The CRPG Book Project
Sharing the History of Computer Role-Playing Games

450-page preview
April 2017
The Final Preview!

This is the final “alpha” of the CRPG Book Project, now reaching 450 pages! The next one will be the finished project, as all that’s really mission now are a few dozen reviews!

It took a while for it to get ready, as moving to Japan changed my life completely and left little free time during the first months. But this gave me time to properly research computing history and finally finish the timeline, all the way from 1975 to 2015.

Other changes include updating older reviews, making sure each one has at least three screenshots, adding new articles on cancelled games, the history of the first JRPGs, a FAQ and the most requested of them all – hyperlinks! Now the developer quotes link directly to their online source, and all other references and download links were equally updated.

A lot of new reviews were added, including big titles like Ultima VII, Wizardry VII, Fallout, Exile, Might and Magic VI, Dwarf Fortress, Dragon’s Dogma, etc. We’re over 250 games now, but sadly the pace I’m receiving new volunteers & reviews has halted to a crawl. So, if you interested in helping, please visit us at https://crpgbook.wordpress.com/ or e-mail us: crpgbook@gmail.com

Thank you for reading

Felipe Pepe,
Project Editor
April 10, 2017
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| 1988-1991 | 16
| 1992-1995 | 30
| 1996-1999 | 60
| 2000-2004 | 120
| 2005-2009 | 272

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| 1982-1987 | 9
| 1988-1991 | 11
| 1992-1995 | 14
| 1996-1999 | 25
| 2000-2004 | 50
| 2005-2009 | 121
| 2010-2014 | 386

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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Year</th>
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| 1988-1991 | 4
| 1992-1995 | 7
| 1996-1999 | 11
| 2000-2004 | 23
| 2005-2009 | 63
| 2010-2014 | 152
| 2015-2017 | 6
| 2018-2019 | 7
| 2020-2021 | 3

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The CRPG Book Project is a collaborative, nonprofit project that aims to compile the history of Computer Role-Playing Games into a handy book. The entire project is being written by fans from all over the world, who pool together their knowledge about modern hits, great classics and obscure titles alike to create a guide to CRPGs that will offer something to both old-school veterans and new players.

The purpose of the project is to share the passion for this great genre, collecting in one place wisdom that is currently spread in countless forums, webpages and individuals. Thus, besides reviews we are also including things such as articles, guides, mod recommendations, developer quotes and trivia.

We also hope to help raise awareness about older or more obscure games. Sadly, there’s a lack of reliable information on the media and the internet as a whole on this subject, and this has led to prejudice and misinformation. There’s still much fun to be had from these classics, and many innovations and creative design choices still remain unmatched by modern games.
Alberto Ourique (AO) is an experienced copywriter, but a rookie in game industry and novels. If all goes wrong, he intends to embrace immortality 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 longstanding abandonian who is amazed to be in the same credits list as Chris Avellone.

Andreas Inderwildi (AI) is a game critic who has achieved nothing of note except for a degree in literary studies, which he stubbornly applies to his one true passion of videogames.

Andrew “Quarex” Huntleigh (QX) is a family man with a Ph.D., and spends his days as a federal officer when not agonizing over proper paperdoll inventory management.

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

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

Baron Von Chateau (BC) Dreams of making a surrealist RPG one day, 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Casper “Grunker” Gronemann (CG) dislikes most parties, excepting those with 6 characters or more.

David “dhamster” Hamilton (DH) is ready to form a party like it’s 1999.

David “mindx2” B. (DB) spends many a night pursuing his collection of classic computer game boxes pining away for that bygone era.

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

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.

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

Fairfax (FAX) a MCA disciple and Civ 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 RPG are gone. In any case, he spent a long time in an examination of Skyrim. After that, he degenerated into economist theorist and only plays with thoughts.

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

Gabor “J_C” Domjan (JC) I was fortunate enough to grow up in the 1990s, so I was part of the golden age of gaming. I enjoy most genres, but CRPGs and flight simulators are my real love.

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

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.

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.

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.

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

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

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

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

Jaedar (JA) had a great big think about it, and realized NW2 is one of the first ‘real’ RPGs he ever played. He’s been playing catch-up ever since.

Jack “Highwang” Ragasa (JR) is Youtube game reviewer that attributes many years of video games to his overly verbose nature.

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

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

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 very deep of his basement is scheming to take over the world. Hoping to turn all readers into his mindless puppets.

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

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

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.

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 Miszczyn (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 7 kids.

Marko Vučković (MV) 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 IBM MS-DOS RPGs. Has a YouTube channel were he posts videos on his beloved hobby.

Neanderthal (NT) Wounded, old and lecherous.

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

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

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

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 “oldfags” 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 it own adjustments.

Outmind (OU) enjoys long walks on the battlefield and hopes robots won’t take over before a FFTactics sequel is released.
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 in one place.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 favorite games.

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

Scorpia (SC) is still crazy (gaming) after all these years. Sometimes, she wishes we were still in the 8-bit era. See Cartography (page 22) for other times.

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

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

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

Silver Girl (SG)

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

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.

SuicideBunny was going to help the project, but the universe had other plans. RIP bro.

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

**Special thanks to:**

The RPG Codex, RPG Watch, Hardcore Gaming 101, The 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, Hall of Light, Emuparadise and every unsung hero who worked on or contributed to these websites, who developed emulators, ports for modern systems, mods, fan-patches, archived rare games or uploaded footage of them to Youtube. This preview would have been impossible without all of you.

And, of course, a most special thanks to those who created all these games in the first place, as well as those who put their best into games that unfortunately never saw the light of day. This book is a tribute to your work.
Land of Xeen
Here will be featured various articles and guides about retro-gaming, gaming history, CRPGs and how to better enjoy them. In this preview, we included three articles:

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

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

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

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

The map for Might & Magic IV: Clouds of Xeen, by artist Michael Winterbauer.
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 favorite title and explore what was going on at the time.

The book contains over 300 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 failure.

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 2000’s, so remember to save often or you might lose hours of progress. There’s no shame in saving after each battle – ignore those who say “save-scumming ruins the challenge”, as really challenging games will limit your saves.

**Start slowly.** Games like *Wizardry I, Ultima IV* and *Pool of Radiance* are all-time classics, but going from modern games to one from the 80’s 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.

**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 great difficulty curve – they start slowly but become very challenging by the end.

**Suggested starting points:**

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

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

- **2000’s CRPGs:** *Deus Ex, Morrowind, Wizardry 8, Diablo II, Gothic, Geneforge, Dragon Age: Origins, Valkyria Chronicles* and *Star Wars: KotOR II - The Sith Lords*.

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

Above all, remember to have fun. Some game take a while to get going, but continuously forcing yourself to play something you’re not enjoying will only result in burnout.
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 80's 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-90's 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 90's and older RPGs often had 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 & grid paper, there's great software such as Grid Cartographer; some games also have fan-made mapping add-ons, 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, read carefully 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 after hours playing.

I can't get a game to work, what now?
Visit the PC Gaming Wiki, an amazing wiki that helps players run and optimize all kinds of PC games. If you can't find the game or the issue you're having, try checking the Vogons forums.
Port comparison's 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 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 80’s, when dozens of wildly different platforms were fighting for consumer’s preference, each with its own hardware particularities. Even basic elements like colors 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 colors but would only emit beeps from its speaker.

Even among computers with color there was a wide range of color pallets and limitations. The blue of a Commodore 64, a 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, colorful art and has mouse support.

This business model would continue until the early 2000’s, 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

Defender of the Crown (1987) was designed to show the Amiga’s 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 fine details. The comparison also show some peculiarities of each machine, such as the C64’s desaturated colors.

Eye of the Beholder

Even playing in the same platform could result in very different experiences. SSI’s Eye of the Beholder was released for DOS in 1991 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)](image1) ![Commodore Amiga (1986)](image2) ![ZX Spectrum (1988)](image3)

The Original *Bard’s Tale* for the Apple II was an impressive graphical feat, since until then dungeon-crawlers like *Wizardry* all used wireframe 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)](image4) ![PlayStation (1995)](image5) ![Windows (1996)](image6)

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 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)](image7) ![Macintosh (1990)](image8) ![PC-9801 (1988)](image9)

Combat in most versions of *Might & 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 keyboards 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.
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 was first released on the Apple II. The DOS port arrived later and it’s very faithful, just changing some colors 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 colors, 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 min-map and it’s fully voiced. Sadly, it was only released in Japan.
What is an Old-School RPG?

by Jay Barnson

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

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

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

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 makes the most “dumbed-down” modern offerings seem like piloting the space shuttle by comparison.

And then you have some pretty awesomely over-the-top tactical stuff, 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... for me, you take the history of commercial computer games, which for me begins around 1979, and mark it at the halfway point between then and now – which would be about 1996 – and set that as the “old-school” demarcation.
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.

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*March 18, 2013*

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

1 Originally posted at: [http://rampantgames.com/blog/?p=1180](http://rampantgames.com/blog/?p=1180)
One of my most satisfying moments as a teacher came two years ago when 15 students overcame their resistance and disorientation and embraced the original *Fallout*. I wrote about that experience¹, and since then I’ve continued to challenge my students with games that fall well outside their comfort zones: arcade classics (e.g. *Defender*); interactive fiction (e.g. *Planetfall*); and early dungeon-crawlers (e.g. *Rogue*).

But I’ve noticed a general downward trajectory forming over the last six years or so. Gradually my students have grown less and less capable of handling one particular assignment: *Ultima IV*.

To be sure, they struggle with a game like *Planetfall*, but when they finally learn the game’s syntax (and heed my advice to map their progress), it’s mostly a question of puzzle-solving. *Defender* knocks them down initially, but they soon apply the quick reflexes they’ve developed playing modern games, and they’re fine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I don’t know if it’s possible to adequately convey what it meant to map-as-you-go. This was work, real work. Okay, you knew the size of the dungeon, drew it on the graph paper, numbered the sides, and usually knew your starting point. Say it was X3, Y5; here were the stairs out. Everything else was unknown.
So you started off, taking a step, drawing lines on your map, and hoping against hope that you hadn’t just stepped on a spinner that turned your merry band in another direction, or worse, an undetectable teleporter that just sent you halfway across the dungeon without your realizing it.

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

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

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

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

Ah yes, the golden age of gaming. 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 April ’99, she was a lead reviewer of, and hint giver for, adventure and role-playing games at Computer Gaming World magazine. Scorpia also ran game-related areas on CompuServe (the original GameSIG), Delphi (GameSIG), AOL (Scorpia’s Lair), and GENie (Games RoundTable).
The Reviews

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

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

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

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

[Image -1x-1 to 256x721]
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 known CRPG, *dnd*, was developed in 1975, that will be the starting point of this book. Which is convenient, since the second half of the 70's 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 game 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, 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 the *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 campus all over the US to join in online multiplayer battles way back in 1973!

**Atari vs Activision:** Atari was rigid with its employees – they weren’t payed 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.

**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 BBSes would grow to offer all sorts of services, from online games to paid file hosting. They peaked in popularity during the mid 90’s, when they began to be replaced by the Internet.

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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 first mass-market home computer. The only among its early rivals to have colors, it became a popular game 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 criticized 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.

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The **Colossal Cave Adventure** (also known 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 game console, it sold over 30 million units and popularized the use of ROM cartridges, allowing for an extensive game library.

The **First MUD** (Multi-User Dungeon) is created. A multiplayer text-based RPG set in an online permanent world, it would spawn an entire genre and set the stage for MMOs.

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

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

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

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

I much preferred the ASCII black & 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 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 armor. Most important of all, there
you could purchase a “brain scan”. It was your
character save.

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

**YOU ARE NOW A WARRIOR**
**TOTAL EXPERIENCE THIS LEVEL = 2**

**VALID COMMANDS DURING PLAY ARE:**

N.S.E.W - MOVE NORTH,SOUTH,EAST,WEST,
(NORTH IS UP)

B.K - BREAK OR KICK DOOR OPEN
L.H - LISTEN FOR MONSTERS OR INSPECT
S.G - OPEN CHEST OR DROP GOLD
A.R - ATTACK OR RUN AWAY
2.H.T - SPELLS, 2AP, HEAL, PRAY, TELEPORT

G - WAIT THAT MANY TURNS
0 - WAIT UNTIL RESTED

**STANDBY DURING PROGRAM LOAD**

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

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, rumored to be in a dragon horde far below the surface. Naturally, it exists, and there it is! Or is it? You know the saying: there can be only one (though not a ring this time).

But each horde had a supposed Apple; grab a fake, and you were 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/level, you could usually get through it in about four hours or so.

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

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

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

Beneath Apple Manor: Special Edition added so called “hi-res graphics”, but you could still play in ASCII mode.
1980-1984
The boom, the clones and the crash

The entire tech industry radically changed in the early 80’s, 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 professionalize. 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 catalog of software and components.

But these were still costly, high-end products. Vital in popularizing 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. Fueled by the success of the Atari 2600, several companies decided to jump in 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 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 professionalize. EA, Interplay, Origin, Infocom, Broderbund, SSI, Sierra On-line and New World Computing were all founded around this time, and would rule the market until the late 90’s.

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.

**The 1983 Video Game Crash:** Video games were the icon of the digital revolution that began in the mid 70’s, 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”.

**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 80’s / early 90’s thanks to beat’em ups and fighting games.

**Mystery House** is released. Roberta Williams and Sierra’s first game, it added graphics to previously text-only Adventure games, redefining the genre.

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

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

**The Commodore 64** is introduced. The “Ford T of home computers”, it’s hugely popular and dominates the low-end market for years.

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

**Nintendo’s Game & Watch** is released. A LCD clock with a single game, it had several models and inspired the GameBoy. In 1982 the *Donkey Kong* Game & Watch also introduced the D-Pad.

**The MS-DOS** is 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 90’s.

**3½-inch floppy disks** begin 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 00’s.

**The MSX** is a new industry standard of computers, designed by several Japanese companies and Microsoft. It would be popular in Japan, Europe, the Middle-East and South America until the 90’s.

**The Apple Macintosh** popularizes the mouse, graphical interfaces and other innovations, but its expensive and fails to compete with the IBM PC, leading to Steve Jobs being fired from Apple.
Ultima was the first real professionally released RPG from Richard Garriott, and it shows. He threw in everything his young computer geek self thought fun, so anything went!

Combining a huge, colorful and innovative overworld map, the randomly generated 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 too see why it was so successful.

As the game begins, the four continents of Sosaria have already been conquered by the evil wizard Mondain, who used the Gem of Immortality to become invincible. Your only hope is to collect four magic gems to power a time machine to go back in time and slain the wizard before he gains his powers.

You can basically explore the world as you want because of how loosely intertwined the game’s solution and mechanics are. Which is good, as at its core Ultima takes about 2-5 hours to complete, if you know what you are doing.

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

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

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

Towns and castles are one-screen areas where most of the game’s solution are uncovered via jesters talking out loud, or by spending money in bars. Items and food can be bought – or stolen, thought that may anger the tough guards. As the player progresses, the technology of the world advances, and various new weapons and armors begin showing up in the stores, going from swords and bows to pistols, energy swords and even a “phazor”. That also includes vehicles, such as a hovercraft with lasers and a space shuttle.

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

The magic system is quite simple, with only a few different spells available in towns as one-cast scrolls. And really, only two are useful: Ladders Up & Down. Those aid in making the dungeons somewhat light and semi-optional, as they allow one to avoid having to seriously map or look for secret doors in any of the many dungeons.

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

Ultima was my first real RPG experience. While I had some understanding of this sort of thing thanks to the Endless Quest and Choose your Own Adventure books, this game was like nothing my 13 year-old mind had experienced back in 1988 on my new C64.

It taught me keyboard layouts and how these “RPG things” worked. To look for clues. To explore a world with much of its flavor in the manual’s wonderful text and artwork. To BE in an adventure, as opposed to just watching the animated Hobbit film.

This game took me a good month to complete – with only a single call to Origin’s hint line towards the end game – in those days before game solutions were easily available. And it made me fall in love with the genre as a whole.

Would a much more difficult and unforgiving game like Wizardry have done the same, with its deadly traps and multiple characters – who could all be permanently wiped out in an instant?

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

Probably not. RM
Among the several “proto-RPGs” made in the late 70’s and early 80’s, while the genre was still defining itself, a popular style of game was the “gather treasures across the land” type.

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

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 the map searching areas repeatedly, as there’s a 5% chance to finding 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 better explored in Windwalker (1989), and games 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 deserve its praise as one of the many forgotten pioneers that helped shape video games. FE
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 take 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 crawls by being fully real-time. Commands must be quickly inputed 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 color 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.

*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 game culminates on the fifth level of the dungeon, wrestling with the parser to activate a magic ring which finally shows 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

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The dungeon has no traps, but is full of fake walls. It also change colors: 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!
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(I was missing a pairing review and didn’t want to leave this one out)
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 Gillian’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 & 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-hole derived from time-line 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.
First released in 1983, Moria started out as a Rogue clone for University of Oklahoma’s VAX-11/780 minicomputer. As the development went on, the game started to differ significantly from its predecessor: the setting became Tolkien’s Middle-Earth and the objective was to kill the Balrog.

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

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

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

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

Unfortunately, Moria is an early roguelike and it suffers from many of the same problems a player might encounter with Rogue or Hack: it’s difficult while not being complex enough to provide you a way of preparing yourself for the worst encounters. That would be enough to make your survival in any game dependent on the mercy of random number generator but Moria takes it a few steps further: while the game was being developed, each new version was supposed to be a challenge for the veteran players who’ve managed to beat the previous ones. As a result, Moria’s difficulty makes the game unwelcoming even to those who’ve played roguelikes before and don’t have a problem with procedurally generated levels, permanent death and high level of difficulty.
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 the derivative titles, especially Angband (in fact, the subgenre of roguelikes that has been codified by this game is often described Angband-like). While it’s sad that such an important game in the history of CRPGs is being overlooked, it’s easy to see why: Angband is extremely faithful to the gameplay and setting (although this time players are tasked with defeating Morgoth) of original Moria while greatly improving it and expanding upon it. It’s simply a better game that, while still challenging, won’t scare off less experienced players.

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

Angband

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

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 game were 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.

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 planets’ twin moons.

Garriott felt that allowing the character to be able to interact with his or her surrounding 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.

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 Bobbits and Elves.

Ultima III: Exodus

Origin Systems, 1983
Apple II, DOS, C64, Amiga, NES, etc.
“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 realized, people were playing completely different 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

Luckily, his hard work and brand new code was successful enough to sell over a hundred thousand copies of Exodus, resulting in Origins 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, popularizing 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 re-defined 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

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

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 color walls, while encounters are more sparse and fought in the tactical combat view.
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 R.O.B., 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 PS/2 family in 1987. It was an innovative machine, with an all-new operational system (*OS/2*), new ports and a new VGA graphic 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-Compatibile. 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 80’s brought in a wave of innovation that revitalized the whole industry, setting the foundations for the creative explosion that would follow in the 90’s.
Trends:

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

**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 colors, but now 64 colors 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 colors. In 1984 EGA cards raised that to 16 colors, and in 1987 the VGA cards pushed it to 256 colors, finally standing up to the Amiga, Apple IIGs and Atari ST.

**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 90’s, when they began to be replaced by built-in audio chips.
Wizard’s Crown is a turn-based, tactical CRPG created by my favorite 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 customize 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 armored 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, blocks with a shield, identifies items, casts spells, etc.

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, they are 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 defense 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 stabilizes 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 run in-between.
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 traveling 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 my time with it. Thanks again, Dad. DT
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.

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 leveling players can choose to change the classes of their spell casters to Sorcerer (illusions) and Wizard (Summoning), adding depth to combat.

During the early phases of the game, Bard’s Tale is an intensely demanding experience as players have to familiarize 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!
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 title screen animation, the main quest in the game was to reunite the seven pieces of the destiny wand and foil the plans of the evil Archmage, Lagoth Zanta.

Ardent fans of the series will also recall the “Snares of Death” within the many challenging dungeons. These were real-time puzzles and often had a slightly esoteric element which befuddled and flummoxed gamers world-wide. 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 to the variety of locations, descriptive prose within dungeons and overall story, the third game remains my favorite 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 poignant, 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

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

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

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

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

“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.
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.

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

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

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

With the absence of any defined quests within *The City*, your goals are simply to develop a character with powerful stats, obtain high quality equipment and amass sufficient wealth so that you may have a chance to survive in future scenarios. This is done through encountering the city’s inhabitants and defeating them in combat, though wealth can also be increased through the use of variable rate bank accounts although a higher interest rate also means there is a higher risk of you losing your money!
After the release of *The City*, Phillip Price left due to issues with the game's publisher. And so the sequel, *Alternate Reality: The Dungeon*, would arrive only in 1987, developed by Ken Jordan and Dan Pinal with some notes from Price and with Gary Gilbertson again providing a rich variety of music. *The Dungeon* is a solid dungeon-crawler, that can be played without *The City* and feels like a full game. It offers several quests found either through exploring or by visiting the Oracle, who will assign quests if a suitable offering is made. Through completing these quests the player learns a lot more about the nature of *Alternate Reality*'s environment and his kidnappers.

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

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

In the end, that didn't matter, as *The Dungeon* never got a 16-bit port. Versions for the Amiga and IBM PC were about 70% complete when the game's publisher, Datasoft, went out of business. Today players still brave the streets of Xebec's Demise and the corridors of *The Dungeon*, trying to discover yet more secrets of the mysterious *Alternate Reality* and hoping that one day they will be able to finally bring their characters back to Earth. GD

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"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.

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

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

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

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

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

The story is mainly told through scrolls found scattered across towns and dungeons. These scrolls do an excellent job of introducing players to the people, places and events that shape the world of *Phantasie*. Players also encounter many puzzles and personalities in the dungeons, such as Filmon and Lord Wood.
The dungeons are a highlight. You’ll encounter various skill checks, interactions and secrets while exploring.

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

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 organized in rows and closely resembles the early Final Fantasy games, which arrived several years later. This system is the same in the first two games, but it’s improved with the addition of ranged weapons and the ability to hit different body locations in the third game.

Not all battles are random though, and there are many unique encounters to experience in the games, such as a creature called J.R. Trolkin in the first game, an obvious homage to J.R.R. Tolkien. More memorable though are Pluto’s Minions from 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.

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

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

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

Japanese Games: The side-view battle interface of the Japanese Phantasie MSX port (left), and the Japan-only Phantasie IV (right).
It’s a very old game now, designed originally for 8-bit systems with 64K RAM and CPUs running about 1 MHz. Regardless, the achievements of *Ultima IV* are astonishing.

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

With many games, that’s as far as it would go. You’d have your mage or fighter or bard or whatever, and play on from there – 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.

No game, before or since, has had such an objective. All others have been concerned with making you a better warrior or spellslinger, concentrating entirely on developing physical or magical prowess. Combat is the means to this, and it is easy to see why other CRPGs have so much. It’s the main way to get ahead; in some cases, the only way.

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

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

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, turn-based. Opponents are carefully controlled, so you won’t, especially at the start, be overwhelmed. You can explore without worrying that a horde of orcs will show up and wipe you out. Also, enemies will sometimes run away if they take too many casualties.

You aren’t alone, either. Over time, you gather in seven members to your party. They represent the other seven virtues, and you will need every one of those people. Further, leveling is not a big item; eight is the maximum level you can reach.
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 “favors”. 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’n’slash or endless “side jobs”, then Ultima IV is still one-of-a-kind, even after all these years. SC

“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.

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

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

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.
Dystopian futures often feel like interesting RPG settings, but late 70’s 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.

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 arcadey, 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, armor, suspension, tires, weapons and power plant.

This is where the game shines. It’s a joy to build your own vehicle, 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, tires, armor layers and even the driver have their own hit points. Get shot at a side that has no armor 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 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 threatened by the evil Lord Dragos, who has one of the two legendary Rings of Zilfin. Your rather challenging quest is to somehow get both rings for yourself and use them to destroy Dragos once and for all.

The world is divided into a series of locations, such as villages, forests, mountains, 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; 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 traveling. Luckily, there are plenty of magical mushrooms and healers in Batiniq.

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

It's 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.
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 Wizardry 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 promise the game does keep. Environments include forests, deserts, swamps, mountains, oceans and ethereal realms.

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 rigor that 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-gritting 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.
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 to a rich lore and 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 leveling 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 auto-mapping 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 rivaled. 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

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“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*

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

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

After *Might and Magic II*, John Van Caneghem would release *King’s Bounty* (1990), a strategy game that would eventually lead to *Heroes of Might & Magic* (1995), a spin-off series that have long since outgrew the base series in popularity.
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.

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

However due to the game's success and inherently appealing core concepts it ended up being ported to every platform under the Sun, always amongst the best looking games on these machines. And it would influence developers for years to come.

Overall, the game is an excellent pickup and play “Koei Kingdom Simulator” styled Strategy/RPG that can appeal to many different audiences. Based on the Norman invasion of England during the Crusades, the player is tasked with picking one of a handful of Saxon lords to defend the land.

Each of them have different abilities in Sword-fighting, Jousting, and Leadership. The former two affect the difficulty of some of the game’s action sequences while the latter affects the meat of the game, which is effectively a beefed up version of Risk.

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

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

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

While only just barely an RPG, Defender of the Crown provides a good and quick pickup game when you want to conquer a nation with fantastic audio-visuals. And you get help from Robin Hood! Who wouldn’t want that? RM
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 64k of memory.

Planet Arth is in trouble. Deadly solar flares are occurring all over the galaxy, threatening to wipe out civilization. Your task is to must find fuel for refugee ships leaving Arth, find colonizable planets for them, uncover ancient alien artifacts, and figure out why the solar flares are happening in the first place. All this is accomplished through scanning planets, exploring their surface 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.

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 nohand-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 – i.e., 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 your selected – quite an impressive feature at the time!

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.
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 maneuver 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 to 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”.

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

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

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

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

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

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 involving, sending Adol through lands of ice and fire before reaching the shrine to defeat the evil Dark Fact.

Like many early Japanese Action-RPGs, you fight enemies by bumping into them, where your level 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 Igs.

These were okay conversions, thought 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

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, than localized 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 modernize 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 rebirth, 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.
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.

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

And with *Deathlord’s* 17 continents and archipelagos, there are a lot of areas to brave. 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 the entire town 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

Wiz

dary 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

Wizardry IV

relies heavily on meta-knowledge
of the series, and the
box’s
itself warns:
“FOR EXPERT
PLAYERS ONLY -
Experience with
Proving Grounds
Required.”

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.
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.

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 nighttime 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/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!
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 trivialize combat.

With few exceptions, there are only three types of enemies – skeletons, ogres, and wraiths who look suspiciously like Nazgûl – all 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 favorite of those fortunate enough to have experienced it on its original platform. ZD

The ghost of a deceased brother will urge the next-in-line to find his remains.

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There wasn’t really much of story in the game, but the manual included a well-written back-story to introduce players into the game. It tells that one day the Grey Lord found a Power Gem, but unleashing its power resulted in his essence splitting into two halves – a good wizard and the evil Lord Chaos. The player takes the role of Theron, Lord Grey’s apprentice, who selects and controls the four champions. The task is to enter the dungeon, find the Firestaff and then use it to stop Lord Chaos.
“We had a ‘hunch’ that *Dungeon Master* would do OK. I guess because we felt we were trying to do a type of game that had never been done before. That is a game that blends real-time action with a rich environment to play in. I guess the closest analog to what we were trying to do was to create the dungeon equivalent of a ‘flight simulator’.”

- Wayne Holder,
  Dungeon Master’s Producer

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

*Chaos Strikes Back* was like *Dungeon Master* on steroids, with even more deadly enemies, fiendish puzzles and possibly the most intricate 3D dungeon ever created, with all 13 levels interconnected via numerous stair and pits. In my opinion it was the ultimate game in the real-time blobber sub-genre of CRPGs. One of my best gaming moments ever was on a level containing both illusory walls and dragons. Unlike me, the dragons could see through the walls, and even breathe 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

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

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

*“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](http://www.dungeon-master.com)*
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.

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 armor and one for a shield – which will break after a certain number of hits. The various potions you can buy in towns regenerate health, magic, raise damage or repair your shields.

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 crawls. It cannot be mastered by just being good at the action part, you have to also map the entire game meticulously, explore every inch 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
Even with titles like *Circuit’s Edge*, cyberpunk is one of those genres I wished had gotten as much play in CRPGs as they did on tabletops. For their part, Interplay went straight to the source with William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* including word of a potential film emblazoned on the box (the movie never happened). The result was a sort of cross between a traditional 2D adventure and a CRPG, a year before Sierra’s *Quest for Glory* hit retail.

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

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

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

It’s also not much of a stretch in seeing how Warren Spector’s *Deus Ex* shares elements of its gameplay formula with Interplay’s creative adaptation within its own detailed slice of fiction, NPCs to shake down for clues, and in using your own wits to map your way through all of that data. It makes sense.

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

**Neuromancer**
Interplay, 1988
Amiga, Apple II, C64 and DOS

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.
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 squeeze-in’s, 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. At the end... I didn't want it to end (you can keep playing, too!). I was floored. I didn't realize 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 do a Russian explosives expert who liked to throw knives, I could. And that was a much richer development tree than “Fighter.”

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

Heavily derived from tabletop RPGs, Wasteland features seven attributes and over 30 skills, but not all of them are equally useful.
The system design is elegant, difficult and confusing at the same time. The elegance comes in the simple mechanic of being able to select any attribute, item, or skill, and then select an object in the environment for that to act on. An adventure game mechanic taken to the extreme with brilliant results. If you want to use Intelligence on an object, you can. If you want to use your proton axe on a wall or door, you can. It is touches like this where *Wasteland* shines.

Similarly, the fact the skill tree grows beyond what's in the manual added 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**

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“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

The game offers a large open world to explore at your pace, but you better equip a Geiger Counter.

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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.

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

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, armor 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 customize 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 in pen and paper, reaching epic power levels.
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 mystical 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 entire *Ultima* series is near and dear to my heart, but none more than *Ultima V* – a game I spent over five years of my life striving to recreate via a *Dungeon Siege* mod called “Lazarus”.

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

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

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

You play a Robin Hood-esque role, never entirely certain who you can trust and who might turn you in to the authorities. This situation leads to interesting questions like “does virtue still have meaning when compelled?” and introduces shades of gray to the moral equation of *Ultima*, creating situations where “what’s right” isn’t always readily apparent and keeping players on their toes.
“[..] where *Ultima IV* was fairly black-and-white — I mean good guys are good guys and bad guys are bad guys — *Ultima V* unfolds in a gray area. Lots of characters try convincing you that Blackthorn is doing things just right; some say he’s a evil force; and others realize he’s wrong but are taking advantage of the situation for personal profit and are willing to fight anyone who opposes Blackthorn.”

— Richard Garriott, *Ultima V*’s creator

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

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

In conclusion: From its morally ambiguous dilemmas and intriguing story premise to its primitive world simulation and vast play space, *Ultima V* paved the way for all the great RPGs to come.

If you haven’t already played it, you owe it to yourself to pick up a copy and experience this key piece of RPG history! **IF**

**Mods:**

*Ultima V Update Patch:* If you’re playing the MS-DOS version of *US*, 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](http://www.u5lazarus.com)

*Ultima V: Lazarus* uses the *Dungeon Siege* engine to recreate *Ultima V* with more modern technology.
The late 80’s 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 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, like 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 armor 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** is a very original game, starting from its story. A glory-seeking paladin slayed the Great Dragon – but 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 & 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 wireframe 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 dialogs, tips, items and a world map were added, while the difficulty was reduced, with many 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.

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 unique enemies such as giant dog heads, 3D wire-frames 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 dialogs don't help much either.
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 “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 which is different based on the difficulty setting you choose.

So time is of 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.

Everyday takes time from traveling to memorizing spells, working for money and training skills. So while on a ship voyage that takes three days, your spell casters can memorize lots of spells for example.

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 gain combat bonuses, the ability to pierce several enemies with one arrow, the ability to move around when not blocked on the sides, and the ability to step on enemies and pierce them with a sword.

An important part of the game is talking to NPCs to find out how to stop the candle from burning down. Lots and lots of note taking (or screen capping) are needed. NPCs also have schedules like in Ultima 5, 6, 7, and knowing when to talk to NPCs can be a challenge in itself. Sometimes you can even leave their houses open unless you address them by their names.

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 Siege (1992).
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 armorer, 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 aptitude 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, need to sleep and rest, and need to repair weapons and armor. 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 armor 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.
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.

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

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

Although as a standalone title the game can be tedious considering the lack of an overarching quest, as a companion-piece to *Pool of Radiance* and *Curse of the Azure Bonds* and a chance to build your characters beyond the usual methods of experience farming, *Hillsfar* is an entertaining diversion and a fun place to explore. CA
Castle of the Winds is one of the few CRPGs I remember playing and winning as a child of the 90’s, partly because it was available as shareware to set up the commercially released second part of the story, so the first part was shorter. Beyond that, it has an addictive charm derived both from its roguelike tile-based dungeon-delving and its clean window-based interface.

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

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

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

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 has one of the best deaths in Sierra's murderous history – using the lockpick 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.
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/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.

Combat is very simple. You can dodge or parry attacks with a shield, but often it’s better to just keep attacking.

Quest for Glory II sends you to a labyrinthic 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 & click controls. 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 terrorizing 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 honor. 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 emphasizes, relies just as much as 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

The game uses Sierra’s SCI0 engine from King’s Quest IV, allowing for mouse control but still requiring a text parser.
The Dark Heart of Uukrul

The Dark Heart of Uukrul is my favorite RPG of all time. I should be angry that it is so obscure and overlooked, but I realize 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.

Uukrul emphasizes teamwork in a way that few other RPGs do, requiring each of your characters’ input into 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 emphasizing 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.
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(I was missing a pairing review and didn't want to leave this one out)
Bloodwych

Bloodwych can at first glance be summed up as a two-player Dungeon Master clone. But take a closer look and you’ll find ideas that surpass almost every other dungeon crawler out there, like a conversation system and the option to split up the party. So how come most people haven’t heard of it?

The first thing people notice about the game is how drab it looks. Everything is gray stone except for the occasional wooden wall, banner or door. Monsters and items don’t look detailed either and use repetitive sprites, but at least the colors help them stand out. Another oddity is an UI with large icons on a thin banner of the screen, making everything feel cramped and small, being very easy to miss out on items on the ground. This was all done to allow for the two-player split-screen mode, one of the game’s ideas that sadly doesn’t do much. Playing with a friend is always more fun, but instead of making players work together they’re forced to compete for gear and XP.

There is no character creation process, the game begins by you choosing only one of 16 pre-generated heroes. They are sorted into 4 classes based on card suits – Spades are warriors, Clubs are wizards, Hearts are bards and Diamonds are rogues. Oddly enough the game then drops you in a starter dungeon where the other 15 heroes are wandering about, and you’re supposed to use the dialog system to recruit three more heroes into your party.

The dungeon design is basic-fare; key hunts, fake walls, pressure plates, spinners, etc. Players can always stop and (try to) talk to monsters they encounter, but short of trade offers or using shops there’s little reason to bother. One would think that with features like two players, a dialog system and splittable parties the dungeon design would at least make use of those features, but it doesn’t. In fact, these nifty features go almost unused in the 16-bit versions of Bloodwych, and the 8-bit versions cut some of them out entirely.

This was 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. Regardless, it was too late to save the game from mediocrity, and today Bloodwych only serves as an obscure relic from the past. ÁV
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 to 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

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*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.
1990-1994
The creative and technological explosion

The early 90's 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 unrivaled.

_Dune II_ set the standard for RTS games, _Wolfenstein 3D_ and _Doom_ introduced FPS (or "Doom-clones", as they were known), _Civilization_ popularized 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 connections and access to BBSes, "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 less-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 & cinema. But system requirements were high: expensive CD-ROM drives, sound and graphic cards.

**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 1992. Nintendo responded by censoring their games, while Sega created its own rating system. Eventually several game companies partnered to form the Interactive Digital Software Association (IGDA), which led to the creation of the self-regulatory ESRB rating system in 1994.

**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 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.

**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/MegaDrive, 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.

**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 90’s, 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 popularized first-person shooters, multiplayer deathmatches and modding. **The PlayStation** is Sony’s first console. Created after a failed partnership with Nintendo, it would dominate the market, selling over 100 million units. **Aliens TC** is a total conversion mod for Doom, based on the movie Aliens and released in 1994.

**The Sega Saturn** is released as a successor to the Genesis/Mega Drive. With a very limited game library (it didn’t even receive a Sonic game), the console failed and sold only 9 million units.
Ultima VI must have come as a shock to Ultima fans when it was first released, so wildly did its graphics depart from the design of the first five titles in the series. Gone were the overhead tiles and dual-scale worlds that had been staples of the series; full-color isometric graphics and a continuous, open world awaited the Avatar.

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

It’s a grim picture that is painted as the game opens: Britannia is under attack by a new and terrifying foe. The Gargoyles have marched out of the depths of the world, killed many of the realm’s soldiers, and have seized the eight Shrines of Virtue. And it’s up to you to stop them.

Ultima VI thus seems to set up a very generic tale about a hero ridding a fantasy realm of an army of monsters. And were this any other game, that might well have been the scope of its story.

But this is an Ultima; Ultima VI twists its story around in a brilliant act of narrative subversion. The Gargoyles, we soon learn, have a legitimate grievance against Britannia, one which upends the Avatar’s seemingly noble actions in Ultima IV and Ultima V.

For, as the player will soon learn, the Codex was not Britannia’s to claim; it has, in fact been stolen. And the rescue of Lord British precipitated a horrifying cataclysm that devastated the Gargoyle people and their home. Now, bereft of their holy book and reeling from the destruction of much of their world, they have set out to pay back Britannia in kind for its misdeeds. And it is only by finding a way to reconcile the warring sides that the Avatar can prevail.

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

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

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

The Shrines of Virtue allow the Avatar to level up, once they have been liberated. Each confers different stat bonuses, based on its respective Virtues.
“The first thing I do is invent an abundance of activities, then I write a story that takes you from one activity to another to another. That is the way to design it, not to come up with a story, and then put in enough puzzles for you to solve the story. To my knowledge, very few people are really approaching it [game design] from that angle.”

- Richard Garriott, Ultima VI’s Designer

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. KK

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

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

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, dialog keywords, new graphics and much more.

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

The Ultima 6 Project

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

Encounters that could be avoided in Ultima VI typically have to be fought out to their bitter end in U6P.
There are guardsmen in uniform watching you, but clearly they decided you are not an immediate threat.

The handsome man -- clearly the Sheik himself -- gestures for you to come join him.

One of the best-dressed men nods as you pass close by. You were alert enough to feel his fingers probing for your money belt!

Do you:
1) attack him
2) accuse him of thievery
3) ignore it and talk to the Sheik

Tunnels & Trolls is based on the tabletop RPG of same name, designed by Ken St. Andre in 1975 as a lighthearted 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 & Magic, asked New World Computing to co-design a licensed T&T CRPG.

As such, Tunnels & 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 customizable 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 3 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.
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 Audra who, per usual pulp standards, is a down-on-his luck detective who 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-color 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.
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 colorful 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 NPC’s 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.

Some knights have old rivalries and should be kept apart, others are of questionable moral fiber 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 5 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, buy things from peddlers and gather 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.
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 artifacts of the realm. The game has improved path-finding and interface, making it less potentially 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 4 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

During army battles you can order individual troops to perform tactical actions or use special items and spells.

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.

*Vengeance of Excalibur* sends your knights to Spain, were they’ll meet Gypsies, Basques, Saracens and even Djinns.
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. 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, like 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 task in order for them to pledge their support. These task range from rescuing a chief’s daughter to 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/night NPC schedules. The new crafting system is robust, allowing you to skin animals, use ovens to bake clay pots and even grind sulphur, 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 9 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.
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 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 SF, with several drops of *Ultima* for good measure worked superbly, even before the amusement of elements like the gypsy character creation system replaced by 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-traveler, and a time-traveler 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
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 mesmerized me so much that I didn't stop to ask "Wait, sewers?" but was instead eager to start my adventure and see where it would take me.

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 realized why that was; the developers decided to merely use the AD&D rules as a guideline instead of wrapping the game in them. Turns out that half of the main stats are useless and many smaller rules are either ignored or hidden from the player.

Looking back on that I can imagine that hardcore roleplayers would be miffed, but to a newcomer like myself it was perfect. I did as the manual suggested and created a mixed party of 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.
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 regard, including many high-quality NPC artwork.

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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. *Av*

**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 GameBoy Advance was made in 2002. This remake made various changes, such as employing the *D&D* 3rd Edition rules, adding non-combat skills like Bluff and Intimidate, and even using a new isometric tactical combat, similar to that of the Gold Box games. Unfortunately, the slow combat and awkward interface don't fit well, resulting in a mediocre game.
Erotic Japanese RPGs date back to the early 80’s, before even Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy existed. Titles such as "Housewife Temptation" had players as 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 & sex controversies surrounding Mortal Kombat and Night Trap which led to the ESRB being formed, when game publishing was still a wild, new frontier.

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 in 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 a 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 attack, as many times as you can while the enemy attack charges.

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
The second (and last) erotic RPG to be localized 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 (localized 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 endeavor 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 humor 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, itemization is extremely simplistic, being limited to armor 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.

*Knights of Xentar* was localized 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 behaviors and order them to use items and spells.

*Xentar*’s humor is its first noticeable aspect, as you are immediately robbed and forced to run around naked.
The finger-drumming, fidget-inducing drudgery of the loading screen has tested many a gamer’s patience down the years. Not in Moonstone. These precious moments of downtime – illustrated with such portentous quotes as “The gods pause for a moment to contemplate your fate” – were a chance to gather wits, wipe down your sweat-soaked joystick and prepare for the carnage that awaited.

Moonstone is not just my favorite RPG, but my favorite game ever. After a spine-tingling intro in which a red-garbed knight is initiated into the quest for the titular moonstone by a sect of druids on behalf of their deity Danu, the adventure began in earnest. Not your typical title by any means, Moonstone was a curious mixture of genres; a Frankenstein’s monster that, astonishingly, has never been revisited by either direct sequel nor indirect imitator. To hijack a football analogy, it’s a game of two halves – the first being a fantasy map in which you move the icon of your knight around. Each turn you can move a bit and perform an action, such as attacking other knights, investigating lairs, pestering wizards, gambling away your hard-gotten gold and so on.

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

So far, so predictable? Possibly. But players must raid monsters’ lairs in search of the four keys to the Valley of the Gods, where the moonstone (and its guardian) rest. And when your knight enters a lair, Moonstone’s second half grabs you by the arm, rips it clean off and proceeds to beat you to death with it. Each lair pits the player against an eclectic array of foes, from lion-like trogg warbeasts who impale unwitting warriors upon their horns to skull-faced mudmen who pounce from their wetland lairs to drag unsuspecting heroes into the earth and a giant – seemingly invincible – red dragon who randomly cruises the world map and snacks on knights.

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

Timing, strategy and lightning reflexes are key, as limbs are severed, bodies hacked in two and ripened yellow cornfields become innard-soaked charnel pits as Moonstone’s true legacy becomes brutally clear.
What, to my mind though, truly sets Moonstone apart from not only its contemporaries but – heck – every other video game ever made is that intangible quality simply known as… well, atmosphere.

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Todd Prescott, Moonstone’s Designer

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

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

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 a 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 realize just how barebones 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 customizable 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, hand-crafted content. JG
**Fate: Gates of Dawn** is an obscure, superlative German game. It's a first person turn-based blobber with quite a few interesting features. You are able to control as many as 4 different parties with up to 7 party members each – one of your parties can crawl through a dungeon level while another is in the city collecting rumors 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 getting 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 & 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’s 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 8 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 German humor, 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.
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 groundbreaking 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 story is a paint-by-numbers affair that starts with the player’s character – unrecognized 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 dialogs 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 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 defines 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.
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, feel like the sort of things 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**

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"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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Side-quests usually are very simple, based on finding an object or killing a specific enemy. But they are creative.
The land in each game is large, with 24 map locations each of which are 16x16 squares. On top of all this explorable area, there are ten towns, castles, and dozens of dungeons to explore. Progressing across the map often requires your characters to cast certain spells or to learn special skills mentioned previously.

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

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

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

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

In all, World of Xeen is a game that includes practically everything. If you look hard, you can probably even find a kitchen sink somewhere. But, because of its immense scope and place in history, the game stands as a landmark RPG for good reason.
When, as a 12-year-old, I first played Legend (titled The Four Crystals of Trazere in the US), I was left confused. Until this day RPGs for me were always turn-based, but now my party ran in real-time, sometimes fighting monsters faster than I could react. Nevertheless Legend quickly became one of my all-time favorite RPGs, because of the fascinating magic system and isometric view - two features that were new to me as well.

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

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

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

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

The combination of its unique magic system and challenging dungeon riddles makes Legend a great title, suitable for all fans of classic RPGs. MH
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* mesh 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 fully 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 dialog options, but as puzzles, and 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 to be placed among the classics. VK
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.

It's a very different experience from RPGs where you just need to run out kill monsters to get a shiny new weapon. In the *Ultima* series people matter. Their dialog is not something to be skipped so you can just get on with the game. The text is something to be savored, 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 dialogs based on typing “name”, “job”, “bye” and other keywords. Now you just have to click on the dialog options that appear on-screen.

Another aspect is the sheer amount of detail that went into *Ultima VII*’s world. Not only in the dialogs and secrets, but in the simulation of the world itself. Want to make bread? Cut the grain, grind it to 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 between in 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* in modern PCs, with several new features like higher resolutions, 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*

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 dialogs. 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**

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.

*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*.
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.

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

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

Adventure and dangers dwell within towns with packs of thieves and bandits but those places also offer rest for our weary adventurers. Inns, smiths and various shops are a good way to recruit fresh blood, train your merry band or hear rumors. Additionally to the main plot, various side-quests are available through specific NPC. For example, one of them allows you to even cross the path of the former heroes of *Crystals of Arborea*, the prequel to *Ishar*.
In *Ishar*, from the lowest human thief to the greatest lizardman fighter, everyone has a voice and strong feelings toward other races. Every time you want to recruit, murder or dismiss someone, a vote occurs. The outcome is democratic and characters each have their pre-determined opinions. The most powerful teammates usually have the most xenophobic opinions, which can lead to dreadful consequences such as a character leaving the group or, worst case scenario, total party kill. Having 100% human team is weaker than other combinations but is also the safest way to control a group. Silmarils is keen to remind you the “dog-eat-dog” nature of Kendoria as the first recruitable NPC in the game will take your money and flee after traveling a few days with you.

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

Bigger, better and less confusing, *Ishar 2: Messengers of Doom* (1993) is probably the best of the series but doesn’t have the awesome Basil Poledouris soundtrack.

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

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

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

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.

Character 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, pick-locking 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 artifact.

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 praxis 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, befriend, antagonizing 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 to befriend them and trade items and information. That said, while I love the concept of rival parties and expanded interactions, their implementation are far too insubstantial and fickle to be more than an illusion of world reactivity.

In 1996 Sir-Tech released *Wizardry Gold*, a new version of *Wizardry VII* for Windows and Mac. However, this version is widely considered inferior, due to its inconsistent graphics, poor music and frequent bugs.
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 auto-mapping, 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 temporary 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 over world.

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**

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When I am asked what my favorite 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 analog to the skills, items and hit points in a typical role-playing game, making *Star Control 2* closer to a CRPG than an adventure game. And like any good CRPG, *Star Control 2* offers three areas of activity for the player: exploration, storyline, and combat.

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

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

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

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

The pacing of the game was remarkably well controlled by the designers, especially given the open-ended nature of the play space. New races were found regularly, and each one gave you additional information about the history of the conflict in the region, as well as hints on where to go next and even new avenues of exploration. It always felt like there was somewhere to go and something to do that was important to advance to the story.
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 dialog, and this music was based in MOD format, which uses digitized samples of instruments to play the notes, which are stored independently of the samples and in a much smaller format. This allowed for wildly varying music for each race, but without the large computational overhead (in 1994 terms) of 100% digitized music like an mp3. At the time, *Star Control 2* had some of the best sounding music of any game on the market, and that music helped define the tone of each race that you encountered in the game.

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

Toys for Bob was acquired by Activision in 2005. Fred Ford and Paul Reiche III, the creators of *Star Control*, went on to create the popular *Skylanders* games.
ominously opening with a warning that “in Medieval Germany, reality is more horrifying than fantasy,” *Darklands* keeps its word, whether the horror is a child-gobbling Satanist or just the tedium of digging your scabbed and beaten body out of jail with a spoon. Despite its age, the unique mix of choose-your-own-adventure progression, immersive historical setting and classless builds make *Darklands* a refreshing and original experience.

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

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

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

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

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

The historical accuracy is charming and immersive, all the while being consistently fun to play, proving that once-existing nightmares, beliefs and folklore can be just as entertaining as the usual fantasy genre tropes. Similarly, equipment and loot are wonderfully time period appropriate. It’s refreshing to equip a pike because in the 15th century it was the best way to skewer a wolf with your arm intact, not because it does +25 fire damage.
Besides the unique setting and character system, *Darklands* also shines in its choose-your-own-adventure gameplay. Locations, dialogs and events are all explored primarily through illustrated screens offering multiple choices based on your stats/skills and a surprising amount of free will. These screens are all expertly written, with vivid descriptions that enhance the role-playing aspect of the game.

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

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

Despite all these notable systems and a carefully crafted setting, the release of *Darklands* was met with a mixed reception, mostly due to an unwieldy amount of bugs and a tendency to crash.

The game endured, however, and has retroactively been labeled one of the best RPGs of all time, with a content-filled scale and scope that would influence games like Bethesda’s *The Elder Scrolls* series and the real-time with pause combat in the Infinity Engine games.

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

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

- Arnold Hendrick

*Darklands*’ Lead Designer

*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. The mere name inspire 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 favorite RPGs.

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

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

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

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

Expanding upon Drakkhen (1989), Shadowlands was created in a way to allow players to control the four heroes either individually or in group. Today this may sound trivial, but at the time it was a real revolution in RPGs. Until them there were basically two systems: either the group moved and acted together, with each character performing his specifics 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 it is of vital importance the formation in which the group advances: walking in a line isn’t the same as advancing as a block to face an enemy, for example. It was a strategic dimension entirely new to RPGs.

But, without a doubt, the most challenging and fun aspect of the game are 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.
The control scheme is simple and intuitive, allowing players – after a bit of practice – to easily control each of the four characters. And quickly too, something vital in the more complicated situations found later in the game. Among the things that players have to master is how to throw objects, as the range varies according to the nature and weight of each object, plus the strength of the character throwing it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the end, Shadowlands was (and still is) a magnificent and revolutionary game in two aspects: the individual control of heroes and the use of the Photoscope system. It’s rare to see a game bring this level of originality. The game also had a sequel called Shadoworlds, set in space and using the same engine, but without the same attractiveness of the original. FHG
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. 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 make 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. CH
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 dialog 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 story-telling of that game are still present. We play as the grand-son of the earlier protagonist, who receives a quest from his dying grandfather. From there, the game is about traveling, 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, with a moon crashing 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.

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: http://thalion.exotica.org.uk
The fourth *Quest 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.

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 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 dialog, ranging from dire warnings to throwaway gags. The most memorable are 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 realize 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 lighthearted comedy, the RPG equivalent of *Young Frankenstein*. But this is a tale of love, sacrifice, and redemption. It just happens to feature dueling 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 distinct 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
Raven Software is known today as an Activision subsidiary working on the *Call of Duty* series; in the mid 90’s they were known 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*.

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, armors, potions, keys and magic items you can collect, plus gain XP and eventually level up (though 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 in 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**
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 stylized 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 customize 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 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 weak RPG. In the end, it’s better to just look at, rather than actually play *Perihelion*. FE

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**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

Princess Maker 2 is a Japanese RPG, but its US release was an adventure by itself. In 1995 Soft-Egg Enterprises began to localize the game into English, but ran into countless delays. By the time things were sorted out, no one cared anymore for a 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 2000’s. It was only in 2016 that the game finally was officially released in English, via the Steam store. Such fame is well-deserved, as the Princess Maker series pioneered the raising simulator genre, spawning many sequels and inspiring similar games. It also helps that the game was developed by Gainax, the anime studio famous for Evangelion. So let us abandon all prejudices and examine this often overlooked gem!

Princess Maker 2 takes place in fantasy-medieval setting, where players take the role of a retired war veteran to whose protection was entrusted a young girl. As her father, players must raise the girl from her 10th birthday until she turns 18-years-old, taking care of her jobs, studies, trainings and adventures. Each of those activities takes 10 days of a monthly schedule you must plan for you daughter. Working increases some of her stats but decreases others and a potential pay depends sorely on her performance. For example, working as a lumberjack will increase strength but decrease her sensibility. If she works well, she returns home with a pay. Schools are expensive, especially in the early game, but as your daughter studies, she can advance into more expensive master classes, which yield even more skill points.

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

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

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

*In 2004 a new version called PM2: Refine was released in Japan for Windows and PS2, featuring updated art and full voice acting. This was the version released on Steam in 2016, thought some fans still prefer the original leaked MS-DOS beta.

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

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

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

Driven heavily by stats and by player decisions, Princess Maker 2 is a great game for players who enjoy those aspect 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 six 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.

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

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

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

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

The good news is that an ancient prophecy foretold your arrival, nominating you as the “chosen one”. Your task in the game is to fulfill the prophecy stanza by stanza (it’s a HUGE pamphlet), following it almost as a quest log, to learn the tragic tale of Kairn and eventually kill him.

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

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

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

In a nutshell, Veil of Darkness is a great adventure game but not really a good RPG. It was Event Horizon’s last tentative to mix both genres, as they went back to make more orthodox CRPG and the excellent point & click Sanitarium. Still, I would recommend it for the nice story and the Ravenloft vibes. TR
Vampires are pretty cool, but you know what is cooler? Vampires in a cyberpunk setting. At least, that is what Microprose thought when they created *Bloodnet*.

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

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

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

Combat is awful and badly explained. It’s a basic turn-based system, but some stats don’t make sense and other 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 savescum 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 canceled. TR
**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, 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.

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 BaK’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.
The game is loosely based on Raymond E. Feist’s Riftwar saga, a high fantasy book series from the 80’s, 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 recognize many of the characters and past events described in BaK, 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 favorite 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

Like a book, Krondor’s story is divided into several chapters, each following a set group of characters pursuing a certain objective.

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.
A

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

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

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

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

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

After escaping the pens, the main quest begins: to rally the free villages in a fight against mighty army of city-state Draj. They are preparing a military campaign that is supposed to wipe out all ex-slaves. This is another example where *Dark Sun* shines: its openness and non-linearity. You want to help all villages or none at all and face the army by yourself? You can! Want to investigate a remote cave, visit the traveling caravan or go deep into the lair of a mad wizard? It’s up to you where to start and where to go next. The game is divided into over 30 areas, each a huge opened space with many quests, adding to nice 40+ hours of gameplay.
While exploring the game areas you’ll face many adversaries. There will be zombies and spiders, but these are just a nuisance. The real test of your skills will be fighting extra-planar Tanar’ri, 15 feet tall Mountain Stalkers or the huge Mastyrill scorpions. And it’s not only the fauna that wants to kill you. Forget what you learned about fantasy races from all the Tolkien-derived worlds out there – here Halflings are xenophobic cannibals, elves are honor-less nomads and none of the other races are any better.

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

The story continued in the follow-up game, *Wake of the Ravager* (1994). Our heroes arrived at the city of Tyr and need to stop coming of the dragon. Shortly said, *Ravager* is bigger, louder and much more buggier. Sprites got much bigger, animations were improved and overall mood became much grittier and dark. The atmosphere was improved by voiced dialog, new cutscenes and a great CD-audio soundtrack. Sadly, some of the bugs were game breaking and you could face complete restart of your game due to inability to finish one of the main quests.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Players chose one of four heroes to take up the quest with, each with their own strengths and weaknesses from the scaly Ak’shel and his magic to the roguish 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 would improve them over time.

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

Tough, brutal encounters and dungeons later in the game were offset only by the ability to rest anywhere, but *Lands of Lore* knew when to take the gloves off and punished unprepared players despite its deceptively simplicity. It’s a formula that holds up well even today, and a crawl still worth delving into. RC
Dungeon Hack is, sadly, a good idea poorly implemented. The game employs a reworked version of the Eye of the Beholder engine to create a real-time single character graphical roguelike that allows you to customize its random dungeons. It also offers some new features, such as the addition of an auto-map and a new class – the Bard.

However, making it a real-time single character roguelike that uses the AD&D 2nd edition rules is also what virtually damns it. *Dungeon Hack* is a very straightforward roguelike, where you descent a dungeon without any sort of shop or rest stops along the way, killing monsters and finding loot in a randomly generated labyrinth with simple puzzles normally involving putting a good dozen odd keys into a dozen odd door types until you find or kill the objective at the bottom of it. Along the way you’ll battle some of the over fifty monsters present in the game – including lichs and invisible feyrs – plus face hazards such as underwater levels, anti-magic fields and starvation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But take care, as absolutely everything in the environment can be destroyed. Bullets and laser beams will knock out walls, grenades take down trees and bigger explosives can wreck entire buildings or even the near-impenetrable alien craft. Which you usually need to enter to bring the battle to a close, especially if you want to take prisoners.
Your soldiers begin as wet-behind-ears greenies, protected by gray overalls, carrying automatic rifles and puny hand grenades. They will get winded, scared and even mind controlled. But with careful mixture of in-game knowledge and real-world small unit tactics, the player can lead them to victory, neutralizing all aliens on the map and hauling a trove of alien tech back to base, where scientists will swarm over it. And while soldiers are generic, you quickly form bonds with your veteran troopers, and losing them is a hard blow – both emotionally and game mechanics wise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OpenXcom**

This open-source clone of the original game adds new ports, many improvements, allows fixing more bugs and modifying the game to previously impossible levels. Here’s two of its most popular mods:

**X-Piratez:** A large total conversion set in a future where the aliens won. You lead a group of mutant pirates, fighting for freedom and dealing with rival factions.

**Final Mod:** A huge collection of over 70 mods, it expands X-COM in every possible way and it’s perfect for a replay.

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

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

OpenXcom is powerful and flexible, offering many gameplay customization options, ports, resolutions and fan-made mods.
Ultima VIII: Pagan is overall the thirteenth game to bear the Ultima name, and it is one of the franchise’s most controversial entries. Rushed 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.

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 adoptive fatherland, Britannia. In order to punish the Avatar for continually meddling in his plans, the Guardian exiles him to the eponymous Pagan, a barren land of darkness. From there, the Avatar must search for a way to return to Britannia – all along in a desperate race against time, as the Guardian has already begun his grim conquest.

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

The turn-based, battle-scene combat of earlier Ultima games had already been simplified in Ultima VII into a more fluid, real-time action system; in Ultima VIII, that system was even further simplified – some would say devolved – into what is, for all intents and purposes, “hack ‘n slash” combat. The magic system was also overhauled from the one found in Ultima VII – spells now require a lot more effort and time to cast, arguably marginalizing them in favor of weapon-based attacks.
The newly added platforming sequences are a chore by any metric, but the initial release of the game coupled them with absolutely horrific jump controls, clunky enough to be virtually broken. The initial uproar caused by these jump mechanics was so vehement that EA released a patch altering them into a significantly more manageable endeavor.

So – with all of these caveats, flaws, questionable design choices, and development woes, what worth does *Ultima VIII* 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 demonic summoning can still provoke shock and disgust. The narrative – though fraught with plot holes, dropped arcs and other inconsistencies – nevertheless communicates its main theme quite viscerally: that the Avatar, in pursuit of his own “just” ends, is systematically perverting and shattering his own code of virtues.

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

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

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

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

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“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

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

To jump you must press both mouse buttons at once. I assure you, it’s even more awkward than it sounds.
Al-Qadim is not your typical RPG. Usually, CRPGs are about experience points, stats, numbers, skills, plethora of weapons and huge amount 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 experience I have ever tasted. Why, you might ask?

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 law upholding hero, part of a respected family, that adhere to strict code of honor 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 on rails very strictly, but in exchange it gives you the opportunity to really create a connection with your character.

As you return home, you get 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 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 gives it a fairy tale feel. This atmosphere is further enhanced by its rich Arab-inspired MIDI music.

Al-Qadim is worth trying from various reasons. If you love good story telling and you would like to relive your childhood, when the fairy tales were full of true heroes with pure heart, then it is definitely game for you. Just don’t come in expecting the complex, stat-heavy RPG experience of other SSI titles.
After releasing *Zork* in 1980, Infocom ruled the text adventure genre during the 80’s. When the company was purchased by Activision in 1989, a few employees decided to jump ships and 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 super heroes who lives in post-apocalyptic New Jersey. As the Crimson Tape, a hero who’s only power is to create organizational 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 a 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 thought 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

Some items are used for puzzles, others to reach new areas, and a few will even increase your stats or give characters new super powers.

The RPG side is very accessible, with a simple turn-based combat system, few stats and heroes that automatically wear their best equipment.

Legend would still produce a few more games, including the cult classic *Deathgate*. It then close down in 2004.
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 90’s on its sleeves – bright colors, 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 hearts 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 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.

Each of the 19 races and 20 classes – or caste, as they are known in *Realmz* – also possesses other advantages or disadvantages, such as fire-resisting Demons or regenerating Lizard Men. Stats range from movement and attacks per round to racial resistances, hated enemies and even complex aging 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 paralyze 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 then 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 your 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, 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.
Regardless, the solid and multi-faceted 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 modtools, 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 90’s. And many did. Though it never flourished in the way gaming communities have now, with easier access to the internet and less barriers to entry, the fact that a humble shareware game survived from 1994 to the early 00’s is a testament to the stories fans created.

For all the faults Realmz has – a hefty interface and manual that want 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.

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

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

Lead Designer Vijay Lakshman and his team went out to create their own world and lore, inspired by old pencil-and-paper RPGs. The continent of Tamriel (Arena is the only game in the series to feature the entire continent) measures "three to four thousand kilometers east to west", and is populated by a variety of races, enviroments, 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.

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

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

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

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

Combat appears to be simple button-mashing, but hides some unexpected depth. Melee attacks are done by holding the right mouse button and moving the mouse across the screen. Each movement executes a different type of attack; moving sideways leads to a slash, while a vertical movement results in a thrusting attack. Attacking at the same time as your enemy will parry the attack.
To help vanquish your foes, *Arena* features about 21 weapon types and 26 armor pieces, all of which can be made from one of eight different kinds of metal – such as Iron, Mithril or Ebony – each with a different bonus. Furthermore, enchanted items might be found in dungeons or bought in stores. And if you’re lucky, you might even hear rumors pointing you towards one of the legendary artifacts of Tamriel.

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

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

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

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

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

Since 2004 Bethesda has made *Arena* freely available for download at their website, as part of the 10th anniversary of *The Elder Scrolls* series.
The second half of the 90s continued 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 cost, 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 90’s the year 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 Netscape Navigator. But Microsoft giving its browser for free to any Windows 95 owner led to a quick victory, 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 90’s is when computers finally went mainstream.
1995

Pokémon is released in Japan for the GameBoy, selling 10M copies. It would arrive in the West in 1998, starting a “Pokémonia” that took up the planet, from games to anime, toys, cards, etc.

1996

The Nintendo 64 is released, still using cartridges but introducing the analog stick. It would sell 32 million units worldwide.

Quake would follow up on Doom with fully 3D graphics and physics. A landmark that popularized deathmatch, WASD controls, mods like Team Fortress and even led to Machinima and speed runs.

1997

DVDs start to be commercially available in the US, offering much larger storage capacity and faster transfer rates than CDs.

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.

1998

The iMac is released. Created by Steve Jobs in his return to Apple as CEO, it marked the rebirth of the company’s popularity.

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.

1999

The Dreamcast is released. Facing the PS2’s overwhelming popularity and SEGA’s own internal struggles, it was quickly abandoned, selling 9M units.

GameSpy was originally called QuakeSpy, created in 1996 to help people play Quake online.

Super Mario 64 was an early posterboy for 3D games, showing just how well the concept could work.

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.

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Trends:

**Online & LAN Multiplayer:** *Doom* allowed up to four players in deathmatch battles. With access to Internet still limited, the more popular solution were *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 match-making.

**3D Graphics:** The 90’s 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 camera) 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 analog stick.

**MMORPGs:** While MUDs and other permanent online worlds existed for decades, the late 90’s saw the popularization of commercial graphical MMORPGs. *Meridian 59* (1996) and *Ultima Online* (1997) not only brought in a record number of players, but also standardized 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).

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

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

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 his time, when games like Doom and Hexen were kings and everyone wanted a piece of the pie. Too bad that the sequel expanded primarily on the shortcomings: Witchaven 2 suffered from horrible controls that rendered it nearly unplayable. NS
In the not-so-far future, governments have made way for mega-corporations, but their pursue 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 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 weapons work differently against each type of enemy, while your body armor 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.

The game is fully voiced, but dialogs are simple and one-sided, with NPCs usually just asking for money, items or for someone to be killed.

CyberMage: Darklight Awakening

Origin Systems, 1995
MS-DOS

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

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

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

There are few friends to be found among the frightened and superstitious inhabitants of Muhar, who believe the party to be responsible for the plague and the storms. Nonetheless, many NPCs contribute to the quest with interesting conversation and bits of history, that add a lot of atmosphere to the game. Some of these NPCs are willing to join the party, believing that they stand more of a chance to leave Har’Akir as part of a group effort than on their own. These NPCs range from regular humans to exotic creatures such as a wemic, a desert troll, an undead warrior and even a jackalwere. Choosing which NPCs to keep is a strategic decision, as each of them has his strengths and weaknesses. For example, the desert troll is an excellent combatant, especially during the earlier stages of the game; however he can’t gain experience, has limited inventory space, and can’t hold anything in his hands.

The inventory is very elegant, with a simple drag & drop interface and mannequins that display your current equipment and held items with nicely drawn artwork. The inventory capacity, however, is quite limited, both in slots and in maximum weight.
Whenever you enter one of Stone Prophet’s dungeons, the interface changes to fit the theme of the level.

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

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

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

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

Ravenloft: Strahd’s Possession & Menzoberranzan:

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 Menzoberrazan, in a bid to free the villagers and Drizzt himself.
Exile: Escape from the Pit

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 to 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.

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 armor and weapons. The best spells cannot be employed until characters build up enough skill to cast them, so forget about reigning 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 civilization.

Skills alone won’t guarantee survival, meaning that you are going to have to loot dungeons in order to purchase better armament 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.
Fallout 2’s humor 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.

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.

Its 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 works he has developed through the last two decades.

The original Exile trilogy is freeware now, freely available at Spiderweb’s website, so prestigious gamers have no reason not to give it a go.

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.
After the decline in sales of their games during the early 90’s, 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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, leveling 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 antimagic 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.
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 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.

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 tile sets 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, addicting 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 it's freely available for download.

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.

Out of all the work I've done, I think *Mordor* was my absolute favorite. 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Albion* has beautiful graphics; featuring a 2D/3D hybrid system. When in most towns and dungeons the game switches to a 3D first person view, while in interior locations and outdoor areas a 2D isometric view is used. The controls are simple and easy to learn, and the game includes a helpful auto-map feature.

With *Albion*, Blue Byte has created a fully believable alien world including the fauna, flora and architecture. Exploration is interesting, there are a lot of NPCs to interact with and you'll have to learn their customs and culture to succeed. The storyline is gripping with many surprises, and the whole game features many different gameplay elements, with an attention to detail rarely found elsewhere.

*Albion* is a beautiful, fascinating, serious and entertaining game that I recommend to all CRPG-fans that are patient and mature enough to understand and enjoy demanding game-mechanics and challenging tactical combat. Dsarii-ma, my friends! HX
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 synthpop soundtrack or it would be an all-time classic.

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 artifacts.

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-humored 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 rosey tint of nostalgia help make it a fondly cherished game nevertheless. AV
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 favors 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, armor and ammo.

Finally, while most of the dialog 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.

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.

Dialog choices are mostly pointless. Here the first choice begins the main questline, the second one kills you and the third one just ends the dialog.
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.

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 & Magic IV* and *Stonekeep*. It features fantastic aesthetics, great exploration with varied environments and an almost unparalleled automapping system.

It may not be a favorite among hardcore dungeon dwellers due to its simplistic character development, but I’d say it’s a great starting place for anyone new to the dungeon-crawlers. ZE
ack 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, armor 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, armors 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, stylized 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 delight to explore.

Even though they are beat ‘em ups, you can tell the developers had a passion for RPGs. Both the *D&D* games were released on Steam bundled as *Chronicles of Mystara*, 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.
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 hand-crafted 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).

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 armor 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 one, 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 airshafts 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.

**The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall**

Bethesda Softworks, 1996
MS-DOS

Since 2009 Bethesda made *Daggerfall* freely available for download at their website, as celebration for the 15th anniversary of *The Elder Scrolls* series.

Besides the multiple armor parts and accessories, *Daggerfall* also offers hundreds of clothing pieces, so that you can properly role-play your Argonian vampire noble.

The Elder Scrolls II: *Daggerfall*

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Since 2009 Bethesda made *Daggerfall* freely available for download at their website, as celebration for the 15th anniversary of *The Elder Scrolls* series.

Besides the multiple armor parts and accessories, *Daggerfall* also offers hundreds of clothing pieces, so that you can properly role-play your Argonian vampire noble.
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 “Vengeaaance!”), tons of spells, a detailed spellmaking and enchanting 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 artifacts, 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 to grab DOSBox and see what games were like in the olden days when giants were upon the earth.

Currently there are two projects aiming to remake *Daggerfall* – *DaggerXL* and *Daggerfall Unity*. Both seek to port the game into a new engine, allowing for better graphics, new features and greater mod support.

Useful Files & 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.

The dialog system allows you to ask anyone about several topics using three different tones. NPCs also react to your reputation, level, guild and race.

“...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*

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 singlehandedly neutralize your tactics.
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 specializes in melee weaponry and repair. Archery and trap disarming are handled by the Rogue. Finally, the Sorcerer specializes in powerful spells and the ability to charge magical staves.

Further abilities however are not locked in to your class selection – new skills and spells are acquired by finding or buying arcane tomes and can be learned by any class – as long as they have the required attributes. Classes also have assigned speeds of attack, casting, and blocking. Great depth in customization wouldn’t come until Diablo II.

Diablo excels at world building. Tristram is a quaint little gothic town that’s church sits on top of a mysterious labyrinth. Each new game has a randomly generated dungeon where the adventure takes place.

But your first experience isn’t killing monsters or grabbing items. It’s the serene sounds of one of the best single tracks in gaming history. Strong voice acting and nuanced dialog introduce you to the world in Diablo. Each of Tristram’s cast tells a part of the story through quality voiced dialog in addition to their gameplay functions.

The cast of characters, music, and gothic styled art of the town create an atmosphere where the player always wants to learn more. As you delve deeper into the dungeon you’ll find books detailing past events such as the possession of the prince, the King’s subsequent madness, or details on unique quests. The plot itself fails to live up to such great world building as your mission is laser focused on ridding the town of evil and defeating Diablo.

Diablo’s core gameplay is built on an addictive foundation of killing monsters, leveling up, finding items, and doing this over and over again. This gameplay loop became so popular that it spawned an entire sub-genre known as “Diablo-clones”.

Killing monsters is simple. Left-click to attack, right-click to use spells and press the numbered keys to consume potions in the hot bar. Monsters comes in various shapes and forms – including color palette swaps – and occasionally you’ll also encounter unique fiends that come with special abilities and resistances.

Experience gained from killing these monsters eventually leads to a level up where you can allocate 5 points to Strength, Dexterity, Vitality, or Magic. Each of these affect derived statistics like damage, chance to hit, life, and mana.
What makes this loop fun is the item system. Each item you find will be randomly generated from a preset pool of qualities. Regular items have no special properties; just a damage or armor rating. Magical items combine a prefix and suffix attribute which provide various bonuses to your character. It could be faster attack speed, additional character stats, or even curses. And Unique items are extremely rare and powerful. Diablo captures players with the constant promise of a better item just around the corner, maybe in the next chest or enemy, driving you to keep fighting monsters till the early hours of the morning.

Together with Diablo, Blizzard also launched the Battle.net service, where you could play competitively or cooperatively online. The big downside was the rampant cheating, as Blizzard did not police hacks and exploits much. This alienated some from online play, so the company was much fiercer in enforcing anti-cheating measures on future titles.

Diablo also saw an expansion called Hellfire. It brought some welcome convenience features like the ability to move faster in town. Oddly, Hellfire was not developed by the same team or even company, so it lacks the same consistent quality as the base game. Still, extra content in the way of a new class – the Monk –, item upgrades and quests make Hellfire worthwhile for Diablo veterans, and some features would eventually work their way into Diablo II.

Not many RPGs succeed in minimalism like Diablo. The game world is not to be missed and the seminal loot system provides limitless replay value. There’s always another item to find, another monster to kill and a new gothic labyrinth to navigate.

Mods:

Belzebub: A.k.a. 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 small grid-based inventory forces players to go back to town frequently, for a brief moment of respite.
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 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 reserves 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 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 customize 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, through 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
The Battlespire is a training center 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 randomized instance in Battlespire: Unlike the Daggerfall dungeons, the complex maps here are entirely handcrafted, so you won’t end up starving in a mis-built labyrinth.

No, you’ll pretty likely die in combat instead.

Enemies in the Battlespire are a lot tougher than those you encountered in Daggerfall. You need to out-maneuver hostiles if you want to survive. Now don’t get me wrong: Battlespire may be more action-oriented and linear than Daggerfall, but it’s not all about bloodshed. You’ll have plenty opportunity of getting to know the invaders and make allies. Yes, you heard right: Allies. Not all Daedra are evil, nor does everyone agree with Mehrunes Dagon’s plans of conquest. While you can get far by being impolite or just resorting to violence, you would be a fool to not take advantage of all the political intrigue going on.

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 dialog options are too brilliant to miss out on. NS
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 wide-spread that it became almost invisible.

Back in 1997 CRPGs had lost their place to JRPGs. The genre was stale: apart from very rare exceptions – like *Wasteland*, *Darklands*, *DarkSun* and the *Ultima* series – most 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 humor and presented in a retro-futuristic style, spiced with ironic optimism based on the 1950's US. 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.

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. I.e., the way the Deathclaw is introduced – first in wild rumors, 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, dialog or stealth. And they delivered it.

A simple side-quest such as Raiders kidnapping a girl has multiple approaches: you can kill everyone, talk them down or sneak in and lockpick 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 beyond. 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.
Depending on your stats, items and skills new dialog 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 today, 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 customizable installation.

High Resolution Patch: Unlocks higher resolutions. Not recommended, as it can spoil some moments.

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.
Westwood Studios had a strong tradition in 2D art, creating some impressive artwork in *Eye of the Beholder* and *Lands of Lore*. But the 3D craze and the popularity of the FMV scenes in *Command & Conquer* clearly changed something, and so *Guardians of Destiny* came as a 3D title, with real actors, full voice acting and many pre-rendered cutscenes — enough to fill 4 CDs. Despite the effort, time wouldn't be gentle, and the game's graphics have aged far worse than those of its predecessor.

*Guardians of Destiny* puts you in control of Luther, son of Scotia — the evil witch defeated in *Lands of Lore*. However, Luther isn’t a villain in search for revenge, but rather a wise-cracking reluctant hero, who must find a cure for the ancient curse he bears.

This curse causes Luther to randomly (yes, it might happen at any time) transform into a tiny lizard — that can pass through small openings and cast powerful spells — or into a huge beast, strong and able to move large objects. Apart from that, however, the gameplay is very simple. There are no party members, no classes to choose from, level-ups are automatic and the real-time combat usually boils down to clicking the attack & magic buttons as fast as possible.

Luckily, combat and stats aren’t the focus of the game. *Guardians of Destiny* features a design that clearly favors exploration instead of combat, with its well-designed levels populated by just a few enemies. Instead of monsters, the areas in the game are filled with alternative paths, for each of your transformations, and secrets — not only a few hidden rooms and treasures, but entire levels, items, spells and even lore-related cutscenes that players might not see. There are also various interactions with the environment, such as stacking boxes to climb a ledge, igniting oil or destroying pillars to cause a cave in.

Better yet, the game features two paths — a good and a evil one — each offering a few unique events and endings. There are no dialog choices in-game, everything is made through direct interactions, such as killing NPCs or using/destroying key objects.

These fine details remind you that *Guardians of Destiny* was made by Westwood Studios, long-time veterans of the genre. While it may look cheesy, it’s still a charming RPG, with a charismatic main character, great level design and many secrets to uncover. FE
Back in the mid-90’s, 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* multi-player 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 multi-player (which was still listed on the box). Worst, 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 4 hubs and several interconnected dungeons, Undermountain is filled with traps, hidden passages, optional areas, a great soundtrack and NPCs with unusual quests and dialogos. The dungeons are also well done, although too relying 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**

Your main quest comes from Khelben Blackstaff in Waterdeep, but you’ll find many creatures inside dungeons asking for help or offering rewards.
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 canceled and the license lost in 1994.

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 travel 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 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 90’s Saturday morning cartoon, as three cliché 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 colors.

Overall, Betrayal in Antara is a simple game about following paths between towns, battling foes and then watching a badly-voiced teenager cartoon adventure. Unless you’re really starved for more of Betrayal at Krondor’s gameplay, I’d suggest skipping this one. FE
Aafter the cancellation of the original sequel to *Betrayal at Krondor – Thief of Dreams* – the PyroTechnix studio acquired the Midkemia setting's license and began working with its author, Raymond 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 & click game mostly set inside a single city, it feels as 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 customization 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 artifact. 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 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 Feist adapted *Return to Krondor*’s plot into a novel, named *Krondor: Tear of the Gods*. The game’s 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 lackluster UI.

The game’s heroes all have strict classes and there isn’t much equipment variety, so don’t expect a deep character customization.
Before CDProjekt could sell millions with AAA games, back when the Polish company was just known for adapting Black Isle and Bioware classics to his 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's no levels in Rage of Mages; your power is mainly defined by your equipment and skill level in five specializations – Magic Schools for wizards, Weapons for warriors. As in the Elder Scrolls games, you improve these skills by simply using particular weapons or spells.

In practice, however, choosing your character at the start is barely relevant. You will play with the four heroes (male/female Warrior & 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 certain point of the map. Then you achieve victory and go to the next map.

The maps are what anyone could expect from a 90’s RTS; rectangles of undiscovered territory hidden by 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 NPC’s 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 kill some particular monsters or reach a certain part of the map. There’s no indications or marks in the map so exploration is necessary, which may lead to additional battles or hidden items.

You move your units, fight the enemies, usually use a lot of hit & 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.

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.
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’s 24 of them and 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’s also scripted events, short dialogs 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 in fighting and improving your character with other players in 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

“[...] 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
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 arms and begin his own epic quest.

Of course, the game's claim to fame is the humor, and Dink delivers a constant barrage of odd quips, cruel jokes and passive-aggressive dialogs. I advise attacking everything in sight, just to see his reaction.

The gameplay is simple – you travel through map screens, talking to NPCs and battling monsters, eventually leveling 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 freeware, 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 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-ranged weapons. The archer uses long-ranged 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 90’s, 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 cut-scenes 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.

To run Hexplore on modern PCs you’re going to need the fan patch, otherwise the game will crash every few seconds.

The late 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.
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(I was missing a pairing review and didn’t want to leave this one out)
The fabled designer Roberta Williams had a big problem in the late 90’s. The gaming market was booming, titles were selling millions, but adventure games – her trade – were considered dead. Sierra, the company she founded in 1979, was still a giant corporation, but Roberta and her husband had sold it in 1996 (although they still worked there), and Sierra’s new owners were desperate for a big hit.

So Roberta took some of the most popular games at the time – *Quake*, *Tomb Raider* and *Diablo* – added then-innovative 3D graphics and tried to create a new style of adventure game, one that would attract this modern gaming audience into her *King’s Quest* series.

The result is an action-RPG that can be played in either first- or third-person mode, complete with real-time combat, platforming sections and even a grappling hook that allows you to climb walls. Many RPG elements also were added, such as levels and experience points, various weapons and armors and even a *Diablo*-like toolbar of potions and healing items you can devour during combat.

However, little from the previous *King’s Quest* games is present. While occasionally you’ll come across one or two puzzles – such as using an axe to chop down a tree, so that it diverts the flow of a river and stops a nearby mill – those are extremely rare. And don’t expect a single dialog tree either. Most of the time you’ll progress by killing everything that moves, and then clicking on everything that doesn’t.

All could eventually be overlooked had the rest of the game been good. But it just isn’t. Moving and jumping feels clunky (the infamous “tank controls”), combat is nothing but clicking on enemies while chugging potions, environments are dull and empty, the writing is childish and the game simply never manages to excite the player in any way.

Looking back, Roberta was in a difficult position and tried her best to reach this new gaming audience. It’s easy to criticize her now, but such wild bet made sense at the time. In fact, *Mask of Eternity* was released in the same year as the much revered adventure classic *Grim Fandango* – and outsold it 2-by-1.

Does that make it a good game? Definitely not, but serves as a cautionary tale about the whims of the gaming industry and its fans. FE

King’s Quest: Mask of Eternity
Sierra On-Line, 1998
Windows

One of the three endgame trials to prove yourself a worthy champion is a sliding puzzle. How exciting.
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* revitalized the CRPG genre.

After the genre tapered off during the mid 90’s, 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 specialized characters.

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 6-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 onto 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 existing is something the world does not, 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 colorful cast of companions which would set the foundation for Bioware’s character writing.
The excellent voice work and elegant mechanical quirks (the ranger Misc 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 armor 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 & 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 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

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 customizable 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.

In 2016 Beamdog released Baldur’s Gate: Siege of Dragonspear, an expansion pack for the Enhanced Edition of BG.
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 & Magic* games.

A radically different game, *Might & Magic VI* eschews the 2D, grid-based world of its predecessors in favor 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-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.

Combat in *Might & 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 backward, 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 specialize 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 have 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 late 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 specialized and more homogeneous than in its sequels, but the player has more freedom to develop them as they see fit.

The balance tends to favor spellcasting 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.

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.

New World Computing, 1998
Windows
The GrayFace MM6 Patch fixes many bugs and add new features like key remapping and mouse-look. If you want more adventures, you can also try the The Chaos Conspiracy mod, a new fan-made campaign.

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 favorite: your party gains the power to soar freely through the air, raining death onto any unsuspecting enemies below.

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.

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

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

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 & Magic VI takes place after the events of Heroes of Might & 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 centers. 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.

The inventory is now grid-based, with nice equipment artwork, a “paper doll” and – finally – items descriptions. Dungeons are 3D, but shops, guilds, houses and other internal locations are shown through charming 2D art.
“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.

Walking in the footsteps of its big brother barely a year after its release, *Fallout 2* had to answer a lot of the players 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 G.E.C.K. in itself is little more than a MacGuffin, a pretext to send you on a trip in the ruthless remnants of a post-nuclear West Coast. *Fallout’s* setting in itself has always been the true star of the show.

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 drugs upon 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 home in order to survive.

Always promoting the player’s agenda, the way most of the skills are used are left to the player’s discretion 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.

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 insure that you will go through most of the West Coast and its broken, twisted communities before getting a lead on where the G.E.C.K. is located. The order of the locations you visit is not set, and each town provides another viewpoint of the conflicts playing out.

*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.
Fallout 2’s humor 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 from “intentionally” popping up one of your enemies’ gonads.

Truth be said, humor 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 minigun, 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

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 modpack 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 on its own right, it’s highly recommended.
Jagged Alliance 2 is an isometric turn-based strategy game where you hire and command a band of mercenaries in order to free a fictional country called Arulco from the rule of its ruthless dictator, Queen Deidranna. Or is it?

Reassessment and reflection occurs each time I’m asked what JA2 is. I’ve seen people drawn to this game for all possible reasons, from professional soldiers loving its strategic layer to gun nuts drooling over immense arsenal available, expanded even further by mods. Others praise the game for a creative, alchemical approach to RPG genre and its chess-like tactical depth.

Aye, Jagged Alliance 2 is generous enough to allow you to enjoy it from all perspectives and play styles. If you want to treat it as an isometric shooter, one-man team, fine, there’s enough action for every Rambo out there; if you want to instead take an armed stroll and explore the country, you’ll have a laugh and a whale of a great time too.

Such flexibility is achieved through unique blend of strategy and role-playing game.

While borrowing some rules of combat system from its predecessor, JA2 sets its narrative in brand new colorful world filled with dynamic characters. Want to be BFF with the local ganglord? Help him solve some “problems”. Want to get rich quick? Rob his silver cache and spend the rest of the game stalked by assassins he sends. And who knows, they might catch you with your pants down just as you’re visiting the local brothel.

Having played so many games where your units are just cannon fodder, you’ll be surprised how much this old-school game tips its hat to your mercs’ personalities, especially in comparison to its siblings like Fallout Tactics or X-COM. You do not command clones with different stats; in Arulco, you get to create your own custom merc fighting alongside men and women. From all walks of life, each have their own fears, quirks, opinions and they are unafraid to voice them. Several unforgettable one-liners will stick and you grow to loathe a few and adore many.

When you’re called upon to sacrifice one over another you will find yourself doing your best to save your favorite character. It’s what you called virtual character bonding, something you could hardly experience in a cinema or literature. You get to be both an actor and director in your very own B-action movie.

On top of that, JA2 offers a solid gameplay. There’s place for climbing roofs and cutting fences or blowing up walls, full auto shootouts and karate brawls or stealthy night assassinations and sniping from behind a cover, disarming mines or setting booby-traps and much, much more. Deep game mechanics, where the devil is in the details, are an integral part of its vast possibilities and seductive allure. All in all, when it comes to squad tactics and turn-based strategy, there’s yet a game to match JA2’s level of complexity.

Since the release of the source code, dedicated modders managed to create ports of the game for Mac and Android.
You can command various squads at once, and the locals show their support by fighting alongside you as militia.

Mods:
The JA2 community made tons of upgrades to the game, fixing bugs, improving features and adding new ones, creating new stories and expanding it to a level no sane developer today would only dream about. A short-list hardly does them justice, but we’re sure these will give you a taste. All mods are featured and available for download at: [www.bears-pit.com](http://www.bears-pit.com)

Mods for Jagged Alliance 2

JA2 Urban Chaos: The very first complete fan-made sequel of JA2, this highly rated mod offers a complete new adventure in Danubia, with some revolutionary changes to systems and tactics (the name implies urban warfare and you will get plenty).

JA2 Stracciatella: A complete overhaul of the JA2 source code, started by modder Tron, transforming the engine into a true platform independent piece of software. It allowed ports of JA2 to Linux, Mac-OS and lately Android.

JA2 v1.13 platform: Revered among fans for completely overhauling JA2, v1.13 brings thousands of new features and items to the game. It transformed JA2 into a mod-friendly game, spawning an impressive array of mods and features – including multiplayer.

JA2UB Vietnam SOG’69: BecomingX’s campaign lands you in Vietnam, together with some very interesting new characters. One of the most played UB mods.

JA2UB Shady Job: Shady Job is an amazing Russian community response to the JA2 Urban Chaos success. The mod takes JA2UB and turns it into a whole new game, with new tactical map, new markets, new characters and new weapons.

JA2 Unfinished Business was the swan song of the series. The new campaign is short and leaves you hungry for more. Sadly, there was nothing more to be had.

But everyone back in the day wanted JA2UB because it came with the much awaited map editor.

"Even though it wasn’t the focal part of the game, I found some of the NPCs to be the coolest part – especially watching people theorize on how the game worked in this respect. Whether it be Pablo, Kingpin, Deidranna, or any other NPC, there was more talk about this aspect of the game than the actual combat. And I’m happy with that, the combat in JA is a given, so it’s the ‘extras’ that I get off on.”

- Ian Currie,
JA2’s Director and Producer

The irony is huge. The game that ended the original series actually was the one that kept it alive until today, thanks to the massive modding boom that it sparked. This and the decision by the publisher to call the curtains on JA2 and release the source code were Jagged Alliance’s bite of the vampire. It died, but it went on to live forever. SH
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 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 your character isn’t a dashing young hero, destined to be awesome, but a scarred, formaldehyde-soaked corpse, cursed with immortality?

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 colorful 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 midair – 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* it’s a beautifully written RPG that shines in every single area that involves writing.
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 best party members I’ve ever seen in a computer game, and you’ll have fantastic dialogs 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 dialogs) 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, 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, dialogs, 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.

Torment’s writing is unrivaled in gaming, offering plenty of role-playing options, memorable moments, funny lines and overarching philosophical questions.

“You 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

You won’t buy armor 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 dialogs.

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 dialogs that were cut during development.

Black Isle tried developing two other Planescape games, all which were eventually canceled. One of them would be a Playstation game inspired by King’s Field, to be directed by Colin McComb.
Silver is a game of many contradictions. It was developed as a Japanese console-style game by a European studio and released for the PC in 1999. It was marketed as an RPG, yet many of the fundamental elements of the genre were overlooked.

The polygonal characters were represented with little detail, but the pre-rendered backgrounds were lifelike and beautiful. It is, therefore, hardly surprising, that Silver was released to wildly mixed reviews.

The one aspect of the game, the critics almost universally dislike, is the story. It is your standard fantasy fare: in the world of Jarrah a young knight David sets out on a quest to defeat Silver, an evil sorcerer who kidnapped his wife. The mood is set by brilliant, atmospheric music, composed by Dean Evans. The presentation, however, is a mixed bag. While the detailed 2D backdrops and animations shine, the 3D characters could use some polish.

The adventuring party consists of up to three members. You can directly control one character, or select a group and give them basic orders. This is achieved via a radial menu, which can also be used to access equipment and spells. Real-time combat is fast-paced and surprisingly complex. Apart from basic attacks, magic and artifacts, you can use mouse gestures to perform thrusts, swings and dodges. Unfortunately, clunky controls and the lack of active pause, detract from the experience. Since the focus is on action and the screen is often crowded with enemies, getting the most out of the available tools requires skill, reflex and precision. As a result, combat is the most satisfying when you only control David against a single adversary. Those duels often play out as puzzles: you have to learn the opponent’s behavior and use his weak points and the environment to your advantage.

As a fan of classical RPGs, I cannot but notice Silver’s shortcomings. Character development is automatic, dialogs play out with hardly any player input and there are no meaningful choices and consequences. Yet, despite those obvious flaws, the game managed to win me over with its wonderful music, diverse world and the indefinable sense of adventure. When the credits rolled, I was left with that feeling of satisfaction you only get for a few seconds, after you read a good book or see a great film.
The *Final Fantasy* series always had one very unique characteristic: every game is different. After the huge success of *FFVII*, it would be easy to just make a more-of-the-same sequel (and some fans still want one), but Square had other plans.

The first change is obvious: the art is completely different. In the two years since *FFVII*, Square went from crude, cartoonish characters to very realistic models, especially on the superb FMV cutscenes.

The combat has been changed as well, and *FFVIII*’s magic system is the most exotic of the series. Gone is the concept of mana; you now must stock magic spells, that are acquired from enemies. So if you own three Cure spells you’ll only be able to cast Cure three times, then it will be unavailable until you collect more of it from monsters. Of course, this can lead to grinding enemies for spells, and to help counter that the game scales all monsters to your level. As a side-effect *FFVIII* is arguably the easiest game in the series, as enemies are never too strong for you.

Summons work very differently too. Now called Guardian Forces, they must be assigned to characters and each offers different abilities and passive bonus, allowing you to customize your party. They still can be used as regular summons, delivering powerful attacks that can be used at will. This doesn’t kill the challenge, but will test your patience, as every time you call a Guardian Force you’ll have to watch the entire summon animation over and over again.

All of this is honestly a side-show. When talking about *FFVIII*, there’s no escape: the story is the main attraction here, and it goes everywhere; high-school drama, love during wartime, political struggles and even time travel. But, at its core, it’s a coming of age story. The main character, Squall Leonhart, is a reluctant hero, a loner struggling with his own feelings. Many consider him to be too annoying in his teenage angst, and at times the personal moments of the characters are overwhelmed by the bizarre plot, but those who look past these faults may find themselves shedding a tear over the ending credits.

The music deserves a separate mention. Nobuo Uematsu composed an epic, emotional soundtrack that matches the story perfectly. Definitely worth a listen, even if you’re not interested in the game.

Last but not least, *FFVIII* features the addicting Triple Triad card game, a great way to spend even more time in this “love it or hate it” epic. *FE*
Ultima IX: Ascension

ORIGIN, 1999
Windows

Ultima IX, published over 16 years ago, is the last single-player Ultima, and the conclusion of both the Age of Armageddon trilogy (which began with Ultima VII) and the story of the Avatar. It’s also the most controversial entry in the series; no other Ultima game has so sharply and clearly divided the opinions of the fandom.

Development on Ultima IX began soon after the release of Ultima VIII, with Mike McShaffry as the project lead at the time. An enhanced version of the Ultima VIII engine was selected as the technological base for the game, which McShaffry soon converted from a 2D engine to a software-accelerated 3D engine. However, he was soon removed from the project.

It would have been after his departure that the well-known Bob White Plot was written, likely based on Richard Garriott’s own designs for the plot of the game (a leaked version can be read online at websites such as the Ultima Codex and the Ultima Wiki). At the time, EA felt the game worthy of significant investment; many of the CGI cutscenes used in the final game were rendered around this time.

However, much of the team was reassigned to assist with completing Ultima Online, and work largely paused on Ultima IX until mid-1997. Much had changed in the intervening months; hardware accelerated 3D had taken off, and it was decided that Ultima IX should make use of this new technology.

A new team was hired, and Ed Del Castillo was brought over from Westwood Studios to serve as the game’s producer. He rewrote the plot treatment significantly, but was soon dismissed from Origin Systems. With pressure from EA to cancel the game and focus on Ultima Online mounting, Richard Garriott took direct control of the project, and the plot was re-written once more. EA gradually removed funding and resources from the Ultima IX team, and eventually imposed a firm release deadline which left the team scrambling to complete a playable build of the game. With only weeks to spare, a playable build was achieved, and the game was greenlit for release.

Upon release, Ultima IX was – as might be expected given the above – very buggy and unstable, so much so that Origin Systems opted to re-release an updated version of the game on new CDs to all who had purchased it.

The game was also heavily criticized for paying little heed to the canon of the Ultima series; the ending of Ultima VIII and many other key events from the series were ignored or re-written, upsetting fans who had followed the Ultima lore for almost two decades. Other common complaints include that it lacked party members, that the game world felt overly small, that combat was crude, the plot limited, the dialogue unpolished and the voice acting poor.

There is validity to all of these criticisms. There was little time during the race to finish the game for designers and editors to iterate the written dialogue.

Ultima IX’s inventory is still based on multiple containers, but they are now grid-based, making them much easier to organize.
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 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.

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 rights.

For me, personally, there was one other thing that Ultima IX offered. You see, I grew up playing Ultima. I love the series and its setting; Britannia was my Narnia, my magical land hidden just out of view. And in Ultima IX, finally, I could see its sky.

Mods:
Dialogue patch: A re-writing of the game's dialog, to better fit the lore and continuity of the Ultima series.
Forgotten World: Provides several patches and updates for Ultima IX, improving its performance, fixing some of the remaining bugs and restoring some of the content cut late in the game’s production.
Beautiful Britannia: improves the game's textures and adds several areas there were cut from the game.
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 David Cage’s finest offering lies in the 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 irregular.

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.

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 traveling 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 minimap!

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 tries some moral dilemmas: as a soul in the body of Kay’l, is it right for you to have sex with his girlfriend?

The city of Omikron is divided into gated districts, but each area is large and full of locations to explore.
The FPS gameplay is very crude, with several different weapons types but only two that are really useful. While fighting for your life against faceless demons, you can also put your fists to the test in arena battles.

“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 realize 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

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 in full display, as the game’s dynamic camera angles used during cutscenes and dialogs feel very “cinematic”.

Unfortunately, behind such massive project lies 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 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 known besides the fact it would be set “100 cycles” after the first game.
A fan of *Might & 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 *Mê-M VII* has more polished content, it also has less. 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 customize your party.

You begin the game as in *Mê-M VI*, creating your blob of four adventurers, but with an expanded catalogue of classes, races, bosses, HD textures and options for higher resolution.

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.

*Mê-MVII* even makes place 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 questline 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 (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, armor type, weapon ranges, directional facing and so on. For example, attacking a target from the sides or back will grant bonus damage. Additionally, various status effects eventually come into play. Combatants can be made ‘Flammable’ and subsequently be set aflame 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 5 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 hours 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.
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.

However, the game managed to develop a cult following over the years. Among the select group of aficionados was a young Ken Levine. His company, Irrational Games, was granted the rights to work on a sequel, allowing for a proper, triumphant return of SHODAN, the devious rogue AI that had so masterfully served as the first game’s main adversary.

Developed on a shoestring budget in an office that can be aptly described as Looking Glass’ broom closet, there was constant symbiosis between the two companies. First and foremost, Irrational had access to the Dark Engine, which would first come to use in the 1998 stealth classic *Thief*. As a result, *System Shock 2* shares many of its strengths with the original *Thief*: The player is able to hide in the shadows of the large, intricately designed levels, with different surfaces generating different levels of noise, potentially alerting nearby enemies.

What truly separates SS2 from its predecessor is the use of a complex character system, resulting in a game that is both FPS and RPG in equal measure. Early on the player chooses one of three classes: the gun-toting marine, the psionically-endowed OSA agent or the techsavvy navy hacker. Throughout the game the player can customize his character however he chooses: improving his attributes, selecting traits, training the skills required to equip and repair more powerful items, finding implants or learning any of the 35 available PSI-powers, that range from temporarily buffing stats to firing mental projectiles and even the ability to teleport yourself.
“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

Resources are scarce though: weapons degrade with every single shot and have a nasty tendency to either break or jam during tense firefights. Enemies respawn over time, and even areas which have been previously cleared can become death traps. The high difficulty crowns SS2’s unrivaled sense of danger.

To add to the atmosphere, the ghosts of the Von Braun – the faster-than-light spaceship where your descent into hell takes place – still inhabit the vessel. Both figuratively – in the form of increasingly desperate audio logs – and literally, as apparitions that recreate the crew members’ final, ghastly moments.

System Shock 2 struck a nerve, but despite an overwhelmingly positive reception and the fact that it would go on to inspire both FPS/RPG hybrids and horror games to this very day, it sold below expectations. And with Looking Glass going out of business in 2000, the jarring cliffhanger that concludes the rushed final levels remains unresolved to this day.

Irrational Games would live on to see the financial success that Looking Glass was never allowed with the 2007 release of the popular Bioshock series, which – to the disappointment of many fans – did not turn out to be the next step in the logical evolution of FPS/RPG hybrids they had hoped for.

System Shock 2 stands unchallenged both in its seamless blending of genres and in its ability to truly make the player feel like a pathetic creature of meat and bone, panting and sweating as you run through SHODAN’s corridors. NH

SHODAN is voiced by Terri Brosius, who not only worked as writer and level designer for Looking Glass, but was also part of an early 90’s rock band named Tribe.

Mods:
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 90’s were a time of great technological jumps, then the start of the new millennium was a time of drastic changes in the business side. It was a period of consolidation that re-shaped the gaming industry.

Previously, the successful fifth generation of consoles, led by the Playstation and the Nintendo 64, had sold millions and greatly expanded the gaming audience. Now the Playstation 2 was spearheading the 6th console generation and breaking all sales records, 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 90’s, and the harsh climate of the early 00’s saw the end of Interplay, SSI, Hasbro Interactive, 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 2000’s.

In Japan, Square would merge with Enix and become Square-Enix, an attempt to fight the ever increasing development costs. Even on the hardware side things were getting tighter, with 3Dfx suffering from bad decisions and being acquired by Nvidia, leaving the graphic cards market as the duopoly between ATI and Nvidia that stands to this day.

One of the biggest changes happened in the console market; SEGA left the fight with heavy losses after the consecutive failures of the Saturn and the Dreamcast. But a new challenger, Microsoft, rose in its place. 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.

Signaling the start of a new era, the early 2000’s were 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 them – 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.

**The dot.com bubble:** This is a tangential subject, but key to understanding the insecurity that loomed the early 2000’s. With the birth and popularization 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.

**Handheld Consoles:** After *Pokémon*’s success revitalized the decade-old Game Boy, Nintendo started to quickly develop new handhelds. The Game Boy Color 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 PSP Vita.

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**The Playstation 2** is released. It dominated the 2000’s and became the best-selling video game console in history, with over 155 million units sold.

**The Gamecube** was a bet on “family-friendly” consoles, but the lack of third-party games made it struggle. It sold 22 million units.

**The Xbox** was Microsoft’s entry into the console wars. It would revolutionize the gaming scenario in the US and sell 24 million units.

**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 MMORPGs. It peaked at 12 million subscribers in 2010, but remains extremely popular.

**Half-Life 2** brings in an innovative physics engine and a more cinematic approach. It also comes with Valve’s newly-released Steam and lead to popular mods, such as *Garry’s Mod*.

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**2000**

*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.

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**2001**

*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.

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**2002**

*Grand Theft Auto III* takes the world by storm, selling 14 million units across all platforms, popularizing open-world sandbox games and leading to a new debate over video game violence.

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**2003**

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.

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**2004**

*Neopets* is a virtual pet website that was launched in 1999 and quickly grew popular, reaching 35 million users in 2005.
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 A.I.s 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.

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 datacubes to discover and study, as well as inhabitants that philosophize, 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 leveled up, allowing further specialization, 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

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 play style. 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.

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 characterization 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-around 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

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.

Mods:

The Nameless Mod: A long and elaborate campaign, featuring great level design and two separate story-lines. 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.

HDTTP / New Vision: Two mods that updates the game’s graphics. They are featured in both Revision and GMDX.

Shifter / Biomod: Two rather controversial mods that make radical rebalance and gameplay changes.

Instead of just offering dialog choices, Deus Ex reacts to player’s actions, shaping the narrative around them.
Baldur’s Gate II: Shadow of Amn for me was more than a game; it was an unforgettable journey throughout the world of Faërun that came alive before my eyes, with friends and villains with believable yet interesting and unique histories and personalities of their own. It was my first CRPG ever, and one that I fell absolutely in love with.

BG2 continues the story of the first game, but you can skip BG1 if you wish without losing much. Set in the Forgotten Realms, rich in detail and history, you assume the role of Gorion’s ward, one of the many 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 dialogs 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.

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 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 neighboring regions. Athkatla is a delight to explore; each part of the city is well fleshed out, populated by townsperson of different status or professions. While it outwardly appears that the city is co-governed by a merchant council and a sinister group of mages, there are other powerful organizations that play prominent roles and soon you will find yourself caught amidst their struggle over control of the city. You also have the chance to increase your standing within Athkatla through the stronghold quests which vary depending on your player character’s chosen class.

During your journey, you’ll find a wealth of side-quests; so much that you might feel overwhelmed at times. Most of the quests are varied, well-written, and often incorporates puzzles, ranging from simple riddles, to elaborate plots with you playing the role of a detective – for example, one has you attempting to prove your sanity by answering riddles in order to escape from a prison where mental “deviants” are held.

*The Enhanced Edition of Baldur’s Gate II, released by Overhaul Games in 2013, adds new content, wide-screen support, bug fixes and new ports.
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 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-caster classes, there is a huge range of weapons available. The majority of weapons come with their own history and lore (or sometimes humorous conversations!), often interesting and fun to read. There are also a number of legendary weapons which can be forged using parts found during your journey - most of the time it's well worth it to hunt for these parts!

Baldur’s Gate 2 is one hell of a journey; there is so much to experience, so much to see, it is hard to describe it all using words alone – you will have to experience it for yourself! By the end of your journey through both Shadows of Amn and the Throne of Bhaal expansion, you will be as eager to share your experiences with others as I am. SN

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.
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. 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 customize. 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.

Instead of customizing 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 customize your entire group of adventurers – again a party of six characters. This apparently simple change has a deep impact in 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 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 center 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’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.

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 hidding helmets to various rule changes and new easy-of-use features.

Widescreen Mod: Allows resolutions over 800x600.

Unfinished Business: Restores content that was cut from the game, including dialog, 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.

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.

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.

It stands as one of the highlights of Icewind Dale, its 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 to gold. AO

Icewind Dale doesn’t have recruitable NPCs – instead, it tasks players with creating a full of party of six characters.
Vampire: The Masquerade Redemption has always been overshadowed by its big brother Bloodlines. It might not be the best CRPG ever, but it’s still a bloody good game. With a small team, Nihilistic Studios was able to construct beautiful environments and a compelling story with colorful characters.

While convalescing in Medieval Prague, a young French crusader called Christof Romuald falls in love with one of the nuns taking care of him. His overzealous attitude leads him straight into conflict with local vampires and paints him as a worthy candidate to undeath. Turned into a vampire by the Brujah, a clan of warrior-philosophers from ancient Carthage, our hero wanders through Prague and Vienna by night to save his lost love and prevent the awakening of an ancient wicked vampire. Halfway through the game, Christof is projected through time and awakes on the Eve of the New Year 2000 in London to end his quest.

The story itself is simple and extremely straightforward but the unique setting created by White Wolf is well-explained and keeps its density. A few occasional choices are given to the player, but they don’t change much and only impact on the ending. Through the two time periods, three companions will join Christof on his desperate quest. Entertaining and diverse, they will comment on every place and every character encountered by distilling interesting tidbits about Vampire’s universe.

While the timeskip doesn’t really change anything gameplay-wise (except the weapons, the UI and the characters), the cultural shock felt by Christof is pretty entertaining to watch. Putting aside the cheesy love story, the cast and the writing are good enough to keep your attention. Strangely enough, self-conscious humour is also present and works pretty well.

Aficionados of the original pen-and-paper game felt deeply betrayed by Redemption’s gameplay. Indeed, while the profound political nature of the vampires is quickly established, the game is exclusively based around combat. Redemption plays as a deeply narrative Diablo-like. Love it or hate it but there is no way to avoid it. If you accept it, it is an entertaining and original experience.

On the surface, Redemption’s gameplay is very similar to Diablo: click on enemies until extinction, get loot, rinse and repeat. The vanilla formula changes quite a bit once you become a vampire. Your PCs have three bars: life, blood & frenzy. By draining humans (or enemies), you get blood which allows you to heal yourself and fuel disciplines, vampire magic. If your blood bar gets low, your frenzy rises up making your character prone to enter a state uncontrollable rage. Those simple facts become matters of life and death in combat as a simple fight can turn into a total party wipe with thirsty characters. Vampire weaknesses, such as sunlight or fire, can make things go south pretty fast.
Every vampire gets basic disciplines (such as feeding) but also more exotic ones linked to his/her clan. In Redemption, there are more than ten of those and each one unlocks up to five different powers. The range is extremely large: wolf form, fireballs, invisibility, summoning, celerity, cauldron of blood, etc. Combinations are pretty fun, and tailoring the disciplines used by your characters usually end up being as important as the weapon they use, maybe more. Arsenal and enemies are pretty varied: Swords and spiked maces turn into guns and flamethrowers in the modern era, each class of weapons affecting enemies differently. Non-vampiric enemies range from humans, ghosts to other monstrosities from the World of Darkness – the Werewolf probably being the nastiest of all. While the game isn’t very difficult, bosses are tough, usually spamming high-end disciplines and draining most of your resources.

The polarizing gameplay aside, Redemption succeeded in offering a nice atmosphere through a coherent art direction. Graphics have aged well, except the blocky-handed characters, and offer a nice vision of the World of Darkness. Sound design is creepy as hell and the soundtrack is fantastic. Composed by two different artists to follow the story’s division, music is probably one of the best in the genre. The medieval bits are dark and dreary while the modern elements relies on techno and rap vibes.

Only remembered by a few, Redemption’s multiplayer was extremely original. More than a year before Neverwinters Nights, it tried to recreate the tabletop experience with an omnipotent storyteller as a host. The storyteller could change everything in the multiplayer sessions: add monsters, props, give experience points, etc. Unfortunately, only two scenarios were built within the core game and no user-friendly toolkits were given to the players.

Redemption is a schizophrenic game using a well-thought universe and a compelling narrative to promote a Diablo variation. It is definitively a good game and is worth a look. If you manage to bypass the boring tutorial dungeon, then you will definitively enjoy yourself. TR

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
With its isometric perspective, real-time combat, simplistic character system and a cliche story about a chosen one, it’s easy to dismiss *Soulbringer* as a yet another *Diablo*-clone. You couldn’t be further from 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.

Each weapon has up to 5 possible attacks, that differ in a variety of areas like speed, reach, damage type, etc. You can also combine those attacks into combos, presumably tailor-suited for different enemy types. In fact, you are encouraged to do so, as it’s only while performing a combo that your character can dodge or parry.

Attacks are also aimed at different body parts – or more exactly different height levels, as the game takes the attacks trajectory and elevation into account. Unfortunately, elevation seems to be the game’s Achilles heel, as the AI, while quite competent in other areas, just can’t understand it properly. This manifests in a variety of ways – from some very weird 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 standard five elements, that have associated skills that grow with use. However those skills provide you not with spell power, but with protection from said element – up to the point where enemy spells start to actually heal you. The trade-off is, of course, decreasing the skill with a subsequent element – 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 cliche 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
The original \textit{Grandia}, released in 1997 for the Sega Saturn (and later the PS1), is often listed among the best JRPGs of all time, thanks to its light-hearted story, the challenging, puzzle-filled dungeons and – above all – its combat system.

While most JRPGs use similar turn-based combat systems derived from \textit{Wizardry} and \textit{Dragon Quest}, the \textit{Grandia} series has an entirely new system, where battles happen in real-time, but follow an initiative order. During battle, a gauge displays the order characters will act, as their icons travel from left to right through three phases – Wait, Command and Act.

During the Wait phase characters will, well, wait. As each character reach the Command phase, you’ll give them an order and they will execute it at the end of the Act phase – with each type of action requiring a different amount of time to be executed. Not only it feels dynamic, but both the player and the enemies can use attacks and skills to delay their foes’ actions – or even cancel them all together, if timed correctly.

\textit{Grandia II}, the only game of the series ported to PCs, further improves the combat system by featuring a fully 3D combat area. Now characters must move close to their foes to attack, making position and speed play a big role when timing your actions.

Unfortunately the whole system feels underused, as the encounter design is quite poor and battles are very easy. You characters all have multiple powerful attacks, vast pools of mana and bags full of items, overpowering most obstacles – even boss battles.

\textit{Grandia II} puts you in the shoes of Ryudo, a young mercenary hired to protect a priestess during an exorcism ritual. Things go bad, the girl gets possessed and they both set on a journey to save her soul. It’s a good premise, with a few memorable characters and plot twists – but also many cliché JRPG tropes.

While it’s an entertaining title, \textit{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: \textit{Child of Light} and \textit{Penny Arcade’s Precipice of Darkness 3 & 4}. FE

\textit{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.

\textit{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.
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 00’s 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 colorful 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 360º – which can be used to find hidden items, but is quite troublesome in dense areas.

At first glance, BoFIV’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 customization 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 up, allowing you to customize your party. But beware – some masters may decrease defense 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.
Each new area usually presents an 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.

There are many masters your characters can train under, each offering new abilities and stats change at level up.

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 capturing 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 – Dwarf Fortress-style –, 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 BoF IV 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 an unique mechanic or puzzle, which can either be solved quickly to proceed or thoroughly explored in exchange for 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. The characters and world aren't as memorable and a lot has been cut or streamlined, from the dragon forms to the dungeon’s complexity and even the overall game length.

However, on its own BoF IV 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.
The first RPG developed by Volition (known for their Red Faction and Saint’s Row series), Summoner is rather obscure and forgotten today for variety of reasons. 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.

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 to explore the world and learn about its history, events and everyday lives of its characters.

Summoner’s story is centered 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 and focused 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 make 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.
When D.W. Bradley, the architect behind *Wizardry 5-7*, 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 favorites 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 customization 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 neighbor.

Don’t overlook *Wizards & Warriors* just because *Wizardry 8* gets all the attention – you’ll be surprised at how frequently *Wizardry* gets shown up! CY

The excellent combat system blends turn-based actions with real-time movement, being both tactical and fast-paced.

There are 10 races and 4 basic classes to create your party from, plus 11 hidden classes you can unlock by completing certain quests or acting in a certain way.

Getting the game to run on modern PCs can be quite a challenge. Be sure to install the Unofficial Patch, RAD Video Tools and enable Win98 compatibility.
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 humor, 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.

As soon as I entered the universe of *Anachronox* I was swept into an unforgettable cyberpunk world, where danger, action and humor 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 P.I., now a down on his luck drunkard, owing a big debt to the local crime lord. His only companions are his deceased secretary (digitized 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 tech 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 written about. 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 humor, 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.
Anachronox's storyline ends in a cliff-hanger 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.

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 possible on 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 his own special abilities, which can be used in combat, quest solving and uncovering secret areas. Lockpicking, hacking and aggressive jabbering are only few of the skills that will come 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 labor of love, created under circumstances that allowed free reign of creativity and encouraged ambitious goals. It's one of those unique games that take you into their world and leave a lasting impression. In conclusion, this is a fun experience you shouldn't miss. DT

“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

You'll come across several mini-games. Some are tied to skills, like lockpicking, but others are much more usual.

Anachronox’s writing manages to achieve a great mix of humor, drama, hard sci-fi and epic space opera.
Arcanum, in my opinion, offers the most complete role-playing experience of any CRPG ever created. The breadth and depth of mechanics and content ensure that one playthrough just won’t be enough. Two or three won’t cut it either. The diversity of character options is immense, not just at character creation, but through gameplay and dialogue choices throughout the huge open world of Arcanum.

Creating a character in Arcanum is a very involved experience. The system is classless, so you won’t pick a class, but there are no less than 8 races and over 50 backgrounds to choose from, allowing you to tailor your character to very specific tastes and also getting the player into the role-playing spirit. The effects of backgrounds range from the minor to the extreme. If you just want to tinker a little or add some flavor to your character, you could be an apprentice to a shopkeeper or a halfling orphan for some minor bonuses and penalties. But if you want to go all in, you could be a supermodel, or an idiot savant or even a Frankenstein monster with huge bonuses and penalties across multiple stats and skills.

When you’re finished creating your avatar, the opening cinematic plays. You are aboard the IFS Zephyr, a zeppelin on its maiden voyage from Caladon to Tarant, when it is attacked and shot down by two ‘strange flying machines’ (i.e. planes) piloted by Orcs. At the crash site you talk to a dying gnome who gives you a silver ring and tells you to ‘Find the boy.’ You are then engaged by a fellow named Virgil, a recent convert to the Panarri religion, who claims you are the reincarnation of the ancient god Nasrudin. Virgil offers to accompany you to the nearby town of Shrouded Hills to meet his superior, and your journey through the world of Arcanum begins.

Arcanum boasts a huge number of quests with several ways to resolve them, usually using the trio of solutions established by Fallout – combat, stealth and diplomacy. The complex character system adds a lot of depth here, as a beautiful elf in an elegant dress will have an easier time getting a murderer to confess, but an ugly mage can still try a charm spell, or even use necromancy to get a testimony from his victims.

The world is massive and very open, with few gates to pass through. There are many optional locations scattered across the map to stumble upon, from altars of old and forgotten gods to ancient dungeons, hidden villages and a few easter eggs.

A lot of smaller touches really add to the charm of Arcanum. For example, every skill in the game has an associated master. You’ll have to find them and often do a special quest for them if you wish to be trained. You will also see your own actions, or the consequences of them, as headlines of the Tarantian, the most popular newspaper in Arcanum. You’ll read and hear various rumors as well, that serve both as leads into obscure side-quests and as subtle hints about future areas and the game’s antagonist.
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 lense 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 shipped somewhat unfinished and quite buggy. Combat suffered the most of any element because of Sierra’s demands that a real-time mode be implemented alongside the intended turn-based mode. As result, combat is quite unsatisfactory and unbalanced, becoming a chore during some of the larger, combat-filled dungeons.

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

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”.

You’ll find a wild range of items, from ancient magical swords to electrical top hats – all beautifully rendered.

The character system is extensive, with various attributes, skills, schools of magic and technological disciplines.

Terra-Arcanum is a fan site dedicated to Arcanum, where you’ll find all mods released for the game, including Forgotten Places of Arcanum, the Widescreen Mod and the highly recommended Unofficial Fan Patch.
Gothic came literally out of nowhere in 2001, and, in my view, set a whole new standard for single-character hiking simulators, aka “The Piranha Bytes RPG”. Funny how the developers didn’t even label it as an RPG at its release.

When talking about why Gothic was something fresh and unique when it was published, it’s definitely important to start with the general theme and story, since it’s essentially “Escape from New York... with swords!” You are just a bloke, who’s nameless for all intents and purposes because nobody even lets you introduce yourself. You are thrown into a prison mining colony surrounded by a deadly one-way-entry forcefield, where the prisoners managed to rebel and take over the whole establishment. After that you are beaten senseless (“baptized”) by a bunch of cops and left on your own. The premise in Gothic is a very good hook because it presents a mix of low key matters with a fairly unique setting. It also manages to uphold that to the end, as even though bigger and more fantastical events start happening, your character’s only motivation is basically to get the hell out of the colony.

The general writing style, which would stick with Piranha Bytes henceforth, also emphasized the dichotomy between the vulgar and the fantastical very well, as you’d be coming across various really colorful characters, who are on the one hand rather typical – pompous mages, brutal thugs, dumb peons -, but on the other extremely believable and amusing.

But Gothic’s biggest strength was not just showing you this strange prison colony, but also letting you visit its every nook and cranny. The world of Gothic was simply massive, as well as beautiful, with tons of places to check out, beasts to murder, secret caverns to penetrate and ancient tombs to raid. And above all, it was hand-crafted, full of verticality and almost without barriers, so you could just go off and explore whatever you wanted – provided you could survive.

And that was where Gothic was tricky, because surviving was a lot harder than in most games. You know it isn’t fooling around when your first opponent is a turkey that can horribly murder you in a few hits. And it was this ridiculous brutality that gave the game most 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 thrive was to quickly get better gear, beg people to train you in combat and master the fighting system, which I consider one of the best ones in Action-RPG history. At first it seems clunky and unresponsive, but once you get accustomed to it and take on harder opponents, every fight becomes an adrenaline-pumping effort where every mistake could mean death. Various enemies would also fight in different ways, and force you to adapt new tactics.
“We wanted to create a living world, so we decided to make it small and interesting, rather than very large and boring. And instead of a bright faery-tale atmosphere, we preferred to create a dark and gloomy setting. Combine these two things and you end up with a prison camp surrounded by a magical barrier.”

– Alex Brüggemann, Piranha Bytes co-founder and Gothic’s designer

The final outstanding quality of Gothic was its character system and how it tied into the game and story themselves. Sure, you could gain massive XP from monsters and quests, but once you leveled up, essentially nothing happened. You only got a bunch of skill points that required visits at specific trainers that would teach you, but only to the best of their capabilities – if they even respected you in the first place.

Furthermore, while your character started as a classless bloke, to actually acquire a specific class you needed to join one of the three very distinct factions, each of which had its own agenda and quests. Not only was this very neat because tying the leveling to the narrative was a nice throw-back to P&P RPGs, but also because it piled up many layers of choices and consequences. You might agree with one faction, but joining it will prevent you from learning something from another, or completing quests for the third, etc.

I’d lie if I said that I wasn’t not an obnoxious fan of Piranha Bytes’ RPG formula. I remember how amazed I was by the openness of the world, the feelings of seclusion and the brutality of the entire setting in just about all aspects when I played it for the first time. I also remember how glad I was when they took all that and made it even better in Gothic II. After that both the series and the developer would start meandering, but no matter what happened, it would never take away the first two games from me.

And while the sequel very much improved everything from Gothic, skipping this one “because it’s the same but a bit less” would be criminal. Honestly, both games are just parts of one great whole, and you can’t have one without the other. DR

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.

Gothic Reloaded is an ambitious fan project seeking to completely overhaul Gothic’s visuals with HD textures, 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.
made by the Spanish studio Rebel Act Software, *Severance: Blade of Darkness* (also known as *Blade: The Edge of Darkness*) is an interesting hack & slash game which heavily relies on CRPG aesthetics and conventions. The story is pretty cliché but does the job: a dark god is going to escape from his prison and it’s up to you to put him back to his place, using the fabled Blade of Darkness.

In a straight-up *Gauntlet* fashion, four characters are available, each having their own strengths and weaknesses. The amazon is an extremely fast and nimble fighter who specializes in bows and lances, but she is also very frail. The knight is a balanced character using a sword-and-shield fighting style, and can equip some of the best armor in the game. The sluggish barbarian is a powerhouse using gigantic two-handed swords and having plenty of combos. Last but not least, the dwarf is an unsinkable tank but his lack of combos and his short reach make him the hardest character to master.

*Blade of Darkness* is a third-person hack & slash with a very strict sense of timing and a high difficulty. In par with your health bar, your character possesses a power bar which depletes after each attack à la *Dark Souls*. The more powerful a weapon or combo is, the more energy it will consume. Coming from a very large bestiary (orcs, demons, tainted knights), enemies are restless and won’t go down easily. To make things worse, they use the same tactical array as you: blocking, poisoned weapons and deadly combos.

Don’t be fooled by the hack & slash nature of the game, cautiousness and tactical progression are the only way to progress through the game. Tackling more than two enemies, even weak ones, at the same time is always a perilous task. Fortunately, you get a few edges to fight the relentless hordes thrown at you. Weapons start pretty weak but new ones can be picked up along the way. Every class of weapon offers different combos, so it’s always a good idea to keep a spare mace to crush skeletons for example. Few ranged weapons are present but only the amazon will find them useful, puzzles non-standing.

*Severance* employs a lock-on system, similar to *Ocarina of Time*. You can dodge and block attacks, but range and durability are always an issue, so be careful. A few types of armor are hidden through the levels making your character a bit harder to kill. A small inventory allows to stock a handful of health and power-up potions for the most difficult passages. The RPG aspect is limited to a leveling up system automatically boosting your life, power and unlocking new combos. Leveling up also refills your life-bar making it a 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, some levels being pretty labyrinthine while others are just a succession of arenas. Fortunately, the general aesthetic is much better.
The game will send you to very different and exotic places such as Arabic oasis, abandoned fortresses and deep wilderness. Doors, gates and various mechanisms will always bar your way so you will keep most of the game looking for keys. Traps of all sorts are present at every corner and levels are extremely long, so saving often is always a good idea.

Once the titular Blade of Darkness is acquired, you can either choose to proceed to the final boss’s lair or backtrack to previous levels. Indeed the magic weapon is weakened and its power needs to be unlocked by using eight runes, hidden through the entire game. It’s better to keep a lookout for those early on because revisited levels are filled with high-end monsters. Collecting those runes will unlock a additional level and the true final boss. He is pretty tough but at this point you should have seen worse.

Beyond its tough as nails difficulty, Severance’s novelty at the time came from its use of lighting. Completely coded in Python, the game engine displays beautiful shadows and make a clever use of light sources. Some levels, like the knight’s starting level, offer a gothic and dreary atmosphere propelled by torches and eerie sound design. Fire can also be used to inflame wooden structures and solve a few puzzles which is a pretty cool feature.

The funniest thing about Severance and one of its most marketed features is the omnipresent gore. After a few exchanges, your character and the enemy alike will be covered with wounds and the ground repainted with liters of blood. Fights end up by dismembering most of the loser’s body parts with arms and heads flying everywhere. It’s pretty satisfying and completely ridiculous at the same time.

Mixing classic deathtraps of games like Dungeon Master with hack & slash mechanics, Severance was reconsidered these last years in light of the Demons’ / Dark Souls series. While I doubt that there were any influence from either side, the parallel is interesting and made new players aware of Severance’s existence. Harsh but fun, as it definitively should be. TR

José Luis Vaello, Severance’s Lead Artist

Combat will be familiar to Dark Souls fans, but Severance adds combos, breakable shields, mutilations and blood galore.

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 customizable 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.

If you have an interest in mods, be sure to check Arokh’s Lair, where Severance modders and fans still gather.

The Blade of Light mod uses ENB to add some heavy post-processing. Pretty, but not for everyone.
Geneforge, to me, is what an RPG game should be about. A nameless protagonist walks into the world, and chooses their destiny. Skills are built, alliances formed, enemies made. You can be the loyal ally, the backstabbing traitor, or simply slaughter everyone before you have a chance to decide. At the end you have what is a personal experience, something built by the choices you have made.

The first few steps in Geneforge did not grab my attention. Being from a small studio, the game is built with budget graphics, and the combat model is relatively simplistic. What first started to pique my interest was a well crafted backstory.

The main premise of the game is a world in which a ruling clan, the Shapers, uses magical (genetic?) techniques to build servants, and retain tight control over those powers with the premise that abuse would be deadly. This creates in essence a ruling class, with complete dominance over their sentient creations. The moral questions raised by this situation continues throughout the series, and to my satisfaction is never resolved in black and white fashion.

The combat, while simple, can play out very differently based on character build and skill choices. You can focus on combat skills, magic skills, or shaping skills. Shaping skills tend to be my favorite, as eventually your character ends up with a group of creatures that gain strength as they survive combat.

Do you sacrifice the little guy, who has traveled 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 feel of the progression of that 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

This, in my opinion, is where the game truly shines. Your choices, both in character build and NPC interaction, have tangible consequences in the game world. What is one player’s hometown is another’s enemy fortress. Do you consume power at all cost, or do you try to do what you think is right? All options are available, and power is yours for the taking if you are strong enough or cunning enough. The sense of power, as I mentioned earlier, is satisfying as your entourage of creatures grows, your magic gets more powerful, and your combat skills improve.

The choices continue to lead up to the ending of the game. There are several endings possible, and not just of the “last minute good or evil” type. Your choices throughout the game lead up to set of ending slides, which describe the impact of your choices. Again, the game does not disappoint; “good” choices do not always lead to the outcome that you might think.

For me, the first game was just a starting point to a wonderful series. What creator Jeff Vogel has done with this series is create a coherent story of the Shapers that spans all five games. There are highs and lows along the way, but taken in total they provided me with a wonderful experience, and a fantastic story of a strange world.

Throughout the series, the choices continued to provoke my thoughts about the morality involving the control of power, and whether ends of containing deadly power or ending unjust slavery justify whatever means necessary. By the end of the 5 game series, I had become attached to the world of the Shapers, and sad to see the journey end.

The Geneforge games, like both Fallout and Arcanum, impress me as games where not only does the player explore the world, but the player shapes the world. BL

Sucia Island is massive, and exploration is node-based. You’ll have to search carefully to find hidden areas.

Combat is turn-based and somewhat simplistic, but the enemy AI can often surprise you.

You can use Shaper magic to create creatures, in whatever fashion fits your playstyle best.

The Graphics Enhancement mod replaces Geneforge’s amateurish UI, fixes graphical inconsistencies and updates some of its sprites.
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*!

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 & 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 paths, 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 pathfinding.

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
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 do they 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/noneffective relationships, and in true *Pokémon* fashion you also get to choose your initial fairy between 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 sang 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.
Larian Studios’ *Divine Divinity* has got a lot of undeserved reputation since its release. The problem is that it was released in 2002, a time when various *Diablo* clones were popping up left and right. Furthermore, if you looked at various screens or played it for half an hour or so, it really did seem to be just another *Diablo* clone, so the moniker’s stuck even today. Even though *Divine Divinity* was so much more than that.

Sure, there are many elements of a generic hack’n’slash here. The UI, the randomised tons of phat loot, hordes of monsters and similar core mechanics are all something we’ve seen countless times already. However, these are only superficial, and *Divine Divinity’s* unique aspects only become apparent once you spend a few hours to find them. The easiest one to notice is the character system, which is much more RPG-y than your average 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.

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

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’n’slash combat, Divinity might not be up your alley, as there's no denying that it has a lot of combat in many places. 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 customization and ways to shamelessly break them to your advantage.

What is left to conclude, then? Divine Divinity is simply a neat game. Not flawless by any means, but ridiculously absorbing and long enough to entertain you for weeks – it’s one of those games that make you think – “a combination of fetch quests and generic fighting has no right to be this damn addicting!”.

It’s also the start of the whole Divinity series, which includes other titles also worth more than a casual look (especially Divinity 2 and 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

The writing is always amusing, and have grown to become one of Larian’s trademarks.
My first trip to Vivec City was an unforgettable hour of confusion and awe. The Elder Scrolls’ cavalier attention to detail, both large and small, reached an apex there.

Vivec is like a cramped cyberpunk cityscape, but it’s presented inside the brown sandstone of medieval fantasy. Eight floating stone pyramids comprise the city’s eight districts, with a network of gondolas and bridges connecting them to each other and the mainland. Each district has four explorable interior levels each, containing innumerable businesses and residences that house hundreds of named NPCs. They all have their own inventories, their own dispositions, jobs, haunts and hangs that combine to give each NPC their own personal little story. The fictional economy that supports these fictional lives is on full display – their houses, their businesses, the farms that grow their food and the sewers that funnel away their waste are not spared for detail. Administrative businesses, libraries, treasuries and offices take up space next to the rowdy taverns and ghastly magic shops.

Vvardenfell, the massive island you explore in Morrowind, is one of the few sandbox maps that feels like it was built without any intention to turn it into game, as if it was designed and mapped to serve the lore more than playability. As far as the player’s lofty quests are concerned, all those administrative details behind Vivec City’s economy aren’t relevant. You can learn all about the process of how the nearby Netch farms churn out Netch leather which turns into Netch armor, and it’s only flavor text. There are almost two hundred different books to read (well, not really books so much as they are a few paragraphs, but still) that document everything from the world’s history to directories of the council members that currently lead its political parties.

All this detail doesn’t really make or break the game, mechanically speaking. It’s just there. It’s flavor text the player can skip. But what this massive amount of detail does do well (and indeed, its very purpose to the game) is to reify Vvardenfell as a world that is almost as complicated, ancient and dynamic as our own.

Look at how the game handles transportation for an example. Instead of pointing and clicking on a map screen to fast-travel (like in the TES games before and after Morrowind) you use Vvardenfell’s public transit system instead. The people of this island use animal mounts, ferry boats, and magic teleporter booths to travel around. So during the early game you use those facilities too.

Critics during the game’s launch rightfully bemoaned Morrowind’s slow walking speed and constricting fast travel system, but those caveats serve as buildup for a divine payoff later on. They build anticipation for a revelatory moment that the player may not experience for tens or perhaps hundreds of hours later. Until then, Morrowind is a slow burning game.

OpenMW is a project seeking to recreate Morrowind in a new open engine, allowing for more mods, improvements and a Mac version. You can follow them here: 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.

Bethesda Softworks, 2002
Windows and Xbox
Transportation starts off slow. Combat starts off incredibly awkwardly. Since the world seems like it was designed before the gameplay was designed, it doesn't lead you through roads and villages that are cleanly organized to funnel you in the right direction. The names are hard to pronounce, there are no omnipotent objectives prodding you this way or that way, and wherever you end up there will be just way too much stuff there.

What gives you guidance is your own sense of adventure and a brilliantly self-aware main quest that tasks you with becoming the omnipotent God-king of Vvardenfell. Eventually some overpowering stat progression happens after level 10 that makes combat and walking much more fast, and during that time your understanding of Vvardenfell will also increase immensely. You will come to learn the hard-to-pronounce names of its numerous towns and locations.

You'll get to know its tribes, its council members, its politics and its religions because the main quest tasks you with meeting and manipulating every last one of them.

Soon you'll be able to teleport across the map, fly from city to city, and sprint with blinding speed! You'll forget about the public transit system because, just as all the flavor text of the main quest suggested you'd do, you'll become a godlike warrior-poet who knows this island inside and out whether you were trying to pay attention or not.

The most brilliant twist *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* takes is that you'll actually have a mental frame of reference to know how great your progress 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**

“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

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 in an 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 cliches.
**Arx Fatalis**

*Arkane Studios, 2002
Windows and Xbox (Linux and Mac)*

Arx Fatalis was Arkane's first game and they wore their influences on their sleeve. You could easily call the whole affair a love letter to Looking Glass, a legendary developer that always put player agency at the forefront. While not reaching the same high points as its inspirations, *Arx Fatalis* stands proud in its own right as arguably one of the last examples of 90’s PC gaming design trends.

Originally envisioned as *Ultima Underwold 3*, which was rejected by EA, the game takes place entirely underground and a competent justification is actually provided to explain as to why the player spends all his time in caverns and tunnels. This particular medieval fantasy world is going through an ice age that turned the surface into a frozen wasteland and only a few underground enclaves hold what is left of civilization. Arx, a converted mine with many races crammed together, is one such place and the center of the game’s narrative.

The limited budget proved to be a blessing in disguise – while the game is shorter than most RPGs, it does its best to make that time meaningful.

Within the 8 levels that compromise Arx there is a great deal of thematic and mechanical variety. Some levels emphasis politics and investigative quests, such as dealing with goblins and their troll workers, while others offer adventure and 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 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 emphasized instead of direct instructions. One particular side quest deserves mention due to its fail state: a missing child must be found and if the player is too slow she gets sacrificed to summon a demon. A grim moment, but fitting for a game that focuses on player interactions, even in failure.

On a higher level, *Arx Fatalis* uses a classless character system defined by 4 attributes – strength, dexterity, constitution and intelligence –, plus 9 skills. The game requires a diverse build to be fully explored and there aren’t restrictions on what can be increased, so it pushes players towards a versatile character.

Sadly, not all skills are equally useful; 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 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 combat focused, it does feature fighting extensively – one of its weaker parts. Melee combat boils down to moving in and out of your opponent’s range to make him miss to then counter attack, and the projectile physics are laughable.
“Extreme honor 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 CEO Of Arkane Studios

Stealth, however, is much better implemented due to the clear influence of the Looking Glass classic Thief, complete with a detection gem feature. 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 unto one of the game’s best aspect, the spellcasting. 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. 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.

Unfortunately, there’s little reason to fiddle with all these exciting effects, as every obstacle can be more easily completed by other means. Arkane created a brilliant system, but not the content to make it shine.

The most commendable thing about Arx Fatalis overall is that they understood Looking Glass’s design principle in an era that already started to forget them. The System Shock-style inventory means that players must always manually interact with the world rather than just arbitrarily loot everything, magic features a consistent logical system, weapons degrade after use, enchanting objects is done through item combination and casting spells, bread can be baked by mixing flour with water then placing it near a fire, etc.

The important aspect here is not realism, since dough doesn’t turn into bread in 5 seconds, but verisimilitude. Players understands the world not through exposition or visuals, but by interacting with it.

It’s hard to say what’s sadder: that Arx Fatalis is one of the last games of arguably the best period of PC gaming, or that more than a decade since its releases it remains unmatched in certain depths. Thus, this relatively hidden gem remains a must-play. LL

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.

Arx - End Of Sun is a free, fan-made prequel to Arx Fatalis, currently under development.
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.

As the swan song 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 dialog 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 harbor of Targos, one of the Ten Towns of Icewind Dale, as your party joins in the defense 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 uneasy 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 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 high and lows. The siege of Targos is definitely the former, but there is a tiresome grind through the mid 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
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: *MMIX* 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 specialized 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 leveling 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. *MMIX* 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 distinct.

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 Me-M series could have become, then by all means give it a try. **DF**

Fans created the [1.3 community patch](#) to fix *MMIX*. 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 specialize into 12 other classes by performing special quests.
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 tabletop 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, armors 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 & Paper experience by creating of a multi-player 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 had not only 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 entirety 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” – customizable micro-MMOs with up to 96 players. Meanwhile, the Aurora Toolset allowed anyone to create their own adventures, something which can be attested by 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

But all of this came at a cost – most of the five years of development were 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 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 one adventure, as you hunt a series of artifacts 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 payed 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 one 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

The financial crisis 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.
In the early 2000s superheroes and comic books were an almost unexplored genre for computer games. There had been a few lackluster 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 "super-hero 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, colorful and extremely ambitious engine, and a storyline that trod the well traveled 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 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 players 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 colorful, exciting and instantly gratifying experience.

More than just perform fancy attacks, heroes can also fly, levitate, teleport, jump into 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 favor 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 litters the city.
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 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 traveling 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

Freedom Force vs the Third Reich further expanded the modding support, allowing for crazier superhero teams. 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 customization uses a clever point-buy system with attributes, disadvantages and customizable powers. 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.

“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
Prince of Qin is a fascinating game, with aspects both familiar and alien to a western gamer. It seems to have been influenced by the Baldur's Gate series and Divine Divinity. Like Baldur's Gate, it is a real-time with pause, isometric CRPG in which you form a party of adventurers from a number of NPCs you meet along the way. Like Divine Divinity, you can learn special abilities through skill trees in order to later perform them in combat via an expendable mana pool. Also like Divine Divinity, it's commonly mistaken for just another Diablo clone.

Despite these influences, Prince of Qin runs in a completely unique direction, using a magic and combat system based upon five elements (Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth). In this five element system, some elements are stronger or weaker against the others, similar to rock-paper-scissors or Pokémon. Each character in your party, and the enemies they fight, have an element associated with them, and so you have to keep this in mind in larger fights and set characters against opponents whose element they have an advantage over.

Exploration is interesting since the enemies are fairly diverse up through the middle of the game, and many of the sidequests are long and related to the game's historical lore. One aspect I found satisfying is that you can fail a quest if you do not make the correct decisions – it may frustrate some players, but it's a gutsy move by the game designers to force players to think about the consequences of their actions.

A poorer game design decision was the inclusion of respawning enemies in certain locations. I suppose they added those so that players could grind for experience if they so desired, but the creatures respawn so quickly that your 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 maneuver, but the story twists events slightly to enable him to survive and act against his conspirators.

The game is still somewhat of an educational experience as the plot progresses based on true historical figures and events, full of tragedy, hope, betrayals, and regrets. At the same time, the reform-minded Fu Su is sometimes made to be a sounding board of the writers, criticizing the plight of peasants and abuses of the ancient mercantile system with a voice that resonates more with modern liberal sentiment.

The character class system follows the same sort of strange, but familiar behavior as the rest of the game. Fu Su is a paladin in-game, but that does not equate to the typical Poul Anderson sort of paladin of Three Hearts and Three Lions fame that D&D ultimately adapted. Instead, a paladin in Prince of Qin is a warrior with artisan skills, allowing Fu Su to craft special equipment through the game.
The story offers a glimpse into Chinese culture, but the translation is wonky and the voice acting is quite bad.

It’s important to carefully consider the elements of each character and enemy, as they’ll heavily impact battles.

The game features an excellent crafting system in which Fu Su can produce magical-infused weapons and equipment, often quite a bit more powerful than many special items you find during the course of the adventure. The decisions you make during the course of the adventure will also create some variation as the cast of NPCs available will be affected by your choices. Due to the diverse cast of NPCs available, and the randomness of dropped loot and created artifacts, the final composition of the party is going to vary incredibly from game to game.

There are four more character classes, such as the well-named Muscleman, who specializes in melee combat and the summoning of creatures to help fight in battle. The Assassin character class is a helpful ranged combatant with trap springing skills, and the Wizard is your elemental-based spell slinger, firing artillery blasts from the back of the party formation, but in a twist he can also heal damage and status effects. Finally, there is the Witch who can also fire magical blasts from afar, but also has the capability of buffing your companions in battle.

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 rely on different types of food to replenish health. Without an Assassin of appropriate skill, you will not be able to open every chest and find some of the uniquely powerful in-game items.

Prince of Qin also came with a multiplayer mode, where you could play a separate (and simpler) campaign, which could support up to 500 players playing in a MMO-like fashion. Its success, mainly in China, led to the release of the online-only standalone expansion Prince of Qin Online - The Overlord of Conquerors (2003) – later renamed World of Qin.

Object Software would still a great single-player prequel called Seal of Evil (2004), with more magical elements and a story showcasing events that led to the creation of the Qin Empire, and World of Qin 2 (2005), a full-fledged MMO. DT
Knights of the Old Republic not only is the first Star Wars CRPG, but also a turning point for BioWare. It's the moment when it abandoned its PC roots in favor 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 realize the full potential of it, as it can feel underdeveloped.

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 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 a 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-favorite, 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.

Combat is real-time with pause and allows you to queue a set of actions for each character.

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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 Baldurs Gate II will be gravely disappointed.
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 you will 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 subtle 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.

"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 sizable 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 feeling of *Star Wars* is very strong with this one, and it’s a game I highly recommend for anyone who prioritizes 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 & quests.
- **Grif Vindh's Roleplay Padawan Mod:** Allow 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.
In 2003 David White released the first version of *The Battle for Wesnoth*. 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 full-fledged campaigns.

The secret behind *Wesnoth* is its deceivingly simple gameplay. Units move in an 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 alignment 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 Kapoue, 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 rigors 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 multi-player maps, etc. All these can be downloaded directly via the game 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.
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 canceled 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.

Minders 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. But while dialogues have many choices at first, the game later descent into mindless killing.

The game is based on Fallout’s SPECIAL ruleset, with similar stats and perks, but removes most non-combat skills, adds magic and four races.
TRON is a film that – despite releasing 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 digitized 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 digitizing him.

Developed by the FPS veterans at Monolith (Blood, No One Lives Forever, F.E.A.R.) most of the game plays as a FPS, with the player using the iconic Identity Disc and a variety of imaginative analogues to the standard weaponry – shotgun, sniper rifle, grenade launcher, submachine gun, etc – all based on geometric primitives (Disc, Rod, Ball, Mesh).

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 armor 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 strategize 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 fire-fight.

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.
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 a FPS, not quite a 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 favorite 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.

"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

An expansion for TRON 2.0 and a TRON 3.0 game were planned, but later canceled in favor of the TRON Legacy movie and its tie-in game.

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 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 customizable rules.
The Temple of Elemental Evil (a.k.a. ToEE) is based on the namesake classic Pen n’ 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 systems’ basic classes – 11 in total. Couple that with the myriad feats available to customize characters and half the fun of the game becomes concepting the members of your band of adventurers: maybe create a Druid who specializes 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 (what spell schools should I sacrifice? Decisions, decisions).

Once cast into the game itself, you are provided with a wide variety of tactical maneuvers: 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 on something at the expense of another – do I use Charge Attack to swiftly engage in melee, at the expense of an Armor Class penalty 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 chance of tripping opponents become more favorable, 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 roleplaying 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”.

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.
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.

*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 full-fledged RPG experience, you may want to look elsewhere. SA

**Mods:**

- **Circle of Eight modpack:** 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 & bugfixing.
- **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 village of Hommlet is huge, and some NPCs have interesting quests and stories, but the focus of the game is the tactical combat.**

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

*D&D’s* magic system is fully employed, with hundreds of spells and even meta-magic feats like Empower Spell.
Compared to the golden era that was the late 90’s, the 2000’s 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*. 

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/hers 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 with 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.

More than just reducing cities to small hubs made of corridors (and with tons of loading screens), this killed exploration and made *Deus Ex’s* 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 biomods were drastically reduced, while the RPG-like skills were removed altogether. Game director Harvey Smith later summed it 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.

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Moreover, any choice the player makes is quickly forgotten in favor of “player freedom”. I.e., 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, here’s your 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 posterchild for the compromises that PC games suffered when transitioning into multi-platform releases. FE
**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 2000’s, they partnered with International Hobo, a game writing & design consultancy company.

This little back-story seems key to understanding why *Kult* feels like two different games inside one.

Clearly influenced by Michael Moorcock, it tells of a world were 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 neighboring 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 it 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 armor.

Your character can freely shift into a shadow version of the current area, meeting ghosts and battling demons for XP and skill bonus.
In the early 2000's, 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 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 leveling 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 items sets. This may sound like a generic Diablo-clone, but the charm of Sacred lies in the details.

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 stats 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 pallet swapping.

This attention to details is constant, and the devs also included many easter eggs, references and their own sense of humor. 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 Tristam. With all that, the shortcomings of its uncaptivating story are almost forgotten. You'll find yourself excusing “just one more quest” or “just one more level up” while additively 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 savior of the land or as the source of its problems.
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, thought the camera can take some time getting used to. Once again Ascaron’s typical humor 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.

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.

The Sacred brand was still strong, so Deep Silver bought the series’ license. 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’n’slash divided into linear stages. The game’s dialogs are especially frustrating – a poor attempt at replicating the series’ humor, 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 lighthearted humor and open-world design still a thrill. Anyone into Diablo should do themselves a favor and give Sacred 1 & 2 a try. MHO
Talking about *Fable*, unfortunately, is impossible without talking about its creator, the famous Peter Molyneux, and his ludicrous promises. *Fable* was hyped to the high heavens as an innovative RPG, an extensive simulated world where the years would pass, your character would age, form a family, the sons of murdered enemies would swear revenge and, famously, you would even be able to plant an acorn and see it grow into a tree in real time.

Unsurprisingly, the game didn’t deliver all it promised, and more than a decade later that still taints any debate about the title. Which is a shame, since *Fable* is an excellent – if limited – game.

Designed for the original Xbox, *Fable*’s isn’t aimed at hardcore RPG veterans. Molyneux set out to create an RPG for all audiences, taking elements from *The Legend of Zelda*, *Knights of the Old Republic* and even from *The Sims*. The result is a streamlined action-RPG, where players will make binary moral choices and endure the consequences, while traveling across a simulated fantasy world that, while not as revolutionary as promised, is still quite reactive.

You begin as a child, just as your village is raided and your family murdered. Rescued by a wizard, you are accepted at the Heroes’ Guild, where you’ll learn melee combat, archery and magic. These are tied to three stats – Strength, Skill and Will, respectively – which are the core of *Fable*’s character system.

Every enemy you kill or quest you complete 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 & 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.
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 colorful 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 armors to play with, and is quite easy and unbalanced. While that will frustrate players looking for a challenge, the game tries to compensate by offering plenty of secret treasures to find and a clever “boast system”, allowing confident heroes to add extra challenges to quests, such as completing them without using weapons.

After Fable’s release, Peter Molyneux apologized for over-promising and claimed it happened because he was too excited with the project. The concept is indeed exciting, and even with many parts of it being underdeveloped – especially the stealth system and the consequences to some of your decisions – it’s still an unique, and often exciting, game to play.

While you won’t get the extensive role-playing options of something like Arcanum or Fallout, Fable offers an accessible, visually charming and instantly gratifying RPG experience. It’s a good introduction to the genre, while also offering a few secrets and optional challenges for experienced players.

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Fable has a very small mod community, but it made some nice new items and rebalance mods. You can find them at www.fablettlcmod.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.
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 to 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 have their 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.
When fighting RTS battles on planets, you can design your own custom troops and even directly control them. You’ll face amusing choose-your-own-adventure mini-games, such as escaping prison or running an election.

To do this, the character can take missions to hunt pirates or protect convoys. Alternately, he or she can decide to be a miner of asteroids, a trader of commodities from planet to planet, or 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, equipments, planetary battles and a new subplot regarding a pirate threat to the galaxy.
Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines was the third and final RPG from Troika Games, the company founded by the Fallout veterans Leonard Boyarsky, Tim Cain and Jason Anderson. The game was created using an early build of Valve’s Source engine, was rushed out by Activision and suffered heavily from being released in the same day as Half-Life 2, resulting in numerous bugs and weak sales. However, over time it became a cult classic.

What’s so great about VtM:Bloodlines? A lot of things, ranging from the overall storyline to minor details. The game manages to do the impossible, merging classic RPG gameplay with modern FPS visuals. You experience the game as one of seven different vampire clans, who have different vampiric powers, and you can play Bloodlines like a shooter, a stealth game, a hack’n’slash or for a good part even as an adventure game, solving many situations without force, but by lock-picking, hacking, persuading, intimidating or seducing people. Besides these various options, the game world itself manages to bridge two other extremes: you get large playable hubs that open up in the progression of the storyline and offer dozens of unique side and main quests, but the quests themselves are more linear in style and convey plot and atmosphere better than any sandbox game could do.

Still, there are often multiple approaches possible in a quest depending on your character, and other characters will react accordingly to your behavior, coming alive due to the great facial animations of the Source engine, some of the best voice-overs in gaming history and the witty writing of Brian Mitsoda. He created many very memorable characters and funny dialogs for Bloodlines, especially for the mad Malkavian clan, that has entirely different dialog options. Imagine talking to a TV set or to a STOP sign! Imagine a thin blood making references to the whole story that you can only understand once you finished it!

There are other great moments in the game where a character revelation may surprise you with a depthness 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

Combine this with the powerful music of Rik Schaffer and the mature handling of adult themes and you get an atmospheric dark RPG that fits the World of Darkness setting perfectly!

Also impressive are the lengths the game goes to honor the source material. Besides the aforementioned Malkavians and their unique dialogs there’s the Nosferatu, hideous vampires that must avoid being seen at all costs and cannot dialog with NPCs normally, forcing you to make clever use of stealth.

Although Troika closed its doors after releasing only two official patches, the community stepped in and an Unofficial Patch appeared that fixed most of the open issues and restored a lot of unfinished or cut content most of which was still hidden in the game files. The patch is still being updated ten years after the rushed release of the game and with it Bloodlines finally becomes the last masterpiece of Troika it deserves to be! WS

Mods & Patches:

Unofficial Patch: The basic patch fixes countless bugs, and the optional plus patch restore a lot of cut content, including dialogs, quests and even maps. Mandatory for anyone trying to play the game.

VtM: The Final Nights: A fan-made expansion pack that adds 7 new clans, new disciplines, NPCs, items, quests, a haggle system and other surprises.

Clan Quest Mod: Adds a series of quests to the game, including one quest specific to each clan.

VTMB: Camarilla Edition: Overhauls how Disciplines work and other interesting changes such as making you constantly need to drink blood to avoid starving.

Arsenal mod: Adds 30 new weapons to the game, including swords, grenades and several rifles.

Companion Mod: Allows you recruit NPCs and even embrace select human companions later in the game.

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.

Project Vaulderie is an attempt to port Bloodlines over to the Unity Engine, allowing for Mac & Linux versions, facilitate the creation of mods and add various new features and graphical improvements.
When Interplay closed Black Isle Studios in 2003, Feargus Urquhart teamed up with a few veteran developers to form Obsidian Entertainment. 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 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, giving us a true masterpiece.

Indisputably, *KotoR 2*’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 nature of the Force, alongside with a questionable, but well intentioned morality.

For her, not only the concept of “the will of the Force” negates 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 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 it’s 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 biding.

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’s 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.
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 imbalanced — which has its good sides, as it enables player to get through encounters faster. The crafting system, on the other hand, has been greatly expanded and polished, providing many customization 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 compliments the game’s dark undertones and manages to convey the desired mood of every scene, all without losing that distinct feel *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 favor 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 mod, 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.

“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 of the Force (and all that power) to do it.”

- Chris Avellone, *Kotor 2*’s lead designer

*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 twelve companions in the game, with some of them exclusive to specific genders or alignments.
2005-2009
Indie, casual, social & multi-platform games

The second half of the 00’s 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 maximize 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 entry barrier of development even further, with development costs skyrocketing. Perhaps it’s not surprising then that while this new generation had the longest life cycle of them all, it also had the smallest game library.

To better fit this console-dominated world, many traditions from PCs had to be adapted, leading to innovations such as Mass Effect’s (2007) dialog 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 & 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 2000’s 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 centered 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 Europe 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:

**Smarthphones:** Nokia had already shown the potential of mixing cellphones 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 cellphone + 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).

**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 way for a now-booming indie scene.

**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.

### Timeline:

- **2005:** 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.
- **2006:** You Tube
- **2007:** 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.
- **2008:** 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.
- **2009:** Android OS is released, created by Google based on Linux. First used on smartphones, it later jumped to tablets and consoles, such as the Nvidia Shield handheld and the crowdfunded Ouya.

### Games Released:

- **Minecraft:** Alpha version is released. It would become the quintessential indie game, insanely popular and selling over 100 million copies.
- **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 paid) 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.
- **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.
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 filmmaker Danny Ledonne anonymously released *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!,* a free game where you play as Eric and Dylan.

First released in 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 for his creation.

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 criticized for trivializing the shootings, but in fact it humanizes it. It places players in the shoes of the boys and offers a glimpse of why did they do it – and then list 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 programs, 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

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 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 organizers, 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, as a documentary. But, once again, the Slamdance organizers vetted 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 dehumanized 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.
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(I was missing a pairing review and didn’t want to leave this one out)
Fate had humble beginnings, born an accessible yet deep Diablo clone developed in mere five months. The game was quite successful, leading to four stand-alone versions – the original in 2005, Fate: Undiscovered Realms in 2008, Fate: Traitor Soul in 2009 and Fate: The Cursed King in 2011.

Each incarnation adds more content and a few new features, but the game itself is basically the same: a Diablo-like dungeon crawler with one town and an endless dungeon under it. There’s lot of different monsters, random dungeons and 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.

What 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 descent lower and lower, gaining more and more powerful loot and fulfilling new random quests. After finishing main quest you can retire your hero, creating an “inheritance” to be given to his descendant 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) differs 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 features with himself.

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 favor of addicting gameplay.

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 keep the core gameplay but adds content and features, such as more pets, new player races and recruitable NPCs.
In your typical Tolkien-esque fantasy world, plenty of favor 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.

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 civilizations 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 armor the goblin may be wearing (which is also dependent on the specific body part struck), how many layers of armor 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 (an indeed there are books and even thesis 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.
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, but 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 another.

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 an one-of-a-kind game, that achieved a rare perfect balance between procedurally generated elements and the importance of player input. TT

Modders have created a wealth of tilesets and utilities, such as *Dwarf Therapist*, an app for managing the dwarves’ jobs; and *Stonesense*, which renders isometric graphics of your fortress.

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“*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
Oblivion represents a fundamental change in core audience for the venerable The Elder Scrolls franchise. Most relevant to this change is the exponentially rising development costs of the time, mainly due to a demand for higher 3D graphical fidelity. Being the first game in the series to be fully voice acted, with celebrities such as Patrick Stewart, also contributed to the high budget and caused the dialogue to suffer drastic reductions. This caused a shift from PC to consoles as the primary platform, in pursuit of a larger consumer base to support the budget.

Thus, Bethesda choose to be commercial, returning to the traditional elements of the earlier games. Gone is the unique Sino-Arabic influence of Morrowind which received much acclaim. Now, instead of an exotic environment with alien creatures such as the bipedal alligators called alits, the game takes place in a generic fantasy world with wolves prowling forests. The ruling Empire of the series also suffered changes for the sake of consumer familiarity, now with clear gothic roots rather than the previously established roman society with oriental influences.

However, there’s one aspect which no amount of justifications regarding costs will suffice: the context of the main plot is pathetic. 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 unrelated world threats, and it’s uncanny to hear the population express just minor concern over the end of the world.

For all the faults found in world building it must be said that the quest design significantly improved; in fact, it’s where the title excels. While lacking the context of Morrowind’s quests, which were more about the setting, Oblivion provides excellent opportunities for adventures, such as exorcising a haunted manor bought cheap or traveling through someone’s mind to wake them up. The Dark Brotherhood assassination quests in particular are some of the best in the series. Beyond direct murder, you are incentivized to find alternative methods to execute your targets.

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. But in this new system lacks a sense of progress; it plays the same way from start to finish. You hold block while waiting for enemies to overextend and then strike while they recover – better moves that can be learned such as power attacks or disarming blows not changing this rhythm.

The ranged combat feels very satisfying, due to the excellent sound design and the new physics engine. The magic system remains relatively unchanged; you sling your favorite damage spell across the room and heal yourself. Sadly, some of the environmental effects such as levitation were taken out, which greatly diminishes encounter possibilities.
With all that being said, by far the most bizarre gameplay aspect is the progression system. Bethesda kept their somewhat arcane leveling systems where you have a set of attributes and skills associated with them, but also stripped it down. While the concept of having to use skills for them to progress is easy to understand, the unique interaction between attributes and skills gives rise to an entire character progress meta-aspect. But here it is too shallow to satisfy veterans, while still being esoteric for newcomers.

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 for a group of minotaurs – but also levels up them up to match you, making every encounter fall into a rigid sameness quickly.

The game also sold itself on its Radiant A.I., 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.

Many of the old-school RPG elements were streamlined, but others were kept intact, resulting in an uneven game.

In the end, Oblivion possesses neither the mechanical complexity to satisfy Daggerfall fans nor deep world building to satisfy Morrowind fans. Even so, it still possess that core sandbox experience intrinsic to the series, complemented by some great quest design, so it shouldn’t be surprising that it holds a place in the hearts of gamers that spent hundreds of hours in it – many for the first time in a game such as this.

For this reason, and for that fact that it represents an excellent case study for how modern game design trends formed, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion is fully deserving of being remembered by history. LL

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.

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.
A huge part of the roguelike games’ appeal is their mystery: random generation means that no two games will be the same and makes memorization infeasible while the permanent death of player characters discourages careless trial and error.

As a result, the player is expected to learn the game’s rules and adapt to different situations by both in-game preparation (leveling up, collecting items) and the knowledge of different strategies for dealing with the inevitable appearance of something he can’t face head-on. Failure to do so means their character is lost forever, with no option but to start again.

The trade off here is that the larger games in this genre take an unimaginably large amount of failed attempts to figure out. In fact, this can be such a big time investment that learning games like NetHack or ADOM by yourself is simply not expected and the number of people who were able to finish them without reading spoilers, watching other people play or just asking more experienced players for advice is very, very low.

One of the main design principles of Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup is to avoid this while still keeping the game random, complex and difficult. To achieve this, the developers made Crawl almost completely free of instant deaths or difficult puzzles.

On the other hand, they’re actively fighting against any sort of grinding and disproportionately powerful tactics – even going as far as to remove the ability of selling items in shops. In addition to trying to make 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 leveling, 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 armor but get additional lives after leveling up.

There’s also a choice of class, although that affects only starting skills and equipment – different skills can be learned by using them and what started out as a warrior might end up being a mage.
Religion plays a very important role in *Crawl* as your character can worship many different gods, each providing him different benefits while at the same time requiring to follow a specific code of conduct – those range from simple, like Elyvilon wanting you to destroy weapons and avoiding evil magic, to strange, like Ashenzari wanting you to wear cursed equipment. Some of the gifts given by those gods can be interesting too: followers of Dithmenos are surrounded by darkness, high level Jiyva worshippers receive random mutations and those crazy enough to become Xom’s playthings will turn *Crawl* into unpredictable, unfair and extremely difficult game.

The game begun its life back in 1995 as *Linley’s Dungeon Crawl*, when it was still being developed by a single programmer, Linley Henzell. It was first released in 1997, then constantly updated until 2003. The ‘stone soup’ version was supposed to be a temporary fork when the dev team went on a hiatus, but after some time it was clear that the project was abandoned and *DCSS* became the official version.

Like many roguelikes, *Crawl* is light on the plot – you search for Runes which will allow you to enter the realm of Zot to retrieve a mysterious Orb. It’s not the most fascinating premise, although religion-related flavor text and some of the dungeon branches help to flesh out the world a little bit. Still, it’s just a minor complaint about an otherwise excellent and well-designed game.

While *Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup* might not be my favourite roguelike, it’s a great introduction to the genre before trying to get into titles like *NetHack* and probably the best choice for those who find typical roguelikes antiquated or too cryptic. MM

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"My favourite gameplay mechanic is roguelike perma-death: a character who took hours to build up can be destroyed forever by a few poor decisions and a single turn of bad luck. When you can’t just reload a save from two minutes ago again and again until you get past any obstacle, decisions become meaningful and the game stops being a quasi-interactive movie and becomes a game again."

- Linley Henzell, *Crawl*’s original developer

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"Playing in ASCII mode is also possible. Here we abandoned Trog, the God of Violence, in favor of Nemelex Xobeh, the Trickster God. A terrible punishment for this betrayal awaits us."
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.

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 contextualized, 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 repayable than previous Gothic, 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.
The other parts of this game don't have such extenuating circumstances. Gone is the rewarding exploration with hand-placed items, replaced by progressive randomized loot where the contents of chests you find are decided by 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 Gothics 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 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 colorful 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 A.I. and system balancing to the game, but all it does, ultimately, is smooth a broken experience. While the community's bugfixes 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

Mods:

Community Patch: Absolutely essential, it eliminates hundreds of game-breaking bugs. It also offers optional alternative balancing/A.I., which make 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.

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.
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 specializes 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 to players who, like myself, have little prior familiarity with the *D&D* ruleset. It is everything a powergamer 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-dialog and while exploring, and a crafting system, which works but isn’t exciting. The enjoyment from these activities depend a lot on the writing and dungeon design, which most of the time works well enough, a few boring areas excepted.
“Despite having a large amount of design documentation, I didn’t feel I had a clear picture of how we were going to get to a finished game. Arguably of more importance, the game didn’t feel fun. There’s a lot of abstraction in D&D RPGs, so it’s never really going to feel ‘viscerally’ fun, but the controls and interface were frustrating.”

- Josh Sawyer, NWN 2’s Lead Designer

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 4 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.

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 tooset 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 to 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.

There are some valuable resources available to NWN2 players, such as the NWN2 wiki, which offers extensive documentation on the game’s mechanics, and the online Character Builder, available at www.nwnlist.com
When the 3DO Company went bankrupt in 2003, Ubisoft bought the *Might and Magic* license 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 artifact known as the Skull of Shadows. He is aided by Xana, a spirit confined inside his soul right on 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 — specially 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.

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 parrying 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 released 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 leveling 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 lockpicking and backstabbing. The stealth system isn’t always useful, but it’s quite robust, based on light and sound like the *Thief* games.
The Magic skill tree features standard fare such as fireballs and healing magic, but also spells to freeze the ground, see in the dark and 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 armor 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 on 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 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.

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“I clearly remember when we discovered how creating an icy surface made the orcs slip on it. I think it was when we realized that we were right trying to create a simulated world where everything was possible. This was really fun.”

- Raphael Colantonio, *Dark Messiah*’s creative director
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 colored globes serve as mana for spells. The satisfying aspect of the game comes from the simplicity of the core mechanic, combined with the skill required to chain multiple groups together, deny your opponent access to mana and earn extra turns.

There are four character classes available – Druid, Knight, Warrior and Wizard – each with his own set of spells and passive skills. Spells range from dealing direct damage to altering tiles on the board and even taking multiple turns at once. You unlock new spells by leveling up, but can only equip a maximum of six different spells. Choosing the right loadout of items and spells to counter your foe is of vital importance, and experimentation is encouraged.

Exploration is done through a 2D map with an appealing, painted art style. There you can visit towns, buy equipment, take quests and listen to rumors. The world is limited at first, but as you progress new areas are unlocked. Over time, enemies pop up and block routes, meaning you must either find an alternative way or fight them to progress.

The story itself is a little bit flat and your main motivation for the various missions is really just to gain XP and gold. There are four realms to visit, focusing on different factions, and these introduce new enemy types to fight or capture. Some quests offer you choices, and you can gain companions who provide handy support abilities, such as damaging an enemy as the battle begins.

The big appeal of Puzzle Quest is taking an already addictive puzzle game then adding depth and RPG elements to it. Later in the game you can capture monsters to use as mounts, learn spells from enemies, hunt treasures, craft your own magical equipment and even build siege weapons and conquer entire cities.

The formula became quite popular and led to a number of follow-up games, including Puzzle Quest: Galactrix (2009), which had a sci-fi setting and used hexagonal tiles – akin to Hexic – and Puzzle Quest 2 (2010), a direct sequel with similar mechanics but focused on dungeon-crawling.
One day Mr. Lemongrass left home, eager to become an adventurer. However, *Recettear* isn’t about his heroic deeds, but rather his collateral damage. More to the point, it’s about the huge debt he left after vanishing, that must now be paid by his daughter, Recette. She’s a naive young girl that never worked a day in her life, and has inherited the task of opening an item shop and making enough money to repay the whole debt in one month.

With this very unique premise, *Recettear* places the player as owner of a small shop in a typical RPG town, full of adventurers and surrounded by dungeons. Your job is to run the shop, purchasing items and reselling them with a profit.

At its core it’s a very simple system, but has many nuances that add to the experience. For example, if you feature only expensive items and decoration, your shop will be considered too fancy, attracting less customers. There are also special events, such as days when certain types of items are on 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 an isometric Action-RPG, where you explore randomly generated levels, defeat enemies and collect treasure. Many items can only be found inside dungeons, including ingredients to craft powerful weapons – that you can either give to your adventurers or sell at a high price. The dungeons have few enemies and can quickly get repetitive, but at least the boss fights every 5 levels are interesting.

Since there’s limited time to pay the debt you’ll have to manage your schedule, setting time to run the shop, buy supplies, explore dungeons and talk to the townsfolk. Sadly, the later is underused, rarely resulting in anything besides one-note stories and jokes.

*Recettear* also features post-game content, with extra dungeons and boss battles, two New Game+ modes and the hellish Survival Mode, where each week you must pay increasingly high debts, trying your best to keep the shop open as long as you can. Of course, not everyone will have the urge to master Capitalism, or the patience to explore dungeons with 100 floors, but the main story is short, lighthearted and a nice change of pace from other RPGs. FE

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*Recettear* was first released at the 73rd Comiket in 2007, and then localized into English by Carpe Fulgur in 2010.

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The combat is very simple but every adventurer plays differently, and some floors have special conditions.

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A poor adventurer asks for an expensive item. Do you lower the price to equip him better, or do you prioritize your profit?
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 originals, 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 3 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 Lv 20), you’ll likely be fairly overpowered after Act 1.

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.
Thankfully, Obsidian delivered a great narrative alongside its Spirit Meter. While NWN2’s campaign was a poorly paced save-the-world plot, MotB takes 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 inside 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, antagonize 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.

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 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

Mods:

**MotB Makeover SoZ Edition**: A complex mod that adds features introduced in NWN2: Storm of Zehir, such as full party creation (up to 8 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.
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 equipments, 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 colorful 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.

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 parent’s, 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 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. F

Idea Factory & Compile Heart, 2007
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

Agarest was first released in 2007 in Japan for the PS3. It was localized into English for consoles in 2009, and then ported to PCs in 2013.

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.
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 character 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 traveling musician? Charisma also makes it easier to get paid as a traveling 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’s 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 permadeth, 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.

Elona offers ten classes and eleven races, as well as several traits and feats, allowing for characters that can range from a Lich Warmage to a Fairy Pianist.

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 “pet”. In Elona+/Custom you can even evolve the girl.
The Witcher

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, ruined fortress serving as haven for the few remaining witchers. However, this turns out to be only one thread in a much more complex series of events, in which the protagonist gets involved.

The game was created by CD Projekt RED, development studio branch of Polish game publisher and distributor CD Projekt. It was the studio’s first release and clearly a work of passion, as it shows that creators were the book series’ fans. The Witcher’s faithfulness to the source material and attention to detail is remarkable, maybe even a bit too much, with some characters, ideas and dialogues clearly recycled from the books, sometimes with a different name.

The Witcher was created on highly modified version of Neverwinter Nights’ Aurora Engine, but you probably would not notice that if it wasn’t written in huge letters on the intro screens, as graphics are vastly improved even compared to Neverwinter Nights 2.

Sound design is very good, and the bleak music may not be very appealing to listen outside the game, unless you are trying to fuel your of depression, but it complements the game's setting perfectly. However, CD Projekt RED have not avoided the trap of adult = sex, violence and profanity, as The Witcher has more than its share of each.

The world created by Andrzej Sapkowski is a place, where happy endings are very few and far between. Its inhabitants are usually savvy enough to understand this, and try to cope using (often dark) sense of humor and cynical attitude, only emphasized by the fact that almost nobody in the world cares about religion. This creates an interesting mix of classic fantasy and mature themes with a semi-serious approach. Monsters roam the countryside, with most people helpless against them. Human dominance has forced elves and dwarves exist to live in ghettos or take up arms as guerillas (or terrorists, depending who you ask). Mages reserve their miracle-working magic for elites, who can afford their services, while human and inhuman life is valued highly only by a selected few.

Geralt is one of those people, as much as he wishes he was not. He tries to be a cold professional, but more often than not he ends up helping people, because nobody else will or can. He repeatedly tries to remain neutral in the affairs of the world and just do his job. In the novels he usually fails, in the game the player decides which path is the right one, or rather the least wrong one.

While The Witcher is not an open-world game, each chapter puts Geralt, in a fairly large area, which he can explore, and interact with its various inhabitants. Character progression is hand-waved as Geralt regaining his skills and knowledge lost due to a near-death experience and subsequent amnesia.
On each level up, Geralt earns skill points (called talents) of three types: bronze, silver and gold. These talents can be spent to improve his abilities, with higher ability levels requiring the more rare silver and gold ones to unlock.

As witchers are superhuman monster hunters, Geralt is able to take on multiple enemies at once from the very start, using one of his two swords – steel against humans and their like, silver against monsters – and a fast, strong or group fighting style (which work well against agile, armored and numerous opponents, respectively). Using other melee weapons is possible – but suboptimal, as Geralt's kill only work with his swords – but ranged combat is not possible.

The game offers two camera modes for you to play in. Clicking on the enemy when in top-down view will cause Geralt to automatically close the distance and attack, while clicking on the ground will move him away and/or evade attacks. Over-the-shoulder camera makes controls more action-like, with manual, keyboard-controlled movement. In both modes well-timed button presses will chain attacks into combos, with increasingly more elaborate animations and higher damage as the protagonist's abilities increase.

Geralt also knows five simple spells, called signs, which can help him in a pinch, and can be quite significantly upgraded. The toughest fights may also call for preparation in the form of alchemy, used to create potions temporarily enhancing Geralt's abilities.

Most of the time, however, is spent talking to people living in the city of Vyzima and its rural surroundings. Over the course of his adventure Geralt will meet villagers, merchants, minstrels, craftsmen, child prophets, guards, knights, bandits, medics, prostitutes, spies, princesses, freedom fighters (terrorists) and many more, including even a private investigator. Player will get immersed into the world mostly by interacting with this lot, solving their many problems, fist-fighting, playing dice and occasionally getting drunk in good company.

Because ultimately, this is what this game is all about – becoming the witcher and living his life for a little while. And it does it very well. WM

Mods:
CD Projekt released 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.
Although it was released back in 1999, *Jagged Alliance 2* still reins alone – a highly complex and detailed tactical game that to this day it's still played by fans, with many mods still being made to keep the game alive and going. Many JA2 wannabe games exist, but the consensus is that none can compare to what was achieved in JA2 with mods, not even the recently released *Jagged Alliance Flashback*.

It turns out JA2 also had a cult following in other corners of the world, and in 2005 a *Jagged Alliance* wannabe called *Brigade E5: New Jagged Union* was developed in Russia. It didn't do well with professional critics but developed a loyal a fan base. Two years later, a sequel was released called *Brigade E6* (known as *7.62 High Calibre* in the US), featuring a more non-linear gameplay and other various changes.

By far the most interesting part of the game is its combat system. Instead of using turn-based combat like *JA2*, *High Calibre* features an unique real-time with pause system. The easiest way to explain it is that every single action takes time. For example, want to turn around? It will take you 0.20 seconds. Want to grab a med kit stored in your pockets? 0.89 seconds are used for that!

Every action in the game takes time, including the most basic ones like changing stance, picking up objects and, of course, firing your weapon. While this may sound clunky and messy, it actually makes the combat really deep. The player must make intelligent choices and calculate its time to play effectively.

The amount of depth underneath the system is staggering – there are four shot types, six movement types, customizable firing modes, a locational damage system and multiple variables that alter the speed of each action. Even adrenaline plays a big role, making characters act faster, but less accurately.

Apart from the combat, another great feature is the number of weapons available. From pistols to light machine guns and sniper rifles, *High Calibre* features over a hundred weapons, a number which can be further raised by installing mods.

Weapons have stats such as accuracy, magazine size and damage, but also other stats like the time it takes to aim them and their reliability. Unreliable weapons like the Colt M16 must be kept well repaired and clean, or they might jam at the worst possible moment – meaning some players might prefer the legendary reliability of an AK-47 instead.
Stats also vary between the classes of weapons. Pistols are weak and inaccurate but are much faster to aim and fire, making them very good close range weapons, when accuracy is not a problem. Some weapons can even have their stock folded to make them faster to aim at the cost of reduced accuracy.

There are also many weapon accessories, such as flashlights, suppressors, foregrips, bipods, bayonets, under barrel grenade launchers, laser sights and multiple types of scopes. Some attachments also have weaknesses – laser sights and flashlights can make you easier to spot by enemies, and using long range scopes will reduce your field of view, making easier for enemies to flank you.

With so many options, combat feels rewarding and fresh. This is fortunate because the rest of the game is not so well designed. Sadly, High Calibre suffers from various bugs and a boring “FedEX quest” storyline, filled with uninteresting characters and saved only by its exciting battles.

You’ll start as lone mercenary, hired to find a Russian businessman that is currently hiding in the South-American nation of Algeria. High Calibre is an open, non-linear game, so you can move around the map to different cities, take multiple side-quests and side with either the rebels or the government forces.

Later on you’ll be able to hire mercenaries to help you in battle, partake in highly intense battles to capture and control cities and other valuable areas and also create militia to defend your locations from enemies. If they die you will have to capture the area again in more high intense battles – an activity most JA2 players should be used to.

Unfortunately, 7.62 High Calibre isn’t the JA2 successor we all have been waiting for. However, with the help of a few mods, those into tactical battles can definitely still have a great time.

Mods:

Blue Sun Mod: The most well known mod for the game, it adds a new quest-line, more mercenaries to recruit, more maps, hundreds of new weapons and stat balancing and many essential bug fixes. 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 release on Steam as an free enhanced edition for 7.62 owners.

The Blue Sun Mod is endorsed by the developers and can be directly downloaded by Steam. Just enable it in the “Betas” menu.
When a lone developer started talking about this old-school fantasy RPG that he was working on back in 2005, most people didn’t believe he could pull it off. Much to everyone’s surprise he not only released *Eschalon: Book 1*, but also managed to release two more sequels.

“Old-school” describes 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 going 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. A cryptic chain of letters guides him onto the main quest which involves four powerful gemstones, and soon enough he’s traveling 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 predetermined 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 auto-mapping 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 dialogs aren't badly written I still couldn't shake the feel 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 monster’s 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.
Skills also suffer from severe balance issues, as some of them are only used in a handful of situations, or maybe even in 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 customizable difficulty level; this includes options such as weapons wearing down with use, and hunger and thirst meters.

By 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 anti-climactic 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.*

**Character creation features**

all the standards, plus options like choosing a home region and a religion.

“...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*

Combat is turn-based and somewhat simplistic, but it’s agile and helps with keeping the pace of the game fun.

The sequels add small but welcome upgrades, such as difficulty customization, item wear and a better UI.
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.

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 North devs 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 artifact”, “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. Criticized 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
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 realize the full potential of the chicken dew. If a talking gas pump lectures you on the sublime nature of Chrono Cross, things have clearly taken a turn for the strange. The writing 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 4 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 inputs that vary wildly between one another in terms of gameplay, and it makes each scuffle feel unique instead of just another grind. Only in Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden could you break-dance 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 humor 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
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 artifacts 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.

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 making 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 composing 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. FX
Set in a fictional version of Europe during a World War 1-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 10 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 tanks. 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, armor 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 armored 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 a 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 allows you to play as other squads.

Between each mission you’re threatened 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 watercolor 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 2000’s, with a fresh take on the genre, an involving story and gorgeous visuals. FE
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 longstanding *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 re-skinning of *Oblivion*. Bethesda did indeed scrap the (nearly mythic!) 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 humor that characterized 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 V.A.T.S. system, which allows the player to pause time and target opponent’s 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 V.A.T.S. 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.
These range from hacking and lockpicking mini-games to better handling of each specific class of weapons. Each level up you can also choose a perk that, in most cases, ultimately boils down to making you hit others harder, or 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” away 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.

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!

Fallout: Overhauls the game’s weather and lighting, replacing the green tint for a more natural look.

Fallout Overhaul Kit (FOOK): A big modpack that adds hundreds of weapons, armors 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.
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 controls 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.

Generally, combat is what the game does best. Enemies react to your moves, acting ahead if your actions get too simplistic, dodging your attacks, taking advantage of the pauses in your movement, and inflicting status ailments. They also block, flank, stunlock you, fly, jump, do leap and ranged attacks, cast powerful spells, heal themselves, float out of your attack or spell range, and move faster than you do.

Much of the game’s difficulty comes from managing your timing and momentum (which may prove frustrating to some). The companion AI is competent enough that the player might find herself worse at controlling the girls (in particular Arche) than the AI, but also highly customizable.

Fortune Summoners never holds your hand. Dungeons get labyrinthine and span many screens, featuring puzzles that involve jumping, switch-pulling, crate-pushing, and discovering hidden passages. Unfortunately, exploration can get fetch quest-y and linear, with a back-and-forth design that often expects you to find the one NPC amidst a hundred of others to advance the plot.

Starting off with Arche the transfer student on the way to her new school, the game’s story and dialogue are nothing if not cliché-laden – luckily treated playfully, not seriously. The pervading spirit of light-heartedness and camaraderie, perfectly captured by Carpe Fulgur’s translation, eases you into the whole nonsense pretty well, too.

Fortune Summoners takes pride in its old school design, with good reason and to good effect. The combat is engaging and challenging, the writing is upbeat and charming, and the dungeon crawling, while at times artificially prolonged by backtracking, is enjoyable with many secrets to find. As a result, it remains one of my favorite action RPGs. CB
In July of 1984 the first installment of the *Lone Wolf* gamebook series, *Flight from the Dark*, was published, spawning a franchise that would sell over ten millions copies to date.

The set up 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 game book 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 of 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 customize 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 spawns 29 books, and as of this 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.


*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.
If you take visceral hack-and-slash combat akin to that found in *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare*, add in a smaller scale, more intimate taste of battle management a la *Medieval: Total War*, and wrap it all in the trappings of a medieval sandbox world with RPG elements, your end result is the multi-faceted 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* are 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 armor 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.

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.
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 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 armor 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 multi-player. 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*
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 fairytale 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.

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, *NWN 2* is the wrong vehicle for this kind of RPG. Its long load times and module-based gameplay become truly agonizing 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.
This is a game where you can (at will) turn into a dragon, attack a flying fortress and the army of demons protecting it, land in the courtyard, kill the guards with a mix of fierce sword fighting and spellcasting, subdue the fortress’s commander and then read his mind to find out his deepest secrets. All this 100% gameplay, no cutscenes involved. It has to be one of the best RPGs ever made by man, right?

Unfortunately, no. Larian’s ambitious vision for Divinity II included a multi-player campaign and even RTS elements. However, development issues, lack of funding and the hardware limitations of the Xbox 360 forced them to make some deep cuts in their project. While the end result is still an entertaining third-person Action-RPG, it’s also a very uneven one.

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 dialogs are exceptional, the quests are highly creative and the game overflows with interesting ideas, such as the aforementioned mind-reading skill, the mighty dragon form, an undead “pet” you can customize by collecting body parts and even a personal battle tower, complete with servants you must recruit.

The problem is that the game often doesn’t play to its strengths, tiring players with dungeons full of mindless enemies or repetitive battles against flying fortress, when the real treat lies in its dialogs and quests. The combat isn’t bad per se, featuring a nice range of spells and abilities, but it’s poorly balanced. 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, lighthearted experience, enjoying quests and skipping combat. Divinity II could have been much more, but its humor and clever writing still guarantee a good time. FE
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-RPG 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 troupe 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 – less classes, less 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.
Loot was similarly simplified. While equipping a new piece of gear in 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 armor 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 ostracization 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 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

**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 modpack that adds new classes, specializations, bug fixes and tweaks.

Baldur’s Gate II Redux: Module 1: Allows you to play through Irenicus’ iconic dungeon from BG2.
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.

The campaign casts you as Blood Angels trying to stop a Tyranid invasion. There are many story 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 customize 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 armors 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 refuse 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 band 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 begins with a rather unique premise: You are Scarlet, a young girl from the small town of San Pasquale. Suddenly, the town is attacked by assassins, your fiancée is killed and you meet with Death itself – who reveals that he is your father, and that you must help him save the world.

The game is a light action-RPG in the veins of Fable, filled with side-quests to take and moral choices to make, but more focused on story and exploration. Most of the game is spent in a fantasy version of 16th-century Venice, divided into five large districts. Venetica is no Assassin's Creed II, but the team made a great job, filling the city with stunning sights and a few hidden side-paths, while using a colorful art style to compensate for the small budget.

The combat is simple to a fault. There are four weapon types – swords, spears, hammers and the undead-slaying Moonblade. Each one comes with different damage types, combat skills and combos you create by timing your attacks right. Or at least that's the theory, as it's too easy to get behind enemies and stun-lock them by quickly mashing the attack button.

As the daughter of Death, Scarlet also has access to some handy powers. First of those is the ability to come back from the dead. As long as she has enough Twilight Energy, she'll always revive when slain. As the game advances, you'll unlock new powers, such as the ability to speak with the deceased, see through the eyes of ravens and briefly warp between the land of the living and the realm of the dead.

It's fascinating in concept and occasionally the game allows you to make great use of these powers – like casually letting a robber cut your throat, then reviving and killing him. Sadly, those are very rare; Venetica fails to explore its immortal character and some powers are used only once during the story.

Scarlet is the main attraction of Venetica, being a strong and charismatic character while still allowing room for players to role-play her. You'll be able to choose Good, Neutral or Evil paths, as well as join one of the three guilds in Venice: Warriors, Messengers and Necromancers, each with a unique set of quests.

Unfortunately, while the game works as whole, its parts feel constrained and rushed. Elements such as the combat, the interface, Scarlet's powers and the consequences for her choices all could use a few more months of polish, and I can't shake the feeling that features were cut nearly 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. 

Venetica has a morality and a reputation system, and even tracks how many people you killed, but rarely use those in interesting ways.

Combat is simple and exploitable, but the game doesn't overstay its welcome or tire players with endless filler fights.
During the development of Hellgate: London, a team at Flagship Studios began working on Mythos, a simple online “Diablo-clone”, to serve as 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. 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 ranged-oriented rogue; and the Alchemist, specialized in magic and summoning. Each has three unique skill trees, with distinct specializations.

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 an 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 returns, 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.
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

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.

“...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

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 & II: Part of a now-abandoned fan-made expansion, adds 7 new classes and lots of great content.

Most class skills in Torchlight aren’t very impressive nor unique, but the more generic character system does allow for more flexible playstyles.

Each class has three skill trees they can level up, but there’s also spells that every character can use, regardless of class.
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 story-telling 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.

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 dialogs. 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 “Standardized 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 colors. Using red abilities, for example, reduces the % of red mana on the pool and increases other colors. 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
Aperion’s previous game, *7.62 High Calibre*, was a real-time open world tactical RPG, heavily inspired by the *Jagged Alliance* series. While rather buggy and with a boring storyline, its complex simulationist combat and highly detailed “gun porn” conquered quite a few devout fans.

*Marauder*, also known as *Men of Prey* in Europe, is instead a linear, story-driven game, based on a book series by the same name from Russian author Berkem Al Atomi. The game places you in the boots of Akhmetzyanov, a common man trying to survive an alternate-history Russia where the government collapsed, anarchy reigns and the US is invading.

Don’t expect a pleasant story. Ahkmet himself is neither a virtuous paragon nor a noble-hearted anti-hero, but a man willing to do anything to keep him and his wife safe. You will fight militias, raiders and cannibals, but also desperate, starved neighbors trying to take some of your precious food.

*Marauder*’s combat perfectly reinforces its harsh atmosphere. The unique real-time with pause system from *High Calibre* is still here, if slightly streamlined. Every action takes a set time to be performed, and each has its pros and cons. The shotgun is a sure kill at close range, but it takes 0.42 seconds to ready it, while a pistol-wielding enemy can fire in just 0.08 seconds. You must take that into account in order to survive.

While I usually prefer turn-based tactical games, *Marauder*’s intense and nerve-wrecking battles make great use of the game’s elaborate real-time system. To add to the challenge, Ahkmet can only see what’s in front of him and must otherwise rely on hearing to guess the enemy’s position. This is further accentuated by the game’s overwhelming odds, pitting you alone against dozens of looters or a full elite military squad with nothing but a rifle, some mines and your wits.

The game keeps the extensive and highly detailed armory found in *High Calibre*, with almost a hundred weapons, and adds a few more RPG mechanics to the formula, such as character creation, a skill tree and lockpicking. You’ll also get up to three companions as the plot advances, allowing for more complex tactics.

Sadly, *Marauder* is extremely linear. Besides the main story, you’ll only be able to visit a bazaar, do a couple of side-quests and have one-line conversations with a handful of NPCs. And the dialogs are all in Russian, with poorly translated English subtitles.

Rough, challenging and intense, *Marauder* is an unique low budget tactical RPG. Its bleak story, harsh setting, high difficulty and complex combat are a sure treat to cold-blooded tactical enthusiasts.

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.
Gothic 1 & 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 installment 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 on one of the endings of Gothic 3.

Set in 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 & 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 lackluster 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 they 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 leveling up, which were then spent at trainers by paying gold. The fact that this system was overcomplicated for no reason shows the designers were aimless in their creative process.

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 license has since returned to them.

Piranha Bytes, 2009
Windows and Xbox 360

Harbor 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.
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 facade. 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 artifacts. Beyond some flavorful 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 flavors 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 comprising. 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* shows 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
To this day, the debate still rages over which game can rightfully be called “the ultimate Dungeons & Dragons 3.5 game experience.” While secterists wage this endless war, the critical thinker will know that the answer depends entirely on which 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 rivaled 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 De&D 3.5 video games.

You begin the game by rolling a party of four characters using De&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 License – the “freeware” version of De&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 endeavors. 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 hand-crafted and take advantage of the strengths of the systems at 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 & 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.
Throughout your tour of KotC’s world, you’ll be greeted with ingenious design decisions that make the adventure flow. Like how you can revitalize 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 clearly balanced around a party of two fighters, a mage, and a cleric, and so taking along more casters will make the mid- and end-game easier.

In an effort that dwarfs most every other game, KotC is perhaps the most well-documented CRPG in existence. Thanks to a hyper-link 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 when it comes to the rules govern their combat.

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.
2010-2014
The freedom to play (and create) any game

After years in the hand of a few giant publishers, the new decade brought in a widespread democratization 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 & buying games. While $60 AAA releases are still popular, it become 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 a 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 localization 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-2000’s, as the amount of choice players have is unrivaled.

Games now come from one-man indies, middle-sized studios and big AAA studios. From the US & 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 in their PCs. From nostalgia driven-projects and from those seeking to expand the boundaries.

Truly, what a time to be gaming.
Trends:

Crowdfunding: Online crowdfunding dates back to the early 2000’s, with platforms like ArtistShare helping fans finance their favorite 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 crowdfunded projects – from small indie games to multi-million dollar entrepreneurship such as the OUYA console and the Oculus Rift.

Youtubers & Streaming: While Youtube was founded in 2005, the 2010’s 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.

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 fulfill 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 2014 League of Legends World Championship finals were watched by over 27 million people.
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 multi-tasking challenge. Miss one tiny bit, half of your tribe would dead and the second 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 colored 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. 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 favors 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 worst: they gather large groups, 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 got the picture. *Din’s Curse* always have something for you to do. But, unlike *Depths of Peril*, you can fully customize how you want to play it.

It’s you who set 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
After the botched release and poor reviews of *Gothic 3*, JoWooD Entertainment took the series’ license 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 thoroughly 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 quests – all clearly marked in 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 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 fiancée’s father! Sounds like 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 flavors 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 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 dialogs and Polish origins gave it a distinct 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 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 humor. Graphics have been greatly upgraded, display 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.

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 armor, 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 a 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, defense, 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 4 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 leveling up your skill to mix more of them into a single spell is quite rewarding.
There are other good ideas, but poor design choices ends 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 armor 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 I also had).

That’s not to mention odd choices like having dungeon maps always fully revealed or how enemies are all displayed in 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 in the first continent. You can dye armor, but there are few colors 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 I 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 likes, 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 addicting 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.

Two Worlds II was surrounded by a lot of controversy, such as accusations of bribery for positive reviews, threats against negative reviews and for releasing a “GOTY Edition” when no outlet chose it as game of the year.

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 armor coloring options, the ability to cast spells with any weapon and use bows with any armor, increased draw distance, killable NPCs, new weapons, armors, quests, boss enemies and much more. Highly recommended, even for a first playthrough.
Cthulhu Saves the World is a small and linear but content-rich RPG, put out by the prolific Robert Boyd & Bill Stiernberg duo at Zeboyd. The game is mostly notable for its retro aesthetics and hilarious take on the Cthulhu-mythos.

In terms of structure and gameplay, Cthulhu Saves the World is a straight-forward JRPG. Where the game shines – the reason it is worthwhile to talk about at all – is its plot, its characters and the obvious love that the developers had for both. You begin the game as Cthulhu, the Old One, being deprived of your powers by an unknown force. In order to regain them, you must first become a true hero – only then you may resume your plans to destroy the world. It's a well-constructed and humorous story, that most fans of Lovecraft should be able to appreciate.

Ironically however, the game's characters are also the game's biggest weakness. While you never get tired of Cthulhu cast in the role of “grumpy and unwilling savior”, or some of his tag-along friends and the sharp developer-wit their personalities exhibit, other characters are downright obnoxious and unnecessary. Your first companion, Umi, is a tiresome groupie whose shtick gets old real fast. Other characters like the necromancer (October), the sword (Sharpe), or the cat alien (Paws) are much more interesting and switch between parodying tropes of the genre and being cool characters in their own right.

As a game, Cthulhu Saves the World is a sufficient but forgettable experience. You walk across a fairly linear overworld or map with your band of rag-tag saviors, collecting items and fighting battles, both random and hand-placed. The battle screen takes you to the standard JRPG line-up, where enemies and player characters stare each other down face to face, taking turns to inflict damage upon each other.

You might think the game is bad or bogged down from my choice of words. This however, is not the case. Cthulhu's characters and enemies are varied and you have plenty of different tactical options at your disposal, thanks in part to a clever progression system that offers a choice between different skills and stats bonuses at each level up.

Ultimately, Cthulhu Saves the World is more than enough fun to justify the measly 2 dollars being asked for the game on Steam these days. It is one of those rare games, like the original Doom, where playing it gives you a sense of who its developers were. What they enjoyed, which time they were raised in, and what culture produced them. For this reason alone, the game is worth a glance from any would-be RPG connoisseurs. CG
Middle of the road games have a certain difficulty attached to them it comes to critique. 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 dialogs 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 simple feature which adds tremendously to the exploration aspect: flying.

Being an enchanted fairy has its perks, one of them 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 & 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 look 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

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Some people have issues getting *Faery* to run. If you bought the Steam version, try using this patch file.
I should clarify right at the beginning that, in my opinion, Obsidian Entertainment’s *Alpha Protocol* is one of the most under-appreciated action-RPGs of all time. Sure, the game has numerous faults, so it is not entirely Game of the Year material, but it also has several important and well-developed elements in which it surpasses the competition.

As one can see from the subtitle, *Alpha Protocol* invites you into the world of espionage, where you encounter top secret organizations, terrorists, rogue spies, gadgets right out from a James Bond movie and, of course, a secret agent who will save the day. The hero I’m talking about is Michael Thorton, who was just recruited into Alpha Protocol, a super secret organization in the United States.

After a brief introduction, you will start your career with an easy tutorial, followed by your first real assignment: traveling to Saudi Arabia to find and deal with an international terrorist. Of course, this is just the beginning, and soon you will figure out things are not as they look. After a few missions, you will run for your life, with half of the American government breathing down on your neck, not mentioning the Russian mafia, and some bad guys from China.

If you like the political thrillers of Tom Clancy, or the hit TV show *24*, you will feel right at home in the world of *Alpha Protocol*, and you won’t be disappointed by the events depicted in the game.

Obviously a good story cannot exist without good characters, and Obsidian pulls this off quite well. Michael Thorton is not a pre-defined character, it’s up to players to decide what kind of person he is. An important tool for this is the dialog system, which at first sight is very similar to the dialog wheels used in other RPGs. However, you won’t choose what you want to say, but in what manner you want to reply. This way, Thorton can be aggressive, professional, or suave – the three agent archetypes, Jack Bauer, Jason Bourne and James Bond – plus a few other choices, depending on the context. There is a short time limit for choosing, which gives dialogs a nice, natural flow.

Your decisions, your replies, the intel gathered, all have consequences (some bigger, some smaller) to a degree that few other games ever could match, which in itself warrants several playthroughs. You can even choose how to approach missions, such as trying to infiltrate an airbase right at the start or going after a local weapon dealer for intel first.

As you level up you’ll gain points that can be spent to gain passive buffs or learn new skills and abilities.

Weapons and gear are customizable in a variety of ways, thanks to upgrades that can be found or purchased.
You have a time limit to choose between the various dialog options, and they will all have long-term consequences.

There are several memorable NPCs in the game, although because the story grounded in reality, they are not as far-fetched as in games like Planescape: Torment. I have to point out Steven Heck, who must be applauded as one of the most memorable characters in gaming. Every minute the player spends with this psychopath rogue agent is comedic gold. Just don’t be surprised if the guy ties up the hostages, pours some bleach on them and finally sets them on fire.

However, not everything is nice and good, thanks to problems found in the game mechanics. By default, the game is a third-person shooter, mixed up with Deus Ex influences and fairly hectic cover mechanics. You can sneak around, evade cameras and knock out unalerted guards, or just draw your weapons and gun everyone down. Being a RPG, Alpha Protocol also has a nice (although shallow) character progression system, which lets the player upgrade Thorton’s skills (weapons, martial arts, technical affinity, etc), as well as offering unique passive perks that are unlocked based on your choices, actions and play-style.

The problem is that some of these abilities are useless, while others are overpowered. For example, using a Stealth skill which briefly turns you invisible together with the Chain Shot skill allows players to easily finish off anybody, even bosses.

You have a time limit to choose between the various dialog options, and they will all have long-term consequences.

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 interested 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.

“The story is gameplay – the alliances/enemies you make in the game effect missions, respect, endgame choices, reactivity, and also special perks for your character as well. Interaction with a character in the game is a game system and gameplay in itself, which was our goal. We didn’t want the story or dialog to be divorced from the missions or gameplay.”

- Chris Avellone, Alpha Protocol’s lead designer
People will never stop bickering over whether *Fallout 3* is better than *New Vegas*, and I love that. It’s a sign of prosperous times, really. After all they’re both excellent games that came out within two years of each other, they both spin the same idea and same franchise to cater to specific tastes, and they both provide some of the most satisfying long-term gameplay in the genre. Plus, that debate always reminds me that *New Vegas* actually exists, which makes me far too giddy to get bitter about anything. Because while I think *Fallout 3* is one of the better RPGs of this generation, I think *Fallout: New Vegas* is the very best game of its generation!

I don’t even have to question myself. Out of an entire console generation of RPGs, I thoroughly believe that *Fallout: New Vegas* had the highest standards in choices and consequences, world building that was most relevant to gameplay, the funniest and most thoughtful writing, the most impactful leveling and character progression, the most pleasant tone and atmosphere. The list goes on.

It’s a dream team collaboration between Bethesda’s tech (a massively detailed open-ended world with a meticulous level of player interaction) and Obsidian’s writing (a complicated interactive political drama) that combined the best qualities of the best modern RPGs. And it certainly helped that the Mojave Wasteland of *New Vegas* was more contemporary, mature and bold. It evoked more *Game of Thrones* than *Road Warrior*.

The Mojave Wasteland wasn’t really a wasteland. The people around *New Vegas* have schools, jobs, clean water, food, clinics and a few functioning governments whose conflicts drive the action of the story. *New Vegas* itself is a vacation spot for wealthy retired folks coming in out of state, and that doesn’t feel like post-apocalypse. Your character isn’t a lone scavenger grasping for survival, he’s a gainfully employed courier trying to make a delivery. This desert wasteland was covered in power lines and plumbing pipelines, farms and busy trade routes. The nonsensical fantasy of *Fallout 3* was turned into a fully detailed economy for *New Vegas*, and the productivity of its economy gave actual stakes to the factions vying over it.

Faction play is the star of the show, really. There are an overwhelming number of possibilities for each faction to intersect in and out of each other’s storylines in different ways. Faction quests criss-cross into other faction quests, the order in which you take them can affect your possibility of taking others, and the motivations and narrative wrappers surrounding those quests always related to the complexities of the world’s economy. The three biggest factions at play all fight with a reasonable and realistic amount of self-interest. You can see where they’re coming from. Even Caesar’s Legion, who had to have been the villains.

And what great villains they were! Caesar’s Legion had an ever-expanding medieval empire that reveled in slavery, torture, sadism and warfare. And what made them truly terrifying is that they weren’t moustache-twirlers.
“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

*Fallout: New Vegas* is a game about economics, after all, so Caesar’s Legion weren’t evil simply because they enjoyed being evil but rather because they had created a fairly successful war economy that required them to be evil. It required them to systemize a banality of evil.

They rationalize the horrible things they do with economics, victim-blaming and their sneering superiority complex. If you lost track of your moral compass, you could easily get talked into seeing things their way. They were terrifying video game villains because they didn’t resemble video game villains. They resembled villains from real life. And that was horrifying.

Outside of their torch lit war camps was a vast American desert full of singing cowboys, lounge lizards, mutated hulks and leatherclad anarchists who had a vast number of stories to tell. The Mojave Wasteland is built as a narrative framing device for its short stories, little *Twilight Zone* side-quests that tell strange and wonderful episodes before the three-part series finale of the main quest.

That’s how I was able to squeeze a gratifying 250 hours (that were rarely boring!) out of the game, there’s simply an insane amount of enjoyably self-contained stories to be found in the side quests.

You can see this same episodic storytelling happening in the DLCs as well. As one of the few games of its generation to do DLC right, *New Vegas* sold four story 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 favorite game of its generation. These are the reasons why *Fallout: New Vegas* is one of the best FPS-RPGs of all time, and deserves to be as highly regarded as *Deus Ex* and *System Shock 2*. GW

With VATS, the player can cripple specific body parts, damage enemy weapons or shoot unexploded grenades.

Part of the team that worked on *New Vegas* had worked on *Van Burren*, Interplay’s canceled third *Fallout*. Many ideas from that game were salvaged, including Caesar’s Legion, the Hoover Dam battle and the Burned Man.

**Mods:**

**Fallout: New Vegas Mod Manager:** Handy tool that makes mod installation, update and removal easier.

**J Sawyer:** 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* team. It’s a huge mod that adds new features, changes to the balancing, new weapons and even implants.

**Mission Mohave - Ultimate Edition Plus:** This pack contains over 27,000 fixes and a compilation of over 35 mods to improve your gaming experience.

**Fallout - Project Brazil:** Offers a whole new campaign, where a civil war erupts inside your vault.

**New Vegas Bounties:** Allows you to work as bounty hunter, with a new questline and challenging fights.

**No Auto Aim:** This mod removes the dice rolls from combat, so that gunplay is more similar to a FPS.

Travelling with certain companions may tear apart your faction allegiances, if you chose to recruit with them.
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 organization, 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 a 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.

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 encyclopedia from the first game still exists and is utilized 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 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 team mates are largely useless and thus levels had to be designed to accommodate every class that Shepard could be, a similar issue that plagued *Neverwinter Nights*.
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.

And what about the continuity between games that BioWare so hyped before ME2 launch? It really isn’t there. Yes, the game gives you little nods here and there for 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 alongside 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

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 and other tweaks.

Flash’s Mass Effect 2 Mod: Aims to make the game more balanced and faithful to the lore. I.e., it makes that enemy’s shield regenerate, just like yours.

High Resolution Texture: Replace character’s textures.

Casual Outfit Beyond Normandy: A pack of casual clothes, that you can now wear even outside the ship.
Dungeons of Dredmor is an interesting take on the modern roguelike. While many other games try to take elements of the genre and mesh them into other models, Dredmor takes the core roguelike formula and plays around with it to make it accessible and customizable, but hard to master.

The game offers three difficulty levels, plus the option to toggle permadeath and increase or decrease the size of the dungeons. This allows people to play Dredmor at their own pace and get a feel for the game before going for the true roguelike experience. The “No time to Grind” mode is especially nice since it speeds up the game, allowing for quick sessions. This ease of access helps to attract those curious about the genre, yet still offer a challenging experience.

Dungeons of Dredmor’s main objective is to reach the bottom of the dungeon and slay the evil Lord Dredmor. While it sounds run-of-the-mill, everything else is goofy and light-hearted in nature. The game has no qualms about taking common game tropes and putting a ridiculous spin on things, such as item vending machines, enemies shouting witty remarks, countless pop culture references and some humorous item and skill descriptions.

Another unique thing about the game is its progression system. Unlike standard roguelikes where there’s a focus on stats and gear, Dungeons of Dredmor relies on skill-trees for character growth. Players pick seven out of the 20 skills (32 with the expansions and countless more through mods on Steam Workshop) available to them and are dumped into the game. The skill trees range from traditional ones, such as “swords” and “smithing”, to humorous ones like “emo-mancy”, “communist” and “tourist”. Each skill influences things such as starting gear, passive traits and active skills; however players only get one skill point per level, so its important to choose wisely.

Depending on what skills players have picked, they can also craft various forms of gear from random materials found in the dungeon. Crafted items can range from the standard weapons and armor to more exotic things such as potions, traps, wands and – why not – a clockwork power-limb. This gives the player an element of control they can establish among all the random variables, allowing them to build towards optimal victory or silly gimmick builds.

Dungeons of Dredmor’s skill system offered so much flexibility that I personally kept coming back, clocking more than 300 hours of game time. Its a great alternative take on the roguelike model, and generally has something for anyone who’s willing to play it. JR
Frayed Knights: The Skull of S’makh-Daon is full of mirthful personality from the title of the game to its jovial conclusion. It’s a turn-based first-person dungeon crawler with no character creation, as you must play the straight-laced elven warrior Arianna, an arrogant thief called Dirk, a healer/hipster who goes by Benjamin, and the ditzy blonde sorceress with a streak of pyromania named Chloe.

Their personalities are all well portrayed, with key dialogs occurring at set times throughout the main quest. These four heroes are considered outcasts by the rest of the adventuring community; the proverbial bottom rings of the social ladder.

Things are so bad for them, that even the first monsters battled are designed as part of a grotesque in-game joke. Yet despite how laughable the enemy is, the game is quite tough due to the incompetence of your party. Your sorceress will often miss with her critical spells, and your rogue and priest don’t seem to do much damage in the rare instances they can land a strike with their own weapons. Frayed Knights admirably simulates trying to survive a basic dungeon crawl via a party of losers.

Towards the end of the game everything begins to come together in a satisfying way. If you took time to develop your party right and completed the side quests, your adventurers have an easier time slicing through the final enemy masses trying to impede your way.

The game introduces a “Drama Star” system as an aid to the player, but also as an incentive not to save scum. Drama Star points are earned for overcoming challenges, and can be used later to instantly aid the party by restoring health, bringing back a fallen character, etc. Loading a saved game wipes the saved drama stars out.

The system unfortunately works against those that have a busy personal life, since those that can only find the time to play the game for an hour at a time won’t enjoy the advantages of the drama stars.

Regardless, I enjoyed helping Arianna, Dirk, Benjamin and Chloe earn the respect of their peers and be finally considered heroes. As a player, you will also earn a sense of accomplishment for building up a bunch of ragtag losers into a fighting force. DT
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.

The game takes place in an amalgam of various settings that you might recognize immediately – a dystopian future where humanity is ruled by feuding megacorps, where contact has been made with hostile aliens, and where the world is threatened by the coming of the “metastreumonic force”, a mysterious throng of beasts spawned from psionics and nightmares. The player is a member of the titular E.Y.E – an organization of psionic cybercommando warrior-monks. But E.Y.E is no exception to the rest of the world – its once brotherly factions of Jian Shang Di and Culter Dei are now at their throats.

*E.Y.E* is a game about many things, but it is primarily about confusion, chaos and betrayal. Make no mistake, the paragraph above shows just about the only things you can be certain of (or can you?) when it comes to the game's narrative.

Events that will make you question the entire game start happening very soon, and accompany you all the way to the “end”. The atmosphere crafted in this game is superb, and it takes you on a true roller-coaster of emotions and sensations. This is achieved thanks to the mix of the mundane and the mystical.

On one hand, you have typical spec ops missions that require you to infiltrate various places, perform false flag operations, etc. But on the other, everything is coated with a layer of esotericism – unexplainable events take place, your character suffers repeated bouts of amnesia, delusion and insanity. As you keep playing, you realize you simply have no one to trust, not even yourself, and the game laughs in your face every time you think you finally understood it.

All these aspects also contribute a lot to another of *E.Y.E*’s highlights – the non-linearity. There are a few moments where you need to take sides and make decisions that influence the rest of the campaign. This adds tons of replayability, but also further enforces your paranoia – Do I betray the guy that is probably betraying me as we speak for the other faction that is shady as hell? Or maybe I should choose the third dude who’s been acting suspiciously since the start!

The visuals vary between cyberpunk dystopias, cryptic dreamscenes and windswept wastelands.

The character building options are vast, including skills, implants, PSI powers and even a research system.

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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.*

Streum On Studio, 2011

Windows
As for mechanics, *E.Y.E* manages to be both a solid shooter and an RPG, which is an impressive feat. It gives you plenty of guns that really feel like proper guns, have various ups and downs, traits, recoil, hit-box-varied damage, etc, including a 4-bullet hand-cannon and a miniature nuke launcher.

You can also use melee weapons and grenades, set up turrets and grab a gundrone to follow you around. The enemies obviously respond in kind, bum-rushing you en masse, sniping from afar or using some seriously heavy ordnance like plasma cannons and gunships.

The neat thing is that you can also toggle the difficulty to your liking with sliders for the AI's accuracy, reflexes, etc. From the RPG side, you have a lot of customization available to you. Apart from guns, you can also get a whole lot of psionic powers, cyber augmentations and stat boosts, which are bought or acquired from research and XP. You can also hack everything you encounter in different ways – destroy, leech stamina or take control. Just be careful you don’t get counter-hacked.

The differences between playing a melee beast, a sharpshooter or a psyker are also fairly big and support different playstyles well.

The technical side is also an important contributor to the overall atmosphere. *E.Y.E* is running on the dated Source Engine, but the developers still managed to squeeze a lot of juice out of it, mostly thanks to the art direction. The environments are fairly varied, including futuristic cyberpunk cities, red dunes of Mars, mysterious ruins and Asian-inspired temples.

Finally, and this is a funny point, *E.Y.E* has been infamous since its release because of its downright terrible translation. Indeed, the dialogs and flavor texts have some seriously broken grammar and bizarre choice of vocabulary, and are generally confusing, although not to the point to make the game unplayable. Interestingly enough, this botched translation actually contributes a lot to the overall feeling of estrangement, as the oneiric atmosphere is only further strengthened when every character sounds either like a mystical sensei or a raving lunatic. *E.Y.E* is a very cool game, and one that I can recommend wholeheartedly. It takes a while to get used to, sometimes can be crushingly difficult, and you’ll wonder what the hell is going on all the time, but the ride is definitely worth it, and it can also be played in co-op if you want to get confused with some buddies. Just make sure you patch it properly. DR

“We believe the role from the developers is not necessarily to please the player, nor to simplify the games. Doing that might drive to what is more and more frequent: a standardization of the market. And in *E.Y.E* it is essential for the dramatic tension to let the player assume his own choices.”

- *Streum-on-Studio*

*Nothing is certain in *E.Y.E.*, the weird dialogs and unusual narrative will keep you second-guessing the whole game.*

The hacking mini-game has you selecting actions to invade an AI, that can and will hack you back.

Some of *EYE*’s inspirations are a little less subtle than the others.
To talk about *Dark Souls*, one has to first talk about *Demon’s Souls*. An ARPG released on PlayStation 3 to little initial fanfare (to the point of being passed over by Sony for localization, a decision they later came to regret) it gradually acquired a cult following. There are many reasons for its appeal, but the most often cited ones are its unforgiving but fair difficulty, methodical and balanced battle system, smart level design, well-realized starkly gothic setting, and unique, entirely novel asynchronous and synchronous multiplayer features.

*Dark Souls* builds upon this foundation, adding a seamlessly traversable, interconnected world with even more content and multiplayer opportunities into the mix, making *Demon’s Souls* feels like a beta test for what would become *Dark Souls*.

In terms of plot, *Dark Souls* is minimalistic, and it depends upon players piecing together background information presented in item descriptions and environmental clues to fully understand its lore. It takes place in a universe where many humans are cursed with the “Darksign”, forcing them to wander the earth for eternity, reviving after each death, slowly losing their humanity. Players are cast into the role of the “Chosen Undead”, and must end this curse.

Over the course of this endeavor, they’ll interact with eclectic – and often eccentric – NPCs, many of which are involved in their own quests. Like the main story of the game, most of these side-quests and their outcomes are not immediately obvious, and need to be discovered. In fact it could well be the case that anyone playing the game for the first time and without accessing third-party information will not even realize that they are happening, and that their actions might have changed some outcome.

Analyzing *Dark Souls*’ compared to other RPGs, it falls into the category of class-less ARPGs with an open story and world structure. While players choose a starting class when creating their character, it only serves to determine their initial stat distribution, as well as starting equipment and spells. Afterwards, every character can freely distribute points into various stats at level up, and use any given equipment or spell as long as they meet its requirements.

The mechanics of saving and death are quite unique, and linked intrinsically with the game’s story. As in *Planescape: Torment*, you play a character who is essentially immortal. However, unlike that game there is a strict penalty for death, and saving is constant and automatic, meaning you must endure every choice you make. Upon death, the game returns you to the last bonfire (serving as checkpoints) you rested at, and all your Souls (the game’s currency, used both to purchase items and to level up) are lost.

You may retrieve them where you died, but dying again while trying to do so will result in them disapearing 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.
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 – i.e., 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 needs to be mentioned.

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 player to their deaths. Similarly, player deaths result in bloodstains in other player’s worlds, and can be touched in order to see the dying player’s last moments as a phantom.

On the topic of phantoms, while *Dark Souls* is a fantastic single-player RPG, it also features a multitude of popular multiplayer options 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.

It is the combination of its challenging battles, exquisitely designed levels, deadly bosses, constant danger of invasion, and punishing death mechanics which makes the moment-to-moment gameplay of *Dark Souls* so exhilarating. What makes it rewarding though is that all of these dangers are almost invariably fair and can be mastered – by learning the game’s mechanics, carefully studying each environment and always proceeding with caution.

Almost every equipment piece in *Dark Souls* is a viable choice, allowing for extremely diverse playstyles.

**Mods:**

**DSFix:** Released the same day as the game’s lousy PC port, this mod unlocks the game’s resolution and/or framerate, among other improvements. A must-have.

**Mouse Fix:** *Dark Souls* plays better with a controller, but if you wish use keyboard & mouse, get this mod.

**Self Gravelording:** Black Phantoms are additional, stronger enemies that can be summoned into your world by an invader. This mod turns them on by default, making the game a lot harder.

**Hyper-Agressive Enemies:** Makes enemies able to see you from far away and chase you anywhere. Use it with Self Gravelording for the ultimate challenge.

“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
A sequel to the surprise hit *The Witcher* (2007), *Assassin of Kings* puts Geralt de Rivia on the trail of eponymous assassin, 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 CD Projekt RED and was at the time of its release one of the best-looking games on the market. Sound and music follow suite, although the soundtrack by Adam Skorupa and Krzysztof Wierzynkiewicz has more of a traditional orchestra 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.

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, optimized 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.

Character system has been reworked from scratch and consists of three separate skill trees, one each for sword-fighting, magic (witcher signs), and alchemy, with the most powerful skills unlocking after certain pre-requisites are met. In addition, Geralt will find rare items called mutagens, which randomly drop from monsters and/or are created as by-products of alchemy. These mutagens can then be inserted into slots attached to some skills (13 in total, the most in alchemy tree), granting a permanent bonus.

The game is comparable in size to its predecessor, with similar ratio of dialogue to combat to exploration. The number of people that Geralt can talk to is somewhat reduced, but they are a comparably diverse and colorful bunch and usually have more to say on average. It is perhaps worth noting that the number of casual sex encounters has been reduced, as Geralt is now in a more-or-less stable relationship with sorceress Triss Merigold.

Wilderness areas are not as open as in the first game and usually resemble a collection of intertwining wide corridors. This makes the world seem smaller, although Geralt will spend a similar amount of time running around it, including some dungeon delving into caves, mines and crypts.
Combat has been 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 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 vigor, 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 armor that absorbing damage.

One of 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 point of view for the unfolding events.

This binary choice gives an incentive to replay the game and allows for an additional insight into the story and motivations of certain characters, if the player plays through both of the paths.

In all honesty, if you expect a straight follow-up to *The Witcher*, you might not like *Assassins of Kings*. The differences are numerous and affect the game on many levels, and there is no question that the sequel is mechanically more shallow. On the other hand, *The Witcher 2* is still a great-looking (and sounding), enjoyable Action-RPG with great characters and deep, complex plot, just like its predecessor. It is simply cut from a different mold. WM

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’s 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 item’s weight and adding auto-loot.
Often one of the most talked aspects of RPGs is their size and length. Since the 80’s magazine ads boast 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 for player's decisions, as many RPGs do. A very common solution is for choices to branch 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 worst bastard who ever lived you’ll still have to do X and Y to save the galaxy.

Going in direct opposition of 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 less than 5 minutes.

*Way of the Samurai* 4, the first (and so far only) game of the series released on PC, follows a very similar formula. You create a ronin that 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 wary of the incursion of foreign warships into their waters – often in unfriendly terms. This tension is portrayed in three main factions: the Shogunate forces, a visiting British ambassador and a group of anti-foreigners extremists.

As you arrive in town, a fight breaks 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.
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 customization 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 parts of it to forge a new blade, sometimes with special proprieties. 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 & 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 humor and over the top characters, but here it often approaches extreme levels of wackiness, with a Lolita-like ambassador, a knight named Megamelons, a trio of sadistic sisters who love torture and a silly “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

“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 inter-cultural exchange. [...] we did consider to some degree that this era might be appealing in the event that the game was released overseas.”

- Tetsushi Saito, WayS 4’s Lead Designer

You can disassemble weapons you collect and use them to forge entirely new ones, with various special abilities.

The game plays with the cultural shock between Japan and the west in a humorous and often over the top tone.

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.

Your journal displays the various events and paths you’ve gone through, and hints on how to unlock new ones.
There is a time early in a child's life upon which he or she discovers a special power that children have: the theater 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 realize 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 bring 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 player’s skulls.

This is first-person action-roleplaying by the numbers, then. Press left to strike, right to block, both for a shield bash, or hold for 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 “skillup 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 leveled at nearly every other aspect of the game – the swordplay feels floaty, magic is different flavors of projectile combat, crafting is grindy and uninspired, the enemies are mostly damage sponges rushing you, and those ancient ruins all look strangely alike.

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 & mouse.

*Skyrim* was a huge commercial success, selling over 20 million copies across all platforms and becoming one of the best-selling games of all time.
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, recognizing 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.

*Skyrim* is a game of moments, of random occurrences, of carefully orchestrated plans going to hell because that stupid NPC walked in on us, of moments posing in front of breathtaking views, of the decision to sit awhile by the fire, an action with no gameplay benefits whatsoever, but done simply because you feel like hearing that bard sing again about how Ulfric is the High King – and in his great honor 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

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**Mods:**

Mods are a big part of *Skyrim*, with over 40,000 mods spread across the Nexus and Steam Workshop. *Skyrim* GEMS ([http://skyrimgems.com](http://skyrimgems.com)) is a great beginner’s guide, but you can also begin with some of these:

**SkyUI:** Absolutely essential, this mod replaces *Skyrim’s* default interface for one better suited for keyboard & 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 & Armors:** Adds over 100 new weapons and 50 new armor 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 & tougher to defeat.

**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:

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*Skyrim* had three expansions: *Dawnguard* and *Dragonborn*, which adds extra areas and content, and *Hearthfire*, which adds the ability to build your own house.

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If you want to heavily modify *Skyrim*, visit the *Skyrim Total Enhancement Project* wiki, a comprehensive modding guide available at [http://wiki.step-project.com](http://wiki.step-project.com)
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 college life. The writing is quite good, and even the romances are interesting, going beyond the usual one-sided pandering relationships.

Each week you must decide your schedule, choosing what magic classes to attend – and eventually learn spells. The game features five magic schools, each with 12 spells, plus 16 combination spells, that require a set number of points in two schools. So you’re looking at over 70 spells to play with, such as Find Spirits, Anti-Magic Field and Stoneshape.

These can occasionally be used to solve (or cause) daily issues, but to me the dungeons are the real highlight here. Once in a while you’ll have to take tests, that teleport you to a maze and require you to reach the exit. The challenges range from a monster hunting you to a rival wizard, or just a big chasm to cross. And the solutions are all up to you. For example, to escape the monster you can kill it with damage spells, teleport it elsewhere, teleport yourself to the exit, distract it, scare it away, blind it, put it to sleep, turn invisible or even simply dig a tunnel across the maze. It’s an extremely rich system that really offers you the proper range of choices a spellcaster should have, instead of simply being a range damage-dealer, shooting fireballs everywhere, like in many “real” RPGs.

The big downside of Magical Diary is how short it is. Even slowly reading everything for the first time will take you only about 5 hours, and there’s simply not enough room to explore its magical system. Many spells only have one use in-game, so you’re likely to end without even casting half of your spellbook. And sadly, there are only seven dungeons in the game.

Still, the game is quite replayable. It’s fun to learn different spells to try new solutions on the dungeons, and the story can go interesting and unexpected places depending on how you choose to act.

Don’t let prejudice put you off; Magical Diary is a solid experience, that brings a much needed breath of fresh air into the genre. FE
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’ll 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 vastly improved, the limited development time led to cuts, re-used 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 armors. 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 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 makes little sense, casting Hawke as either hero or outcast at its convenience, while character development often happens off-screen, during long time skips. Choices mostly only affect your companions and the gameplay feels disconnected from the storyline – play as a mage and you’ll casually slay demons and rain meteors in front of mage-hunting templars (who ignore you), only to see Hawke complain in a cutscene that he hates having to “lay low”.

*Dragon Age II* is a repetitive, hastily-made RPG, but that only makes it mediocre. What makes it so damn disappointing is how it promised to revolutionize RPG storytelling with a personal and grounded tale about long-term coexistence – only to deliver a pandering and linear “save the world and bed everyone” game. **FE**
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 humor 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.

While there are way less 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 game. Some of them are an impressive display of storytelling and attention to player choice, while others are somewhat lackluster, with near-identical replacement characters showing up to take 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 customized 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 ME 2. A request for deeper RPG systems led to key design changes in ME 3.”

- Casey Hudson, Mass Effect series’ Executive Producer

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 down-time 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, lead 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 DLC, 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 multi-player 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 let down.

The Mass Effect trilogy stands as a landmark. While some will always be disappointment by the (many) unfulfilled promises, its successful blend of cinematic Action-RPGs with strong squad members relationship element ensured the direction of future Bioware games – and of many other RPGs. MS

After only featuring a male Shepard in ME1 and 2’s cover and promo material, BioWare made a voting to choose the official female Shepard. She was voted a red-head by 19k fans, and so ME3’s box came with a two-sided cover art – one male, another female.

Enemies now have several abilities and will throw grenades, deploy turrets, use shields, buff allies and pilot mechs – which you can steal for yourself.

Weapon mods are back, and you can now customize 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 multi-player.

Mods:
- Expanded Galaxy Mod: An excellent expansion that adds new features, customization options, 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 happier ending.
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 honors 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, in-built auto-map 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 customization 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 mis-clicks, 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, an unique all-around character.

Almost Human Ltd., 2012
Windows, Linux and Mac

In January 2014 a live-action webseries based on *Legend of Grimrock* was funded on Kickstarter, made by the same team responsible for *Nuka Break*. It also includes Chris Avellone as writer.

While not a very difficult game, *Grimrock* makes clever use of enemies and traps to create elaborate puzzles.
One problem that has plagued games of this ilk from the beginning is how easy it is to trivialize combat with the so-called “combat mambo”. Attack a monster, then quickly side-step 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 homefield 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.

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“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.

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Mages not only have to spend skill points to master the various schools of magic, but also need to know the correct rune inputs, usually found in scrolls.

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Fan-Made Dungeons:

One of *Grimrock*’s high points is the dungeon editor. As grid-based dungeons are easy to plan and build, there’s 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.

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The second game is set in a remote island, offering a huge non-linear dungeon-crawl surrounded by gorgeous vistas.

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The level editor is easy to understand and provides a great deal of freedom when in able hands.
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 it was 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 addicting progression systems, but focused on fast-paced action combat inspired by games like *God of War*.

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 archetype 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 convert 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 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, thought it isn’t useful often.

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 uniques, item sets, gems and even a salvage & 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 it turns out 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

Even if unbalanced, Amalur’s combat is fun and the progression system is solid. What doomed it was the decision to favor 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 encyclopedias, 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.

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 trilling.

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

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 & mouse controls.

A special bar fills up as you fight, allowing you to slow down time, power your attacks and execute foes for a XP bonus.

Amalur had several DLCs, including preorder 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.
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’ arm and climbing to its armored 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. 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 on-line 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 off-line).

Pawns draw 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 farther-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.

Equipment is diverse, and can be upgraded by finding the necessary items. Those range from mining rare ores to breaking a monster’s tusk during battle.
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 behavior) 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

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“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* director

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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.

There are five elemental enchantments, plus several status effects such as slow, poison, silence, burning, wet, etc.

Whether at night or in a dungeon, the realistic darkness forces you to rely on your lantern, enhancing exploration.

Combat is refreshingly tactile, from climbing larger monsters to grappling with smaller creatures to cutting the heads of hydrams.
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.

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 favor due to the damage boost, but can also cost you heavily thanks to the lack of defense 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 & consequence – the game is going to play out in a certain way no matter your dialog 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 is simply a great game. This is definitely not the type of game I would normally play. In fact, I had never played a tower defense game before or since. What really appealed to me about the game were the RPG elements, and it didn’t fail to deliver. The story combines with the combat and character development to make a surprisingly inspired game.

There is an actual story to this game that drives everything forward. The main character, Azra, is infected by a plague and thrown into a pit from where she must escape. As the story unfolds you’ll discover the driving force behind the plague and seek to put an end to it. I really enjoyed the writing, and, while the humor was a bit offbeat, there were several occasions where I literally laughed out loud. There’s the clichéd, somewhat dumb warrior (who has some priceless lines), a sarcastic archer, a noble knight, and a greedy egotistical dragon. It’s a great mixture that allows for all kinds of comedic interactions.

The game is fairly straightforward: you have to protect your main character and defeat all the waves of attacking enemy forces. This is achieved through carefully positioning your characters at choke points on the map. Adding some tactical depth to the gameplay are the class system and magic spells. There are six different classes, which all have unique skills with varying areas of effect, so careful positioning is the key to victory. As characters level up, you spend points in their skill trees to unlock new abilities or improve existing ones. Azra is immobile during battles, but can spend mana to summon allies, upgrade them or on various spells to assist in eliminating the hostile hordes. Coming up with strategies to leverage your army’s abilities towards victories, preferably flawless ones, is the real beauty of the combat system.

All the maps have four levels of difficulty to choose from (with the harder tiers obviously netting better rewards), and there’s a NG+ mode that adds a new type of currency for the best items. The game is also surprisingly long, clocking around 20 hours.

Believe me, even if this isn’t something you’d normally play, it is very capable of engulfing you with its charm. I loved it so much I didn’t even hesitate to pre-order Defender’s Quest II. RR
Frustrating”, “thrilling”, “unique”. These are just a smattering of the words used to describe the brutally difficult, insanely addictive rogue-like 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.

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 rogue-like 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 game.

Don’t be daunted by *FTL*’s difficulty – dying is half the fun. No really, it is! *JU*
Paper Sorcerer is a throwback to the glorious 1980s, paying homage to great blobbers of old and to the point-and-click adventures from the MacVenture series, such as Shadowgate.

The most evil of sorcerers has been up to some usual naughty shenanigans, terrorizing innocents and wreaking havoc, so a group of heroes of the land has been forced to imprison this danger to society inside a magical book. You play as that evil sorcerer (or sorceress) who must now find a way to break free and exact revenge – an obvious connection to the plot of Wizardry IV: The Return of Werdna.

The monochrome visual style is original and beautifully minimalist, with the sleek ink design illustrating the central theme of a world within a book.

The core gameplay of Paper Sorcerer consist of 3D first-person exploration and puzzle solving with 2D turn-based combat. The game's dungeon is made of different levels within the magical book prison, each having three floors followed by a boss area. You’ll encounter enemies as floating black clouds, and combat begins once you approach them.

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 weight in 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 “1980’s mode”. The downside is that the random loot drops can be rather unfair, punishing otherwise successful players and promoting save-scumming.

All in all, Paper Sorcerer is a lovely crafted game with superb artistic presentation. 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.

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.
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 known 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, eleven 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 bought in fully 3D graphics and a physics engine that makes each blow feel extremely satisfying. Blizzard opted for a more stylized 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.

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 6 slots for active skills and 3 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 4 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 being allowed to try a harder difficulty. And there was no end-game 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 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.

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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 & loot” gameplay loop was broken.
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 re-worked difficulty settings, offering players much more freedom in how to play.

Moreover, a solid end-game 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 Lv 1.

This worked particularly well with the more flexible skill system, as the steady addition of gems, legendary items and armor sets with special powers provides new play styles 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 those sets in custom challenges.

Blizzard’s drug-dealing expertise is visible in the abundance of cosmetic and ego-stroking rewards, such as achievements, portrait frames, pets, banners, wings and special item appearances you can apply to your equipment via transmogrification. All this is much welcome in a game with no monthly fees.

While the Auction House ruined the game at launch, *Reaper of Souls* managed to turn *Diablo III* into a friendly, addictive and highly-polished package. It may lack the hardcore experience of *Grim Dawn*, or the extensive mod support of *Torchlight 2*, but, for the vast majority of players, *Diablo III* is all you’ll need until *Diablo IV*. FE
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 canceled console from the 90’s.

In one of the most bizarre industry metaphors, the game begins as the “console goddess” join forces against the Planeptune goddess and remove her from the Console War. And so you must help Neptunia, a powerless and amnesiac personification of a canceled console, to return to her rightful place and save all of Gamindustri. Hard to find a weirder premise.

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 & crafting system, special goddess forms, diverse enemies, multiple status effects and many companions to use (even more with the DLCs). You can customize 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 re-visiting 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 items drops or raising the difficulty.

A huge hit, the game quickly got three sequels (and three remakes), manga & 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
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 into 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 by hands of monsters and frost giants. And, of course, it’s up for you to save the world, regardless of your initial less-than-average physical conditions and zero equipment.

The Adventure part is quite solid: most tasks are logical, and very rarely requires guessing. Moreover, key tasks are marked on your map, so you’ll never lose track. Most quests can be solved by several ways, and each class have their own personal quests and goals. As a result, playing each class feels as 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. Your success in certain puzzles are 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 & 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 adventurer lover – especially to those fond of the *Quest for Glory* games.

The game uses an icon-based interface similar to that of classic Sierra games like *King’s Quest V* and *Quest for Glory III*.

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.

*Heroine’s Quest* is free, available for download on Steam or on the developer’s website: [www.crystalshard.net](http://www.crystalshard.net)
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 favor of other mechanics. Card Hunter is a giant stride forward 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 armor cards are added to the character’s deck. Removed a Perplexing Mirror trinket? Its spell cards come out.

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 armor, which is played as a “counter”. Some armor always slightly reduces damage, while others reduce more but only on a successful die roll of, say, 3+. It’s a well-balanced system that feels right even when the die rolls are not in your favor.

Thus, equipment upgrades are agonizing 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 armor) to cancel opponent’s 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.
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 negative reviews, tight budgets and 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 in 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 / customization system.

However, the story became a cliche 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 Spider RPG gameplay-wise, it feels limited next to most RPGs and, worse, it lacks that bold, exotic creativity that previous Spider 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.

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 armors to customize them to your playstyle.
From a quick glance, *NEO Scavenger* is just a Flash-based roguelike developed by a one-man team. However, like an expert scavenger, it has very few resources, but knows how to make the most out of them and create something truly valuable.

You start by choosing your character’s traits. The game uses an advantage & disadvantage system that should be familiar to *GURPS* fans, allowing you to gain points by picking negative traits (Insomniac, Feeble, Myopia, etc) and spend point on positive traits (Tough, Hacking, Tracking, Botany, etc). While not as complex as other character systems, these will heavily alter each character’s choices and playstyle.

Once that’s done, you wake up from cryogenic sleep, only to find out that the world went to hell. Now you’re in the middle of a post-apocalyptic Michigan, wearing only a medical gown, a weird amulet and a wrist strap labeled “Philip Kindred”, 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 an unique approach to presentation.

Combat, for example, is turn-based and doesn’t feature a single frame of animation. Instead, you select commands, such as “shoot”, “kick” or “sneak towards”, and the combat log will describe what happened. While this may seem crude, it allow for actions that even triple-A games find too complex to animate, such as head-butting, leg tripping and even grappling (with mods) – all while pushing a shopping cart.

Still, the most interesting aspect of the game is how it obfuscates its stats. *NEO Scavenger* never tells you how many hit points you or your enemy have, how much damage a weapon does or to what extend a concussion or a fever affects you. Everything is up to your own judgment. You don’t replace your baseball bat for that machete you just found because the game says it does +10% fire damage, but rather because you – the player – feel safer with it.

These are some very bold design decisions, especially in this graphic- and DPS-driven era. More importantly, they succeed in transmitting an unique sense of tension, as you mentally visualize yourself rolling in the mud, tired and wounded, attacking another desperate survivor with a tree branch and wondering who will drop dead first.
“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 judgment 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

Every aspect of NEO Scavenger follows this logic. The game features a robust survival system that requires you to regularly eat, drink, sleep, threat your wounds, protect yourself from the cold and medicate against diseases. Of course, not every water you find is safe for drinking, and eating meat without cooking it might be a bad idea. Even something like wearing two right-feet boots can result in blisters and affect you negatively. Is it worse than walking around barefoot? It's up to you to figure it out.

Along the way, you’ll die – a lot. But it’s okay, the fun in NEO Scavenger lies precisely in learning how to survive this harsh post-apocalyptic world. The many characters you create will never gain experience nor level up, but after a while you – the player – will learn how to scavenge, craft items, assess risks and survive for a few days without dying of hypothermia.

At that point, you might then be ready to begin searching for answers, to discover out what happened to the world, to explore its borders, interact with its inhabitants and follow whispered rumors towards the game’s cryptic main quest. Or become a cannibal. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. FE

Mods:
Extended NeoScav: Expands the game in every way, adding new traits, crafting recipes, combat moves, factions, items, quests, locations and even a ridable bicycle, plus a few well-thought balance changes.
Mighty (mini)Mod of Doom: Despite the name, it also adds a huge amount of content and re-balancing.
Science & Sorcery: This WIP mod aims to give a Shadowrun-ish feel, adding magic into the game.
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.

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-crawlerish 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’s 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, re-using 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 optimized, 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 is the first game in a planned trilogy, a heavily story-driven tactical RPG with a nice smattering of choice & consequence and beautiful hand-drawn artwork.

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 specialized skills, offering a wide range of tactics. You can also move your characters' stat points around between six different attributes, allowing for greater customization of roles and play-style.

For example, you can spend points making a unit into a specialized armor breaker or boost the number of times they can perform a special ability. One of 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 on units: damaging an enemy reduces their damage. However, outright killing a unit might not be in your best interest since the game uses an “I go, you go” system. Therefore, it can be valuable to leave heavily damaged units, who do little damage, alive to prevent full strength units from getting more turns.

Units also have an armor value which reduces incoming damage, so sometimes it’s better to knock this down before attempting to damage a unit.

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 an unique look, with elegant hand-drawn animation and gorgeous Eyvind Earle-styled landscapes.

If the rest of the trilogy continue the dark, but engrossing, story and expand the combat system, then this series could easily turn into an epic masterpiece fans of story driven games won’t want to miss. RR

Upon achieving enough kills, all basic classes can level up and later upgrade into one of three specialized classes.

The journey will not be an easy one, and your choices will decide the fate of many characters.
Known for old-school point & click adventure games such as Deponia and Edna & Harvey, German developer Daedalic took gamers by surprise when 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 cliche 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.

Blackguards knows its limitations and uses some unconventional design choices to compensate 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 an unique “Western Final Fantasy Tactics” feel, and while the game 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 an 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, draw bridges, 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 result in a rather stale second half of the game.

Even more unfortunate was Daedalic’s failure to realize what made the game fun. Blackguards 2 (2015) changed all the wrong things, streamlining the game and removing RPG elements such as character creation to focus on a more strategic campaign, full of dull battles against endless respawning enemies. It pleased reviewers, but not players, selling only a fraction of the first game and likely ending the Blackguards series. FE
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 of 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 shape 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 a 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 gets 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 bonus. 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
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 & 2*, the game takes place in a post-apocalyptic Roman-esque empire. The populace have descended into a sort of cutthroat 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 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 certain places are imbued by the setting.

*Age of Decadence* is not a game that is kind to completionists. If your lockpicking 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 RPG’s 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’s plenty of viable strategies, and despite being essentially locked into your first choice of weapons and defense (block or dodge) there’s plenty of customizability. For the melee weapons you have daggers that are fast and weak but great with aimed strikes, swords/hammers/axes which can cause bleed/armor breakage/minicrits and rounding out the melee weapons there’s spears which have high range and can interrupt enemies moving close to you.

For ranged combat there’s 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.
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 dialog skill check will simply put you into a combat that anyone with moderate skill can beat. Instead, AoD will just kill you mid-dialog 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 favor 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 dialogs 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
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 pet, or some laughs for their bad stand-up comedy. If you give them what they want, they’ll leave you alone.

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 color – 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 utilize every visual, audio and technical aspect available to convey the desired narrative and tone.

Undertale is not a complex game, or a long one – you’ll beat it in about 5 hours. But it’s still 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
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 permadeth, unidentified items, etc. But, like an old-school side-scrolling game, the screen automatically moves right – if you’re slow, you die.

This add a whole new dimension to the game. Not only you must 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, distance 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 permadeth, 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 customize the difficulty, with four settings and the option to disable 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 usual 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 and extensive soundtrack. You can use the *OWH Music* mod to play the remake using its songs.
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 honorable martial heroes, populated by a mix of all Jin Yong novel’s characters and plots. During your travels it’s possible to change certain storylines and recruit over thirty characters to brawl it out with various villains and heroes.

Five years later, the same team made a sequel titled *Legend of Wulin Heroes* – 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 raising sim mode, where your character’s growth is determined by a weekly training schedule set by the player, presented in a humorous Chibi art style.

You play as a nobody who dreams to become a martial 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, categorized 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 skill gain 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 you’ll get interesting lessons, but you’ll later be asked to identify songs, calligraphy styles, acupuncture points or decide upon a Chess move – which your performance impacting the bonus your character receives.

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.

*Legend of Wulin Heroes* was also never translated into English, but it’s known as one of the best Chinese RPGs ever made.
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 wakeup 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+ NPC can be friended through events and gifts, and they will greatly contribute to your success in future endeavors 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 training 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 – Phoenix Games – 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 & night cycle with timed NPC schedules and increase the romanceable heroine to 10, with possibly more in future DLCs.

As of this writing there’s still some bugs and glitches that might manifest on certain system, and the crowd-sourced translation is rather uneven and messy, but the game is definitely worth playing. It’s a truly one-of-a-kind wuxia experience that you aren’t likely to find elsewhere. NY
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 Game’s *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.

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 savored. 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.
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 interesting features include an elegant combo system, runes you can socket into weapons, a magical gauntlet that fires ranged 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*. Even the game’s first enemy is already a huge, armor-clad demon. While cool, it can feel contrived – the end-game foes look much weaker, ruining the usual “rats to dragons” RPG progression.

Regardless, the graphics can’t make up for how limited the game is. The story is forgettable and just a reason to kill stuff, but the real sin here is how there are few unique weapons and move sets, 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
The emergence of crowd-funding in the early 2010’s 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 less than 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 a-plenty; eleven character classes; dozens of monster types, spells, and talents, hundreds of items and enough quests for a single playthrough to soak many weekends.

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 feel of commanding units is just right, and quests and dialogs 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 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 attack of opportunity. Unless you go out of your way to build a mobile party with mainly passive abilities, fights will be more static than in the Infinity 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 difficulty, and avoid going into the *White March* expansion until the very end or risk out-leveling and out-gearing the second half of the game.
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 with “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 Medieval 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 (eleven 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*’ eleven 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 specialized 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.

The IE Mod allows you to customize 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. While scarcely used, the CYOA-like segments provide interesting role-playing options and are a great addition.

"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

"If you want to make a trick party, like the holy-warrior party of paladins and clerics? You can do that. I like six wizards. It’s just fun. Whatever sort of weird, goofball group that you want to make, you can do that. And that’s very much something that we wanted to support."

- *Josh Sawyer*, *Pillars of Eternity*’s Lead Designer

The *IE Mod* allows you to customize 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.
While this book is dedicated to single-player CRPGs available 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.

So this section is devoted to a brief listing and commentary of various games that didn't fit in the main timeline, such as console RPGs, MMORPGs, RPG Maker games, CRPGs unreleased in the West, unofficial fan-translations and even canceled 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 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_ popularized such combat system), 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 “Roll Playing Game”), _Arfgaldt / アルフガルド_, another text-adventure, etc.

It’s interesting many of these games already called themselves “Role-Playing Games”, even thought few have traditional features 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 game.

Still, there are some early games that are undeniably RPGs, such as _Legend 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 from it, the next pages will examine 15 games that shaped the early JRPGs.
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 have each their own agenda.

Tower of Druaga
ドルアーガの塔 (1984)
Namco’s “Fantasy Pac-Man”, this deceptively simple arcade asks you to climb 60 floors of a tower.

In each floor you must grab a key and recover a hidden item, which requires a specific action – i.e., killing slimes in Floor 2 wields a pickax, which can destroys walls.

Combat is done by “bumping” into foes, but some require special items or strategies to be beaten.

While not an RPG, *Druaga* is a cornerstone for Japanese Action RPGs, as well as their puzzle design.

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 250 x 250 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 Demogorgon.

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’s many useful magical items as well.

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 customize the character’s appearance, displaying equipment the character’s avatar and using colored bars to indicate health.

Hydlide
ハイドライド (1984)
T&E Soft took *Tower of Druaga* and brought in colorful 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 80’s, 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’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.

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 have each their own agenda.

Henk Rogers *tells* that in order to show what RPGs were, he sat down with editors of computer magazines, made a character with their names and then left them playing.
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 artstyle, it sold over two million copies in Japan and defined the entire JRPG genre.

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 XX.

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.
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-know JRPG series.

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.

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 brute 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 popularization 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 to Japan or failed to leave an impact. Even Ultima Underworld (1992), so influential in the West, was barely noticed in Japan – From 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 90’s, Japanese companies would acquire the serie’s license and produce over 30 Wizardry games, remakes and spin-offs, plus novels, manga series, anime, toys, mobile games, tabletop RPGs and even a 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 never were 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 westerns aren’t even aware – such as the Touhou games.

Twice each year a massive event called Comiket (Comic Market) is held in Tokyo, with over half a million attendees during three days. Besides comic and movies, a huge amount of indie games are also presented. Just on Comiket 83, held 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 to 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 Gameboy 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 organized 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 offering the entire translated scrip 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.
Back in the 80’s, 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 as 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 enemies’ 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 weapons 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 his move or stop him 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 curve-balls, 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 earn its reputation. FE
No matter how globalized and connected the world might be, there's 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 know 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).

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 come back to 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 90's JRPG; you follow the story in a linear fashion, traveling from town to town, talking to characters, exploring dungeons and facing enemies in turn-based combat. Unfortunately, while the story is excellent and flows naturally in the first hours, it's later broken by massive dungeons and countless 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, so the original game is preferable.

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.
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: 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 (defense), 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. I.e., 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.

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’s 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.
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. 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 pursue what is morality correct, then the game goes in 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 spell-casters 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. The previous two titles focused on Liu Bei and the Sun family, opposing rulers and 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.
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 (4 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-endness and the tactical diversity a large party offers lie 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 unrivaled, 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
The game, Kamidori Alchemy Meister, 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.

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 sell-able 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 equipments, 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
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 a fictional Japanese clan during the country’s civil war and must unite Japan into one nation. The goofy opening hints at a casual eroge RPG and the first battles are simplistic. However, a few turns in 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, centered 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 defense 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 rooster.

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 abuses 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.

Many other *Rance* games also got fan-translations, and if you enjoyed *Sengoku Rance*’s strategic combat you can also try *Daibanchou -Big Bang Age-*, which uses a similar 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.
The series we know as RPG Maker first began in Japan in 1988 with Mamirin, a simple tool to create real-time dungeons crawlers, developed by ASCII for the PC-8801.

The concept of a tool for players to create their own adventures had been done before, in classics such as Adventure Construction Set (1984), and later on Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures and Neverwinter Nights, but these are isolated titles. ASCII’s tool, however, was honed in dozens of iterations and new releases, until finally reaching the West in 2000 with the first RPG Maker for the PS1.

It was on the PCs, however, that the series would find a devoted audience – first with fan-translations of the Japanese releases, later with the official English release of RPG Maker 2000 and its sequels.

Packed with pre-made art and gameplay systems, the tool allows anyone to easily create a JRPG in the mold of 8-bit titles like Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest. But the real treasures are the games where developers stretch the tool to offer something unique – be it an original RPGs, horror games like Ao Oni and Corpse Party, heartwarming story-driven games such as To the Moon, or even bizarre conceptual games like Mittens and Yume Nikki.

So here’s a short list of some of the most interesting RPGs that are freely available:

**Alter A.I.L.A. Genesis**

One of the most popular RPG Maker games ever made, *After A.I.L.A. Genesis* is a side-scrolling cyberpunk JRPG. Its custom artwork isn’t the best around, but together with the unusual gameplay style and the option to play stealthily makes the game stand out.

The combat system is rather standard, but comes with a lot of depth, with various resistances and special attack types to keep in mind.

A sequel was planned, but later abandoned.

**A Blurred Line**

Consistently voted one of the top RPG Maker games, *A Blurred Line* places you in control of Talan, a man on the run, accused of murdering The Director. Desperate, he has only one clue: “seek Paradise”.

This 6-hour game delivers a fantastic story, full of twists and clever tricks that never feel forced. The combat, while not revolutionary, is entertained and changes entirely depending on which character you’re controlling. Unfortunately, the game was created as part of a series that was never completed. Still, it’s highly recommended for sci-fi fans.
Exit Fate

An elaborate 25+ hours RPG, heavily inspired by *Suidoken II* and entirely done by a single developer.

It blends the traditional JRPG battles – here with a party of 6 characters and a formation system – with large-scale tactical battles where you control armies, as well as a castle players must manage. In true *Suidoken* form, it offers 75 recruitable characters, plus some really challenging post game content.

Pokémon Zeta/Omicron

Arguably the best fan-made *Pokémon* game around, *Zeta/Omicron* contains all 649 monsters from Gen I-V, plus some from *Pokémon X/Y* games, along with new Mega-Evolutions.

An ambitious game, it offers an elaborate story, two regions, 12 gyms, tons of end-game content and a functional online play mode. It's also much harder than the official games, and adds many interesting features, such as challenge modes and viewable IVs & EVs.

The Way

A six-episode game where a hero travels the world in search of his long-lost love. It's over 20 hours long, and while the quality of the chapters is uneven, the overall experience is solid.

It adds some twists to the traditional “RPG maker gameplay”, such as one-on-one duels against rivals, a unique upgrade system and various mini-games, but the real draw here is the elaborate story and setting, which manages to rise above most of its peers.

Visions & Voices

An RPG focused on exploration / puzzles, with a dark, mysterious atmosphere. As the nameless wanderer you investigate the a remote village, where people are either vanishing or going insane.

Each new character you recruit into your party offers unique abilities – both in combat and when exploring –, allowing for a lot of freedom in how you approach each obstacle.

Wilfred the Hero

Visually impressive and one of the most interesting games made in RPG Maker, *Wilfred the Hero* uses colorful custom art assets with an unique, dream-like style. Besides the amazing art, it presents a charming story of an insecure hero and his friend trying to save the world.

*Wilfred the Hero* was planned as part of a series of games, that was never finished. Reportedly the developers are working on a new version of the game, as a full commercial product.
Games we’ll (likely) never play

Talking about canceled games is a difficult and frustrating task. There’s little concrete information, a lot of rumors and, sadly, enough canceled 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, Whichwood, Lord of the Rings: The White Council, etc…

There are also canceled MMORPGs, such as Ultima Online 2, Shenmue Online, Blizzard’s Titan, the World of Darkness MMO and Fallout Online/Project V13. Plus all the countless Kickstarter projects that never made it, including Guido Henkel’s Deathfire. Even fan projects, such the recently canceled 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 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. Canceled 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

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, but Brian Fargo & 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 hope back to frustrated wanna-be time travelers.
The only other game to use the infamous Jefferson engine, Black Isle's original *Fallout 3* was codenamed *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.

It even made 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.

A title that still carries the dreams of those frustrated by Bethesda’s *Fallout 3*, a fan-made remake using the *FOnline* engine is currently in the works.

While *Freedom Force* delivers on many of *Champions* concepts, these screenshots are just too charming.

The only known screenshot of *The Black Hound* came from Josh Sawyer’s desktop background.

The project was having issues with the *D&D* license but, regardless, the financial crises of Interplay would close the Black Isle Studios shortly after.

It may look dated today, but this screenshot was the dream of many RPG fans in the early 2000’s.

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**Champions**

Why there are so few super-hero RPGs? Hero Games tried to answer that in 1992, but and never made it. They attempted to adapt their tabletop rule-set, *Champions: The Super Role-Playing Game*, into a full fledged CRPG, that allowed you to customize your powers, one-liners, spandex and everything.

It even made 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.

**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 who the hound originated.

While there were plans for a full trilogy of games, *The Black Hound* was canceled in 2003, reportedly being about 80% complete at the time.

**Fallout 3 / Van Buren**

The only other game to use the infamous Jefferson engine, Black Isle’s original *Fallout 3* was codenamed *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 [here](#).

A title that still carries the dreams of those frustrated by Bethesda’s *Fallout 3*, a fan-made remake using the *FOnline* engine is currently in the works.
Ultima VIII: The Lost Vale

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

Guardians is another entry into the apparently cursed realm of super-hero 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 legendary X-COM 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 super-powers, 17 skills and 8 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.

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 canceled.

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 to 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 canceled in 2000, as the developers couldn’t secure a publishing contract. Thus, the only White Wolf in CRPGs is Geralt of Rivia – whom Michal Moorock 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 dialogs 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.

The game was quietly canceled in 2009, but a gameplay video preview showing various features surfaced in 2013 and can be seen here.

**Torn**

*Torn* is one of those games that show just how important Black Isle Studios was back then.

Made by the team behind *Planescape: Torment*, it was an 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 canceled in June 2001. But it’s still fondly talked about even today.

**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. Once 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 over 26 years of total development time, maybe the longest in history.

*Newcomer* is quite pretty, considering it’s made for a computer system released in 1982.
The Broken Hourglass

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 a 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 since 2005, but got canceled 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 license issues with EA, Interplay couldn’t use the name anymore and had to change the whole game just a few months before release.

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 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 armor” 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 license back and released The Bard’s Tale (2004), a parody Action-RPG with barely any resemblance of 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.
Wizardry VIII: Stones of Arnhem

The history of the Wizardry series is shrouded in mystery, lawsuits and Japan, but this one takes the cake. 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.

Oddly, this Australian team included people such as actor Max Phipps and filmmaker 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. Another Wizardry 8 was released by another team in 2001, and 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.

Grimoire: Heralds of the Winged Exemplar

Grimoire is a paradox: it is, at the same time, the closest and farthest title here from being released.

One of the most infamous “vapourware” games of all-time, Grimoire is a turn-based blobber, similar to Wizardry VII. And it has been under development for a while now – since 1996, to be precise. It was even previewed in a 1997 issue of the CGW magazine, with an amusing 1998 release date.

And at the helm of this epic title is our old friend Cleve Mark Blakemore – veteran C64 developer, programmer at Wizardry VIII: Stones of Arnhem and self-professed titanium-boned Neanderthal.

Between 20 years of development, trademark disputes, accusations of stolen code, two crowdfunding campaigns, Cleve’s unique personality and even a cameo-parody on Jagged Alliance 2, the most surprising thing is that the released demo (which you can download here) of Grimoire is actually great – a fantastic blobber that rivals old-school classics.

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 for more than $1000, 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.

Promises such as “over 600 hours of gameplay, 244 maps, 240 monsters and 30 recruitable NPCs” may be far fetched, but there is quality here, and if Grimoire’s plot is half as exciting as its development cycle, we’re in for a treat – eventually.

The Grimoire demo plays like a classic 90’s RPG that was lost in time – in part because that’s exactly what it is.
or today’s generations, purchasing a computer to play games is as simple as selecting a machine that runs Windows and fits your budget. At most there will be some careful consideration of which graphics card to choose, or maybe the pros and cons of installing Linux instead.

But back in the 70’s, 80’s and early 90’s, it was a complicated and personal choice among completely different and incompatible machines. A brand dispute much more complex than the current “console wars”, buying a Commodore 64 over a ZX Spectrum, or an IBM PC over an Amiga 500 would lead to an entirely different set of games, software, prices and limitations.

Without the context of these machines, it’s hard to fully understand and appreciate how revolutionary games like *Dungeon Master* and *Ultima Underworld* were, or see the impact of the 16-bit computers and accessories like the mouse and CD-ROM drives.

So this section is devoted to showcasing some of the more popular gaming computers from the past, its iconic games and they joys and frustrations of playing in these beloved machines.

The iconic cover art for the first issue of the *Computer Gaming World* magazine, done by Tim Finkas in 1981.
Sinclair Radionics (later renamed Sinclair Research) was an UK electronic company founded in 1961 by Clive Sinclair. At first selling radios and gadgets, in 1980 they boldly entered the personal computer market with the ZX80, a simple and cheap personal computer.

A small and light machine (weighting less than 400g), it was hooked to TVs and easy to use. Its low price led to some drawbacks however, as the ZX80 was very slow, didn’t have color or sound support, came with only 1K of RAM and used a membrane-like keyboard that was difficult to use.

In 1981, Sinclair released an even cheaper machine, the ZX81. The first computer sold under US$100, it used the same processor and 1K RAM as the ZX80, as well as the same keyboard. Despite these shortcomings, the low price guaranteed its success, selling over 1.5 million units.

Sinclair would top it all in 1982 with their third effort: the ZX Spectrum, boasting a more powerful hardware and new 8 color display. However, it was never intended to become a game platform as it lacked built-in joystick ports, had a rubbery chiclet keyboard that had a mushy feel, primitive sound generation with a tinny built in speaker, and a color display that was optimized for text display.

Despite these profound limitations, the hunger to create and play games led to about 5 million units being sold and over 20,000 software titles being written and distributed.

This effectively launched the home computer and game developer revolutions in the UK, and its creator, Clive Sinclair, was later awarded knighthood for his services to British industry. The Spectrum’s impact on the UK was well captured in the documentary *From Bedrooms to Billions*.

Sinclair would produce a few upgraded versions of the ZX Spectrum in the following years, but a series of commercial failures led to the company being sold to Armstrad in 1986.

Regardless, Sinclair’s cheap and accessible machines had already taken the world – in part by a join-venture with Timex, who sold it on the US, but mostly by over 50 unofficial clones produced mainly on the Soviet Union and Brazil.

**Emulators:**
- **Fuse** - Free Unix Spectrum Emulator: A powerful and free emulator, with ports for Windows, Mac and many others.
- **ZX Spectrum4.net**: A friendly and easy to use emulator. The free version emulates the ZX Spectrum 48k, the paid one offers more systems and an online software library.
Machines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Machine</th>
<th>Released</th>
<th>CPU</th>
<th>RAM</th>
<th>Display</th>
<th>OS</th>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>3.25MHz</td>
<td>1K (64K max)</td>
<td>64x44 text only</td>
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<td>£79.95 (Kit), £99.95 (Built)</td>
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<td>3.5MHz</td>
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<td>BASIC</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZX Spectrum</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>3.5MHz</td>
<td>16K or 48K</td>
<td>256x192 (8 colors)</td>
<td>BASIC</td>
<td>£99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Games (ZX Spectrum only)

- *Jetpac* (1983)
- *Ant Attack* (1983)
- *R-Type* (1988)
Before Amstrad bought up Sinclair in 1986 and got their hands on the Spectrum brand, they had a go at the 8-bit computer market themselves with the Amstrad CPC line.

Originally dealing in consumer electronics, Amstrad’s move to computers began with the CPC 464 in 1984 and expanded greatly afterwards. Unlike most other 8-bits the CPC (which stands for “Color Personal Computer”) required its own monitor, but was nevertheless a sensible purchase, especially due their good third-party support in the form of applications and hardware extensions.

The 464 model had 64k of RAM and an in-built tape deck, making it a cheap, but somewhat clunky machine. Customers demanded more, and Amstrad released two more models the year after. The 664 model switched out the tape deck for a floppy drive, but the 6128 model went one better and had 128k memory and native CP/M support, making it the staple of the platform for the next 5 years.

Still, CPC machines were slow. Loading from a floppy disk took 30-50 seconds, while cassette users had to endure up to 10-minute loading times.

While CPCs could sport “high-resolution” graphics for its time, they had huge problems with graphical scrolling and refresh rates, so were best suited to games that used static artwork, like adventure games. While never really popular outside Europe, they were surprisingly popular in France, leading to numerous French-only games.

In 1990 Amstrad tried to revive the platform with the release of the Plus range of CPCs. While they sported beefier hardware, sleeker looks and a new cartridge slot, the line was a flop as it was still an 8-bit machine in a world of superior 16-bit machines. With Amstrad focusing on portable computers in the 90s, the CPC line was discontinued in 1992 but still held a market presence in Europe until 1994.

Overall sales for CPCs were around 3 million units, with the 464 model alone selling 2 million.

**Emulators:**

*WinAPE:* A simple to use emulator for Windows that can handle the entire CPC line.
Not only we’ll talk about the games, but also about the companies that made them. This section focuses on the great companies of the past, such as SSI, Sir-Tech and Interplay, who created many of the titles in this book but, unfortunately, closed down, were bought or simply faded away.

The stories told here serve as a tribute to those companies and all the talented people that worked there, but also as an overall look at the gaming industry and the various changes it went through.

The articles are all written by Reggie Carolipio, originally posted at GamesBeat, and have been reproduced and edited for length by the author.

The Vault Dweller is exiled and roams through the wasteland in *Fallout*. 
The very first impression that I had of Strategic Simulations, Inc. was that they made games for old people. At the time, I had no idea why I should care about the Fulda Gap or superpowers colliding, only that it didn’t seem all that exciting. That is until I saw their CRPGs, which seemed a lot more interesting, along with the story of how the company came to be.

Joel Billings founded the company in 1979 at a crossroads in his life – go to business school after college or make his love of wargames a reality with his own company? In college, Joel discovered computers and the potential they had to be compelling – and even easier to find – opponents. Two wargaming programmers joined his cause, John Lyon and Ed Willeger, and focused on the Apple over the TSR-80. That was thanks to a chance meeting with a marketing manager from Apple by the name of Trip Hawkins, who went on to found Electronic Arts.

Computer Bismarck in 1980 was their first game, and the company eventually took off to do everything from the American Civil War to the Cold War, with some football and baseball thrown in. From fighting along the Eastern Front on the Apple to the beaches of the Commodore 64, they eventually became one of the most prolific developers and publishers in PC gaming history with a catalog of well over a hundred and fifty titles. If you think the WW2 genre is saturated with shooters, you should have seen their catalog during the eighties when it came to turn-based strategy.

But they also had a turn on the CRPG circuit with the Phantasie and Questron series — along with many others such as Demon’s Winter, the action-adventures Gemstone Warrior and Gemstone Healer, and the post-apocalyptic titles Roadwar 2000 and Roadwar Europa. Stat heavy, tile-based, and packaged with manuals as thick as car instructions, these games immersed the player in each experience with plenty of details to chew over. While they lacked in looks, that only left our imaginations and what their writers packed into the manuals to fill in the blanks.

Their biggest coup was in scoring the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons license from pen-and-paper RPG publisher TSR in 1987. So named because of the gold-colored paper used to label the boxes, the “Gold Box” series would prove to be one of AD&D’s biggest splashes on PCs until the arrival of Bioware’s Baldur’s Gate under the Interplay label almost a decade later.

SSI opened up TSR’s worlds to PC players with fancy graphics, turn-based tactical planning, and all of the nitty gritty details stuffed into every statistic. For players that had never touched the tabletop version but had a PC, it was a great way to get a taste of TSR’s worlds without having to find a group, deal with temperamental dungeon masters, or buy all of the rulebooks. In my case, it was a little of each. The releases had even come with a manual that explained how the gameplay systems work and described the mysteries of THAC0 (to hit armor class zero). But they would often include an illustrated “Adventurer’s Journal” detailing the monsters, AD&D concepts, and the journal entries that would be referenced within the game as a form of copy protection.

TSR’s worlds sprawled across novels, gazettes, and countless sourcebooks providing plenty of adventures for SSI’s developers to craft around. Pool of Radiance kicked things off within the medieval, high-fantasy lands of the Forgotten Realms. Dragonlance’s Champions of Krynn introduced players to a war-torn world shattered by draconic armies of evil and dark magic. Later, new titles would reach into the horrific lands of the Demiplane of Dread’s Ravenloft with the gothic stylings of Strahd’s Possession. Even space, as seen through the lens of high fantasy, launched players on ships fueled by magic with Spelljammer’s Pirates of Realmspace. And if you wanted to do away with magic entirely, SSI had also taken TSR’s revamped look at Buck Rogers under its fold with turn-based battles using ray guns, Wasteland-like skill development, travel between the planets, and plenty of adventure with Countdown to Doomsday and Matrix Cubed.
SSI had also recycled their engines to a degree unheard of today, with no less than 14 titles sharing the same Gold Box engine, including the original Neverwinter Nights, a pioneer MMORPG released in 1991. But SSI had more than just Gold Box games, such as the Dark Sun series and a partnership with Westwood which produced Hillsfar and Eye of the Beholder 1 and 2. The Dark Sun titles in particular demonstrated SSI’s streamlining of the gameplay from the Gold Box series of titles, but never capitalized on these changes — something that Bioware would take further with their Infinity Engine.

However, the heavy milking of the license lead to saturation and decreasing sales. In 1994 TSR decided to farm out licenses to various companies rather than have one handle all, ending their partnership. After losing the TSR license, SSI tried developing its own setting with the steampunk-ish World of Aden, introduced through Thunderscape and Entomorph. As decent as they were, though, they didn't seem to do much to establish SSI’s post-TSR identity as a CRPG developer that could survive without them.

They refocused on their roots as a strategy company developing and publishing deeply detailed wargames such as Steel Panthers, Panzer General, and Silent Hunter. Unfortunately, titles such as Bullfrog’s Populous along with Westwood’s revolutionary Dune 2 and the Command & Conquer series changed the landscape of tactical gaming despite their critically acclaimed — yet increasingly niche — efforts.

The storied developer appeared to die a slow death in the mid to late nineties. Even with conversions of several of its Gold Box titles on the Nintendo Entertainment System early on, SSI was forced to compete against Japanese RPG houses that also flooded this new market with games that proved to be both more accessible and entertaining for a new generation of players.

Later, as hunger for the kind of statistics-heavy wargaming that SSI excelled at producing began giving way to the popularity of the real-time strategy genre, it became more difficult to keep up with its rivals. Although its games would continue to be popular among hardcore tacticians, the level of dominance and the vast number of titles it once produced had steeply eroded.

SSI was eventually bought out by Mindscape in ’94 under which it produced several impressive titles such as the sequel to Panzer General. After changing hands several more times, mostly through the acquisition of its parent such as Mindscape, it eventually landed at Ubisoft who only used the SSI name on one or two games before it was finally retired in 2001.

All in all, SSI had a very successful run. Its games may not have been the most popular — or the easiest to get into as they were often aimed at a more 'adult' crowd — but the quality of its work speaks for itself with every armchair general and D&D grognard. SSI passed quietly into history on what could arguably be considered a high, though muted, note. RC
The road to the first *Wizardry* didn't start with a role-playing game or in someone's basement. It started with a mailing list. It was the late seventies, and would-be dungeon master Robert Woodhead was busy developing a mailing program to help his mother's novelty business. With the help of partner Fred Sirotek, Jr., who had also bankrolled a $7,000 Apple computer, Woodhead created *Infotree*. Always the entrepreneur like his father, Sirotek saw the dollar signs that Infotree could bring in.

Taking the project and the expensive Apple to the Trenton Computer Show, Fred’s brother, Norm, drove Woodhead on the road trip from Canada. After seeing the enthusiastic response that a mailing list had created with the crowds, they came back with a new idea.

Norm knew an opportunity when he saw it. If people were that excited over a piece of business software, how would they react to a game? A space-based wargame, *Galactic Attack*, was the next project, said to have been dreamt up during the drive back home from the show (though a vague Wikipedia entry doubts this story by saying that it was adapted from another early PC game: 1973’s *Empire*). After convincing Fred Sirotek, Sr. to part with the capital to get the project started, *Infotree* was completed and *Galactic Attack* sold enough to fund a new game and the company that would bring it to the world: Sir-tech.

Heavily influenced by the PLATO games he played at Cornell University, Woodhead joined forces with fellow student Andrew Greenberg in 1980 to create their own RPG: *Dungeons of Despair*. The game was later renamed *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord*, after the *Dungeons and Dragons* creator Gary Gygax had apparently threatened to litigate on account of the “double D” initials.

*Wizardry* took a decidedly different direction than *Ultima* did with its exclusively first-person view of wireframe corridors, colorful monster graphics, and in allowing the player to customize a party of characters.

Being able to choose from several classes and races to create a party with them spoke to the D&D roots that more than a few CRPGs at the time aspired to emulate. It was like walking into a dungeon with multiple personalities, each one armed with sharp objects. Although *Ultima 3* would bridge the gap in ‘83 with non-player characters who could join the player’s party, *Wizardry* was already there. Others were also inspired to follow their example such as in Japan where both *Wizardry* and *Ultima* proved to be influential references.

The first three games were also notoriously tough and offered an import feature for characters as they went from title to title. Jumping into the third game without playing any of the previous ones would almost guarantee hours of frustration and when the entire party wiped in *Wizardry*, it was time to start all over again with a fresh batch. But thanks to another innovative twist, this new party could also find the bodies of the slain party and bring them back.

As revolutionary as its features were, the difficulty and frustration of the series had also attained a sort of mythic status that is still well regarded today by its longtime fans. The designers of the fourth *Wizardry* even solicited save disks from players of the previous entries in order to turn their characters into enemies. Yes, your party could have been the bad guys in *Wizardry 4* and these do-gooders were your worst nightmare as you fought your way solo to one of the game’s multiple endings.
As a first for CRPGs, or gaming in general, the boxes were stamped with warnings advising recommended skill levels. Imagine a game like Final Fantasy 13 stamped with the warning “Experts Level: Previous Final Fantasy experience required!” But that didn’t stop the series from receiving accolades from all walks of life: even from a psychologist who wrote in to tell the developers that he had used the first game as a tool in helping to reach a troubled child contemplating suicide.

In 1988 Robert Woodhead left Sir-tech, leaving David W. Bradley to take over the Wizardry series. Wizardry 5 would bring some fresh air to the already dated Wizardry engine by having larger dungeons, filled with the additional wrinkle of interacting with NPCs via a text parser. After it’s release, Andrew Greenberg would also leave the company.

Wizardrys 6 through 8 would prove to be among the series’s finest dungeon crawling, with updated graphics and hundreds of hours packed into a continuous storyline blending sci-fi hints, high fantasy, and tongue-in-cheek humor. An advanced parser system, deeper character builds and a developing skill system provided players with even more directions in which to experience the series’s evolving gameplay.

Sir-tech was also a publisher renowned for titles such as the tactical Jagged Alliance series and imports such as the Realms of Arkania. While not as prolific as Interplay or Origin, its low-key profile and consistent attention to quality gave them a great reputation among their fans. Unfortunately, the market was quickly changing with the release of the PlayStation and Nintendo 64, and Sir-tech failed to follow, betting on mediocre titles such as Druid: Daemons of the Mind and Nemesis: The Wizardry Adventure, a forgettable RPG/adventure game hybrid.

Sir-tech eventually shuttered its doors in ’98 under unclear circumstances, though money and a changing retail model were hinted at as factors. Sir-tech Canada, a separate entity from the publishing side of the company, continued on to finish Jagged Alliance 2 (released in 2000) and Wizardry 8 (released in 2001) before folding in 2003.

But that’s not the end of the Wizardry story. When it first came to Japan in the eighties, Wizardry made a huge impression on its RPG audience, inspiring early pioneers such as Dragon Warrior’s Yuji Horii. The impact and devotion to the series was such that it spawned a massive list of spin-offs and original productions, including light novels, manga series, a couple of pen-and-paper RPG adaptations and an animated movie.

The first Wizardrys would be remade years later for the Famicom, the PC Engine and later the original Playstatation, complete with improved visuals. While only eight Wizardry games were ever produced in the West, in Japan over 30 titles have been released for various platforms, including spin-offs and even an MMORPG, though only one or two of these would ever find their way over to the West (thanks to Atlus), such as Wizardry: Tales of the Forsaken Land in ’01. After Sir-tech had closed its doors, Wizardry lives on. Or at least the rights do, now owned by an obscure company called IPM, Inc. in Japan.

As for the original programmers that started this whole craze in the first place, Robert Woodhead is currently running Animeigo, a company that licenses and distributes Japanese movies and animation. His partner in crime, Andrew Greenberg, has put aside his evil wizard alter-ego Werdna to practice law instead. Their successor, David W. Bradley, went on to work for Origin, later starting his own company, Heuristic Park, which released Wizards & Warriors and Dungeon Lords. And one of Wizardry 8’s designer, Brenda Romero, is still around today, teaching a new generation of designers and would-be game developers the ropes. RC
From his tentative steps with Akalebeth and then on to the first Ultima and its sequel, Richard Garriott clearly saw just how successful his computer role-playing game was going to be when the cash began rolling in and the phone calls never stopped.

Garriott (aka Lord British to his fans) founded Origin Systems in ’83 partly as a result of the series runaway popularity. The Ultima games would become the standard bearer alongside other pioneers such as Wizardry in defining the early years of the CRPG. Even in Japan, Ultima and Richard Garriott had received the kind of accolades — and merchandising — that had been reserved only for properties like Hello Kitty.

Ultima’s amazing success on both sides of the world owed itself as much to Garriott’s hard work as it later did in testing players later with social questions and deep narratives expanding the fictional world of Britannia such as when Ultima 4 revolutionized the genre again in ’85 challenging players to become the Avatar by learning virtues such as honesty, compassion, and valor breaking the stereotypical end game mold of the combat-heavy CRPG. There were still plenty of monsters, but leading a one man war against them was considered secondary to Ultima 4’s goal of truly becoming a virtuous “hero.”

Origin branched out and dabbled in other genres living up to its moniker “we create worlds.” From Garriott’s days as a lone programmer, the company grew up over the years to encompass multiple teams working across multiple genres as well as act as a publisher. One of those published titles was Ultima Underworld by the studio later responsible for the System Shock and Thief series – Looking Glass.

Along with Ultima’s many incarnations over nearly two decades of gaming, there stood the sci-fi epic series Wing Commander and Privateer. There was also the ultraviolent Crusader series with its isometric action. When I wanted to scratch my fantasy and space-sim itch, one just had to look at what Origin was doing next.

Along with a detailed and illustrated manual, Origin included a cloth or paper map with every Ultima game at no extra cost. The same went for several of their other games, like the Claw Marks booklet for Wing Commander. All of this was considered the relative norm in an industry that didn’t yet compromise on extras with “collector’s editions”.

Looking at Origin Systems prior to Ultima Online, it was as if they were firmly in charge of leading themselves into the next generation. Magazine ads were splashed with computer graphics, bullet points, and teasing stories on new, cutting-edge adventures. Even when Garriott had sold Origin to Electronic Arts in ’92, the partnership appeared to be an ideal one on the surface: EA’s deep pockets and distribution empire coupled with Origin’s creative energies couldn’t fail. Looking at EA’s catalog from the eighties into the early nineties, it seemed that they were also as interested in trying out new things and pushing the boundaries of gaming with creative titles such as Free Fall Associates’ Archon: The Light and the Dark, Ozark Softscape’s Seven Cities of Gold, and Binary Systems’ Starflight.

EA had already made early inroads into the lucrative console market as well, but their connections and war chests had also provided funding and star power for projects such as Wing Commander 3 which was regarded as the most expensive game ever made...
at the time in ’94. With its use of virtual sets and live actors (including Mark Hamill and Tim Curry), having Biff Tannen on your wing seemed to be reward enough for the kind of financial moxie and corporate discipline that EA jazzed acquisitions with.

But not everything was perfect. *Ultima 8*’s action was a radical departure from the successful formula of *Ultima 7*. Fans criticized it for its lack of polish, the missing detail and storied focus of its predecessor, and the Super Mario-esque platforming. The reason was EA’s aggressive scheduling borne out of their sports-game mentality pushing Garriott and his team to cut corners to make *Ultima 8*’s release date. What I and many other fans saw on their monitors was the result. “When it’s done” wasn’t something that stockholders wanted to hear.

*Ultima Online* was introduced in ’97. After an extremely popular beta session, EA pushed for further development cannibalizing team members who were then working on *Ultima 9*. After *Ultima 8*, fans like myself were looking forward to the next installment returning to what we loved about the series. But again, EA wanted it out in time for Christmas in ’99, and the results spoke for themselves.

*Ultima IX* remains a controversial title today with several citing it as the sole reason for Origin’s demise while others laud its revolutionary concepts for being ahead of its time. The new Britannia rode the rising wave of new graphics accelerators, first-person shooters, and the 3D craze of the late nineties. With Bethesda already demonstrating its own panache for vast, open worlds with *Arena* and *Daggerfall*, bringing the legendary series to life in the same way seemed only natural for Origin. When *Ultima 9* turned out the way it did, it becomes easier to understand why many (including myself) regarded its lost potential with almost as much disappointment. It was, as Richard Garriott had put it, “the bastard child of Electronic Arts.”

With *Ultima Online*’s growing — and paying — audience and *Ultima 9*’s tepid splash, EA would essentially turn what was left of Origin to focus exclusively on *Ultima Online*, a process that would come to define EA’s Borg-like impression that gamers had about what the publisher routinely seemed to do with its acquired developers.

By then, many of its designers had already left and now more would be joining them. Richard Garriott, like Interplay’s Brian Fargo, left the house he had built shortly after the release of *Ultima 9* to pursue new interests that lay outside of the series that made him a household name among the CRPG community.

Although his departure and contractually obligated silence shortly after the troubled state of *Ultima 9* had raised eyebrows, his interviews afterward reveal a designer eager to do more outside of Ultima in the online space, a point that EA had apparently disagreed with.

By 2004, Origin simply ceased to be. By then, it was a battered and broken shell of the multi-genre titan that it had been now reduced to the equivalent of a janitor assigned to provide the upkeep needed for *Ultima Online* to exist. Its famous titles would exist only in memory or meet the arcade fate of *Wing Commander* on Xbox Live Arcade.

But that’s not the end of the *Ultima* story, at least in spirit. A successful Kickstarter by Richard Garriott and a new studio for *Shroud of the Avatar* promises to combine both the single-player focus of the original Ultimas coupled with MMO elements from *Ultima Online*. Even though it’s not *Ultima* in name, it’s already promising to carry on the same virtues that that had shaped the Stranger into the Avatar years ago and possibly write the first chapter of a new legend. RC
Out of his Los Angeles apartment in ’83, Jon Van Caneghem’s New World Computing – inspired by *Wizardry*, *Ultima*, and their *Dungeons & Dragons* roots — would spend three years programming and designing his brainchild with all of the features that he wanted to play with. The result was *Might and Magic: Secret of the Inner Sanctum*, and — like the games that inspired him — it would become one of the defining titles to toss alongside tile-based landscapes with first person, open-world exploration both above and below ground when it arrived in ’86 on the Apple II.

*Might and Magic* came in a huge box filled with 5.25” floppies, a thick manual, fold-out map, and even a pad of paper with *Might and Magic* letterhead for notes and mapmaking. When I didn’t have an app to duplicate the floppies for play (which was a requirement I wasn’t aware of) and wrote the address on the back of the box looking for help, I received written letter from Caneghem with sincere apologies along with a batch of fresh copies that I can only guess he labeled himself. That also says a lot about the passion of someone whose living room provided the line for customer service. Caneghem was a one-man marketing and distribution dungeon master.

The success of *Might and Magic* paved the way for what would become one of the longest running computer role-playing game series alongside *Ultima* and *Wizardry*. And they were tough. Although they didn’t penalize the player in the same way as *Wizardry*, the game crafted its challenge with mobs of monsters, riddles, towns, and a deadly wilderness which all provided more than enough ways to die in first-person bliss.

Simply living long enough in the starting town of Sorpigal to earn coin for food, experience points, and retain an ample amount of hit points to make it to the inn to save the game provided a preview for what was to come. And leveling wasn’t automatic: you had to pay for each character’s training to upgrade them.

The *Might and Magic* games were also consummate dungeon crawlers loaded with plenty of random encounters to keep feeding experience to your party. Many monsters could actually be bribed to leave your party alone or the player could opt to surrender (and be stripped of gold and food while being moved to a more dangerous area) and hope for better odds later.

The series also had a hidden sci-fi arc. Although each early title stood alone in the most basic sense, the endings referenced a connected story of revenge later expanding to hint at a great civilization that had once ruled the stars. In later titles, this tie-in would be more explicit as adventurers armed themselves with ray guns and skulked through the ruins of forgotten technology.

*Might and Magic* 4 and 5 (later released together as *Might and Magic: World of Xeen*) overhauled the graphics and gameplay of the previous titles and NWC flexed their creative muscles with the unprecedented feature of allowing both games to be combined into one world. This “World of Xeen” opened up a short quest and a new ending that left no doubt as to its sci-fi premise. *Might and Magic* 5 was like the ultimate add-on.

*Might and Magic* 6 overhauled the graphics engine yet again when it arrived in ’98 and tossed out the grid-based movement of the previous games for free-roaming. The series would also find itself in competition with BioWare’s *Baldur’s Gate* as well as the
growing popularity of new genres, such as first-person shooters and the encroaching console market. Increased production costs had also begun to eat away at NWC’s coffers.

NWC attempted to port a few of its games over to consoles, such as the first three *M& M* games, and like many of its peers, would also diversify into publishing and developing new titles. One of these was the turn-based strategy title *King’s Bounty*, released in 1990. *King’s Bounty* would also set the stage for the other series that NWC would be known for: *Heroes of Might and Magic*. The first game would arrive in ’95, and the series would go on to entertain tactical armchair lords and ladies through five installments with add-ons released for most of them.

It was also in ’96 that The 3DO Company under Trip Hawkins bought NWC, injected cash into the company, and opened doors on what Caneghem had hoped would be *Might and Magic Online*. 3DO already had *Meridian 59* - an early 3D MMORPG - so it did make sense to go with an established series for a new MMO, much like what Blizzard would later do with *Warcraft*. But the partnership was a rocky one. With a new owner came new demands, one of which was to make NWC produce a new *M& M* and *Heroes* game every year.

From 1998 to 2000, *Might and Magic* 6 through 8 hit store shelves, one after another. Although *M& M* 6 was a lot of fun, *M& M* 8 began to show its age through an engine that had remained relatively unchanged since ’98. The days of getting away with recycling the same engine across titles as the Gold Box series did in the late eighties and early nineties under SSI were over as far as the mainstream market — spoiled on the 3D craze for better visuals — was concerned.

Meanwhile, in a attempt to reach new audiences, many action-oriented spin-offs of the series were made, such as *Warriors of Might and Magic*, *Crusaders of M&M* and even a online multiplayer FPS game called *Legends of M&M*. The results however, were all mediocre at best.

Other troubles had also plagued NWC’s legendary series. Almost paralleling what had happened with Origin’s *Ultima 9*, an unrealistic schedule and a rush to release doomed *Might and Magic 9*. The game received a critical drubbing both in the press and by fans who tried to practically play this broken game.

In an interview with *M& M* fansite Celestial Heavens, Lead Designer Tim Lang gave a no-holds-barred view on what went wrong. Part of the blame seems to have fallen on Caneghem’s shoulders, though how much 3DO’s own meandering direction had a hand in the product’s final quality is still up for debate. Regardless, it would be the final game in the series under NWC’s — and Caneghem’s — name.

NWC quietly faded along with The 3DO Company in 2003. 3DO declared Chapter 11 that year and then moved into liquidation. The series that had celebrated classic dungeon crawling and loot collecting with its vast worlds and endless mobs had ended on a bug-filled note. But it wasn’t over.

Ubisoft snagged the Might and Magic name and resurrected it with the action-oriented *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* in ’06 (developed by the Arkane Studios, the makers of *Arx Fatalis*). Featuring class-based and leveled multiplayer along with a decent single-player experience, it was a solid game, though a far cry from the turn-based CRPGs of its namesake. *Might and Magic: Clash of Heroes* then came out in ’09 for the DS, PS3, and the Xbox 360 as a surprisingly decent mix of puzzles and RPG gameplay.

But it would be Limbic Entertainment that would re-introduce the series in 2014 with *Might and Magic X*, a CRPG hearkening back to the grid-based movement and 90° turns the classic series grew up on from the 80s and early 90s, much like how Almost Human’s *Legend of Grimrock* had also celebrated in 2012.

Could it herald a new awakening for the series? At the time of this article, it’s probably too early to say, but even so, one thing’s continues to be certain — *Might and Magic* lives. RC
Interplay
1983 - Present

Interplay once dominated computer role-playing games in the late eighties alongside its peers. Although they would later be known as a publishing powerhouse responsible for Black Isle's Fallout series and Planescape: Torment in the late nineties (along with the revolutionary Descent franchise), it started with an idea, a game, and a programmer who wanted to kill lots of monsters.

Brian Fargo wasn't the stereotypical coder living in his parent's garage or a student at a place like Caltech. He was a sprinter on a track scholarship when he walked out of school to work on his first game: Demon's Forge. Like Richard Garriott (Origin) and Jon Van Caneghem (New World Computing), his house was literally his office as he managed marketing and sales from his bedroom.

The company was sold in '82 which pocketed for the then-19-year-old Fargo a cool $5,000. Interplay wasn't around yet, but a company called the Boone Corporation had folded some time afterward and left quite a few gifted programmers without jobs. Several of its laid-off employees — including Rebecca Heine - then banded together with Fargo to help found Interplay, with a little boost from a generous $60,000 windfall from a new client, but not to make games.

Interplay's first contract was from World Book Encyclopedia to do a series of small titles. That didn't stop a young Activision from stepping in later and handing Interplay a contract for three adventure games to the tune of $100,000. Despite creating Mind Shadow under contract, Interplay's indie position left the door open for Electronic Arts to publish one of the genre's most memorable CRPGs with The Bard's Tale in '85.

Although the series wasn't known for having interactive NPCs and consisted of combat-heavy dungeon crawlers, each game relied more on a player's imagination to fill in the blanks when it came to story and was far more forgiving than Wizardry or Might and Magic were. Its vast dungeons were still filled with devious traps, darkness shrouded halls, spinning floors, and mobs of monsters proved enough reasons to religiously back-up character disks.

In '88, Interplay kicked elves, dwarves, and orcs to the radioactive curb in Wasteland, a post-apocalyptic CRPG that shied away from swords and sorcery and replaced them with automatic weapons and a vast, player-customized skillset. Its minimalist looks and top-down tiled approach went against The Bard's Tale's first-person perspective and its gameplay systems more than made up for that, providing ideas that would later be passed down to titles such as Fallout. Dragon Wars went back to high fantasy in '89 with a hybrid of features seen in both Wasteland and The Bard's Tale while casting dragons as the equivalent of nuclear weapons.

Interplay had also adapted William Gibson's Neuromancer as a hybrid adventure/RPG bringing...
the cyberpunk classic to PCs. Software and cyber-decks replaced swords and armor and character interactions were handled as an adventure game in ‘the real world.”

Although the once-revolutionary *Stonekeep* had been released in ’95 on PCs to some fanfare and critical acclaim complete with a hardcover novelette, its grid-based gameplay seemed outdated when compared to the free-roaming worlds of the *Ultima Underworld* series and Bethesda’s *The Elder Scrolls: Arena*. Game stopping bugs on release required players to dial into Interplay’s BBS (Bulletin Board System) if they wanted to finish the game. After four years of development and several million dollars, it wasn’t quite the blockbuster that everyone expected it to be.

Consoles were also busy making their own marks with Japanese RPGs such as *Earthbound* and *Chrono Trigger* on the SNES in ’95, and those proved to be more popular than CRPG ports.

Strong titles such as *Descent* and their Star Trek-based adventure games had also shifted Interplay’s focus away from CRPGs, especially in the wake of flubs such as *Descent to Undermountain*, which attempted to adapt *Descent*’s engine into a CRPG setting with grim results. I remember killing a lich — an undead über sorcerer that no eighth- or ninth-level character should ever solo — simply because it was stuck behind an object and couldn’t get to me.

Even though Interplay had critical successes with several of its titles, the company continued to bleed. Since ’95, Interplay reported a stream of losses and then in ’98, Fargo decided to take the company public to drum up funding. Despite a strong showing in the early months of its (reduced) IPO following June, the company’s stock went into a tailspin in October that same year.

And then in ’99 walked Titus Interactive with deep pockets buying enough of Interplay’s stock to appoint Titus founders Herve and Eric Caen as leading board members. But who were these guys? Answers vary on who you ask. Some simply regard them as investors while others look at them as the sole reasons for why Interplay ultimately imploded.

Titus Interactive was a powerhouse when they focused on PC games in Europe, but among the console crowd, I remember them for their largely awful library. Still, someone must have liked them. They had enough cash to gain a small (and then a controlling) interest in Interplay a few years later in 2001.

Yet even it couldn’t stanch the red ink as losses and debt continued to mount. Among the casualties were those at Black Isle Studios, whose work included *Planescape: Torment*, the *Icewind Dale* series, *Fallout 2* as well as the canceled prototypes of *Fallout 3* (code-named Van Buren) and *Baldur’s Gate III: The Black Hound*. Their developers landed elsewhere at such places as Troika and Obsidian Entertainment.

In 2002, Brian Fargo would leave the company he had founded. But unlike a few that simply disappeared into history, Interplay’s “end” was riddled with financial mishaps following Fargo’s departure. That same year, their stock was delisted from NASDAQ and a number of embarrassing incidents including failing to pay its employees for several weeks and eventually being evicted from its own property in 2004 battered the company further.

Parent company Titus Interactive declared bankruptcy (and was later liquidated) in 2005 and Interplay limped back to the web with a new look in the same year. Yet the company that had ruled the late eighties into the late nineties as a shining CRPG paladin had long left the dungeon.

As for Fargo, he would eventually go on to found a new company, inXile Entertainment, where in 2004, they released a new *Bard’s Tale* as an action RPG. Today, he’s still building dungeons along with his crew at inXile, diving into one based on *Numenera* by tabletop guru Monty Cook, and another that longtime fans have been waiting nearly a quarter of a century for as a proper sequel – *Wasteland 2* – thanks to wildly successful Kickstarters. From the *Demon’s Forge* in ’81 to today, Fargo still has a lot of stories to share and with the way things are going, there are going to be a lot of dungeons to crawl through before anyone hears the last note. *RC*
In its eighteen year history, Westwood took us to Mars, swept us up into the skies on the backs of dragons, crept through sewers, caverns, then ancient cities in search of adventure, and later shaped the face of strategy. And it all started with a print request between two friends in 1985.

Brett Sperry was working as a programmer after studying architecture and psychology in college. He also did freelance work on the side and was about to cap a deal with gaming giant, Epyx, for a game he was writing called *Dragonfire*. The problem was that even though he finally had his own computer, he didn't have a printer so he headed over to Louis Castle's place to borrow his. The two knew each other from group get-togethers at Las Vegas' only Apple store at the time: Century 23.

At Castle's home, Sperry was shown a demo Castle created called *Bloodstonem*, based on 1983's arcade hit, *Dragon's Lair*, imagining a camera over Dirk the Daring's shoulder as he ran down a 3D corridor. That was when Sperry found a partner for the wild idea he had in building their own game company.

Louis Castle's parents' 400 square foot garage in 1985 became their first studio and they called themselves Brelous Software, a portmanteau of Brett and Louis before changing it (admittedly for the better) to Westwood Associates. “Westwood” was the name of Westwood, California, that both appreciated as a great hang out. “Associates” came about from the belief that anyone working for them was more than an employee sharing their passion for games.

Their first commercial contract was from Epyx who paid them $18,000 to put together *The Temple of Apshai Trilogy*, a bundle of all three chapters of the CRPG dungeon crawler. The trilogy also set the tone for Westwood Associates' work. Ports would be redesigned and enhanced in as many ways as possible. Sperry's imagination jumped at the possibilities and Castle's artistic skills would be put to the test becoming the “HD remakes” of their day and, eventually, making their games some of the best looking titles in the market.

With more contracts from Epyx came the cash for upgrades, equipment and new hires like Barry Green and Mike Legg (both from Century 23). Diversifying, they also began working with SSI in 1986. In 1987, Castle, inspired by Game Designers' Workshop's tabletop space RPG, *Traveller*, created the turn-based CRPG, *Mars Saga*. It was Westwood's first original game produced and was released through Electronic Arts for the C64. It would later become another enhanced port, this time published by Infocom, renamed *Mines of Titan* for DOS and the Apple II in 1989.

Sperry continued to work on ports at the time and grew fascinated with CRPGs like *Ultima III* and *Wizardry III*, eventually leading to *Questron II* for Epyx in 1988. The same year, *BattleTech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception* based on FASA's *BattleTech* tabletop series arrived as a sci-fi RPG. Westwood also adapted George Alec Effinger's *When Gravity Fails* as a cyberpunk RPG titled *Circuit's Edge*, releasing it in 1990. But they hadn't lost their taste for swords and sorcery.

The year 1990 would continue to be a busy one for Westwood. SSI's licensing with TSR had opened a floodgate and Westwood Associates dipped their collective feet into the raging torrent with *Dragon-Srike*, a flight combat sim with dragons and based on...
TSR’s *Dragonlance* franchise. Westwood would then turn their eyes to the *Forgotten Realms*’ first plunging players into the sewers beneath Waterdeep with *Eye of the Beholder* in the same year and then a mysterious forest and temple with *Eye of the Beholder II: The Legend of Darkmoon* in 1991.

In 1988, there was a text-based MUD called *Kyrandia* that Westwood eventually bought the rights to later using it as a basis for a point ’n click demo doing away with text parsers. They shopped it to Sierra, who then showed them *King’s Quest V*, which also did the same thing and would come out in 1990. As Sperry recounted, “It was a huge letdown moment.” But Sierra, and later, Virgin Interactive, had also shown an interest in buying the company.

As Louis Castle recalled, they were “betting our home mortgages on each and every title” putting more of their money into making their games than the publishers would. Being a part of Sierra or Virgin could change that. Sierra had a lot of money to throw around but they also wanted a lot of control in exchange. Virgin’s bid, on the other hand, wasn’t quite as large but they promised to be hands-off.

Eventually, Westwood opted to go with Virgin in 1992 becoming Westwood Studios and releasing the first game of the *Legend of Kyrandia* trilogy under the Virgin Games label. It would also be the year that they would release the iconic RTS, Westwood’s *Dune II*.

In 1993, *Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos* expanded the lessons learned from their work with *Eye of the Beholder* for SSI kicking off a trilogy of CRPGs. Another pivotal year, 1995, shook the RTS landscape when Westwood’s *Command & Conquer* made its debut. In 1997, Westwood released an adaptation of the iconic Blade Runner with a new storyline and raising the visual bar.

*Command & Conquer* became a runaway hit, attracting EA, who bought Westwood from Virgin for a cool $122.5 million in 1998. They also absorbed a Virgin Interactive studio in Irvine, California, which became Westwood Pacific (and later, EA Pacific). On the following years Westwood focused on the *Command & Conquer* series while testing the waters with *Command & Conquer: Renegade* in 2002 taking the RTS into an FPS spinoff. They would even build their own MMORPG, *Earth & Beyond*, which released in the same year and be the last game from the fabled studio.

To many, EA’s involvement with Westwood’s eventual closure in 2003 only reinforced its reputation as a coldly calculating corporate machine. As deserved as it is in several ways, the relative retail failures of both *C&C: Renegade* and the expensive *Earth & Beyond* were hard to overlook. But EA actually tried working with Westwood’s Las Vegas HQ to keep them open, eyeing Summerlin in Las Vegas as a potential home. Unfortunately, things didn’t pan out locally with the Nevada land authorities so EA focused on California instead. As Castle recalled, “We blew it, as a state.”

Many employees, instead going west to EA’s Los Angeles campus, decided to stay behind. As for Westwood Pacific, it would be absorbed into EA Los Angeles. Westwood veterans, such as Mike Legg, would later form Petroglyph Games in 2003. Brett Sperry later founded his own art gallery in Las Vegas and start up mobile-focused Jet Set Games. Louis Castle continued on with EA for a time, before moving on briefly to work at other companies – such as Zynga, where he was a VP – before settling in as CSO at SHFL Entertainment.

Westwood is gone, but the rich history and vast library it left behind spans many of PC gaming’s greatest moments. While it’s easy to overlook its CRPG roots because of the giant shadow cast by its decisive role as an RTS powerhouse, they were no less illuminated by the creative impetus of its team of associates. Its tale continue to inspire others today to embark on
FTL Games
1982 - 1996

FTL Games doesn’t have the kind of catalog that any of the other developers on this list do, but their first computer role-playing game would leave an undeniable mark. I didn’t actually get to play this one until very recently (thanks only to the work of fans), but it’s easy to see how it had predated efforts made by titles, such as Westwood’s *Eye of the Beholder*, to bring a living, real-time dungeon to life. Interplay’s *Stonekeep* — years later — may have had cutting-edge graphics and live video, but the basic gameplay was already seen in something as early as FTL’s *Dungeon Master*.

*Dungeon Master* was released in ’87 and quickly took the CRPG community by surprise. Not only did it boast strong visuals for the time, it was also a real-time dungeon crawler (although, whether it was truly the first is debatable when compared to the more obscure *Dungeons of Daggorath* in ’82 or *Alternate Reality: The City from Datasoft* in ’85). Being real-time meant that the game didn’t wait for the player such as when they confronted a monster, which taught the lesson of click or be killed.

With most of the leading CRPGs of the time being turn-based affairs, *Dungeon Master*’s real-time experience was a bold and refreshing change of pace (literally). It also boasted a surprisingly realistic skill system. Instead of abilities improving on a level-by-level basis, there were no levels. Characters grew more experienced in the use of their abilities by simply using them — something that would be echoed years later by CRPGs such as the *Elder Scrolls* series.

It also boasted strong writing as a part of its storied backdrop (at least within its manual) thanks to novelist Nancy Holder (wife of Wayne Holder, FTL’s producer). Even Dragonlance author and co-creator Tracy Hickman, who had also been a tester for the game, would go on to write the hint book.

In the same way that SSI had reused the technology developed for their Gold Box games, FTL had the same hope for *Dungeon Master*’s and the stream of potential new titles that could be based on its engine. It would also be a model emulated later by the FPS market with licensed engines fueling their own excitement from *Doom* to *Unreal*. An expansion pack, *Chaos Strikes Back*, would improve on the gameplay in ’89 with less linear levels within its dungeon with an editor for players interested in crafting their own character portraits.

And then — just as suddenly as *Dungeon Master*’s design triumphs and critical success — the industry passed FTL by. The worlds to be crafted atop the engine never materialized.

Although FTL would go on to create a new *Dungeon Master* for the PC-Engine (aka Turbografx-16) console in ’92 and a real sequel (*Dungeon Master 2: Skullkeep*) in ’93, they were never able to recapture the kind of magic that the first game had thrilled audiences with. *Skullkeep* had also come out in Japan first with the bizarre decision of Interplay publishing it in the West in ’95. By then, it was clear that its time was well past.

FTL ceased operations as a company in ’96, though, its name (and copyright) would live on with a licensed *Dungeon Master Nexus* for the Sega Saturn in Japan in ’98. As for how much FTL or its former members contributed to the design of the final product, that’s up for debate if the list of credits are anything to go by. Although they are credited with the design of the game, it’s also clear that a few of those involved had also worked on porting the first *Dungeon Master* to the SNES in Japan under JVC and Victor Interactive Software.

With only one game, FTL had managed to inspire dungeon masters years later such as those working on * Ultima Underworld*. Although the company and the game it had created would not be as well remembered as those that would follow, a quiet nod to what its gameplay had inspired in a generation of developers can be found in nearly every real-time dungeon today. **RC**
To many, Looking Glass Studios is a legend, the house where thieves helped ground the stealth genre and where the limits of grid-based CRPGs had slipped free. Like others in the industry trying to stick their armored foot in the portcullis, Looking Glass started with a good idea.

Space Rogue for Origin had been released in 1989 and Paul Neurath, having worked on it, felt that it had just scratched the surface of what he was looking for in an RPG. He liked Wizardry, yet the abstract approach it had taken with its first-person dungeons weren't what he was looking for. Neurath wanted the experience to be far more immersive, something akin to FTL's Dungeon Master in '87, but with the freedom of a flight sim.

Things slowly came together in the next few years. In the spring of 1990, Neurath formed Blue Sky Productions and hired Doug Church, who was studying at MIT, and Doug Wike from Origin as the artist. To get the texture mapping done, he tapped Chris Green from Lerner Research, who shared a bit of code with Blue Sky while working on their own projects.

Neurath's idea was for a free-roaming dungeon sim and eventually sold the idea to Origin who decided to fit it into the Ultima series. After two years of development, crunching together their own technology and carving out a massive dungeon at the heart of a volcano, Blue Sky's Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss finally hit shelves in '92 becoming a critically acclaimed hit with retail success coming in a bit later as word of mouth spread on just how different it was from your typical first-person 3D game. Shortly afterward, both Blue Sky and Lerner Research merged into Looking Glass Studios.

Ultima Underworld would be a sign of things to come. A sequel arrived in '93, and in '94 System Shock traded dungeons and swords for sci-fi space stations, cyberspace, mutants, and lasers. Because id's Doom had come out a few months before in the previous year, some would dub it the “thinking man’s Doom”.

Looking Glass also proved it could do more. They released a flight sim in '95 called Flight Unlimited, which was followed by a sequel in '97. In '98, Thief: The Dark Project's medieval world festooned with steampunk bits and bobs defied the FPS stereotype once again in becoming an iconic milestone for stealth. A sequel to System Shock followed in '99, again to critical acclaim, and expanding on the concepts from the first game. Thief would also get a sequel in 2000, a few months before the end came.

By then, Looking Glass’ days were numbered. Along with its critically acclaimed and financially lucrative hits, a few others didn’t pan out as well such as Terra Nova and British Open Championship Golf (the latter ended their brief self-publishing efforts) despite positive words from the press. Mounting losses from canceled projects and a general tightening of belts from potential suitors eventually sealed their fate. Looking Glass had no choice but to shutter its doors in the same year Thief II was released.

Looking Glass Studios shook up the industry with revolutionary ideas embracing cutting edge tech to deliver titles no one else had ever seen. The studio is gone and many of its key members have since moved on to other places within the industry or have left it entirely, but no one can deny that their work has also inspired players and designers since then to continue looking beyond the grid. RC
Founded in 1996 and dedicated to John Romero’s credo of “Design is law,” Ion Storm followed the footsteps of David Crane’s Activision in the early 80’s, putting its designers front-and-center. It was where Romero, the former co-founder of id Software, would start over with Tom Hall, Todd Porter, and Jerry O’Flaherty, setting up shop atop Dallas’ Chase Tower. And like their new digs, they also wanted their games to be bigger and better than anyone else’s.

Ion Storm Austin’s origins were much different, having started out briefly as Looking Glass Austin – where Warren Spector and his team were based. Looking Glass, however, overstretched as it was, decided to close the Austin office roughly a year after it opened. But the team hung together long enough for Ion Storm’s Romero and Wilson to come calling, convincing Spector not to sign a deal with EA for a Command & Conquer RPG and bringing Looking Glass’ orphans onboard in 1997. As a new branch, they would also be left entirely alone to do what they did best – make games.

It was also a heady time in tech – the Internet was exploding, dot coms were hot commodities, and AOL CDs were virally spreading from mailbox to mailbox. Ion Storm rode 3D accelerated excitement on a wave of wild anticipation from those following the careers of its founders, especially a “rock star” like Romero – co-creator of the legendary Doom. Big things were expected. Hype was king. Living up to their own press, on the other hand, proved a lot harder.

Ion Storm’s signed a publishing deal with Eidos, but their very first product, the RTS game Dominion: Storm Over Gift 3, had a troubled development history almost from the start. When it finally arrived in 1998, it was a title that brought little to a savagely competitive arena where Age of Empires, Command & Conquer, Warcraft II and Starcraft held court. Romero’s oft delayed – and much hyped – Daikatana would finally arrive in 2000 to a brutal wave of criticism from both the press and the public.

Tom Hall’s CRPG project, Anachronox, managed to eke past the turmoil relatively unscathed as a Western take on JRPGs, often lauded for its fantastic sci-fi world, moreso than its mechanics holding up as a decent title overall. With as much left on the cutting room floor (such as a multiplayer mode) from Eidos’ pressure to finish and release another chronically late title, Anachronox could have had a sequel. However, Eidos had other plans, closing the Ion Storm Dallas office a few months after Anachronox shipped in 2001.

Separated from the internal gyrations that had rocked Dallas, Ion Storm Austin’s budget had finally allowed Warren Spector to create his long dreamed project: the dystopian future and conspiracy-laden world of Deus Ex, released in 2000 to universal acclaim. The sequel, 2003’s Deus Ex: Invisible War, was less well-received, and Spector and his group would close out Ion Storm’s history revisiting the classic world of Thief, with 2004’s Thief: Deadly Shadows. Spector and many senior developers, such as Harvey Smith, eventually left to pursue new interests in the same year and Eidos quietly closed the doors later in 2005.

To many, Ion Storm Dallas’ reckless development environment and excesses had already set what Masters of Doom’s David Kushner called “Romero’s Willy Wonka factory” on its path to ruin. Yet to others, Ion Storm as a whole was a brave vision where two CRPGs would however briefly – pull back the scandal colored curtains on Romero’s dream for a developer’s Camelot where design was not only law, but would remain king.

“You know, it sounds like such a good idea to let the inmates run the insane asylums, and it really isn’t. [...]We all felt like we were talented, creative guys with big ideas, and if the big bad publishers would just get out of the way we can do amazing things. It just doesn’t work out that way. Real creativity happens within constraints, not without constraints.”

- Warren Spector

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Masters of Doom, by David Kushner, is a great book for those seeking more information on John Romero and Ion Storm.

The infamous Daikatana magazine ad, perhaps the most remembered part of the game.

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Many of the industry’s biggest names, from Peter Molyneux to Richard Garriott, have gone back to being indies sharing a passion for the games they made as smaller, more intimate groups focused on building their dream titles. It’s also one of the reasons why Troika Games was founded in 1998.

That year, Fallout 2 was still in production. Tim Cain, Leonard Boyarsky, and Jason Anderson, the triumvirate of designers instrumental in building Wasteland’s spiritual successor, Fallout, had been working on the sequel since 1997.

The decision for them to leave wasn’t easy. As Tim Cain recounts in Morgan Ramsay’s book, Gamers at Work, they had gotten a taste of how much bureaucracy they had to deal with in Fallout’s development citing interference with design and marketing from people that had little to no idea on what the game was. They survived the experience, though had misgivings about going through it again with the sequel.

They did their best to make things work on Fallout 2 but ultimately chose to strike off on their own, forming Troika Games to get back to basics. According to the FAQ from Troika’s archived homepage, the name came from their days on Fallout when they were referred to as “The Troika” by their boss, a Russian word that roughly translates to “a group of three”.

Troika’s first game was a yearned-for return to fantasy in 2001 with a steampunk twist on a Victorian-styled world. Arcanum was filled with complex crunch, packaged in a beautifully illustrated “big box” published by Sierra with a suitably thick manual written in-universe to describe much of the world, its races, and its characters. If it wanted to double as a PnP derivative, it was only few steps away from the table.

Their second game, released in 2003, was based on the classic Dungeons & Dragons tabletop module, The Temple of Elemental Evil, and the 3.5 ruleset was added in almost literally at the last minute thanks to having been published during production. In 2004, Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines was released as what many regard as the best integration of White Wolf’s famous Vampire RPG into video game format with a storyline rife with choices and consequences, deep development system for the character (try playing as a Malkavian for a truly unique experience), and a slice of open-world exploration and questing.

As creative as the games were, things were much different on the technical level, giving the studio a reputation for buggy releases. Issues during development and the failure to find additional funding for future games eventually led to Troika’s closure in 2005 eventually sending its veteran designers to places such as Blizzard (Diablo III), Obsidian Entertainment (Pillars of Eternity), and inXile (Wasteland 2).

But Troika’s CRPGs live on and not simply as another name amidst so many others on services like Steam and Good Old Games. Long after official support ended, tech-savvy fans smoothed away most of the bugs with Arcanum and Temple of Elemental Evil with their own patches. As of this writing, Bloodlines continues to receive occasional community patches, doing things such as restoring unfinished content to converting the game into a wholly new campaign replete with revamped clans.

Troika went small to make some of the best CRPGs, that didn’t shy away from the kind of crunch hardcore players reveled in. Judging from how they’re regarded at places such as the RPG Codex, Good Old Games and forums elsewhere, the efforts of their biggest supporters continue speaking volumes on how important they still are today. And that’s the kind of legacy any studio can be proud of having. RC

Troika Games
1998 - 2005
Everyone loves lists, any decent book should reference its sources and there's much more gaming knowledge out there than this book can possibly ever hope to contain.

This section aims to address all these points; first providing various CRPG recommendation lists from different websites and profiles, then a series of works, websites and sources that were vital to the creation of this book, closing with the references of every developer quote presented here, as well as an index / cover gallery of all reviewed games.
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 below, with a few ties. Available here - http://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
23. 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
34. Ultima VII: The Black Gate
35. The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall
36. Pool of Radiance
37. Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor
38. Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar
39. Ultima VII Part Two: Serpent Isle
40. Icewind Dale II
41. The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings
42. Wasteland
43. Quest For Glory IV: Shadows of Darkness
44. Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny
45. Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra
46. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
47. Anachronox
48. Arx Fatalis
49. Geneforge
50. Pools of Darkness
51. Albion
52. Drakensang: River of Time
53. Risen
54. King of Dragon Pass
55. Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds
56. Deus Ex: Human Revolution
57. Divine Divinity
58. Mount & Blade: Warband
59. Dungeon Master
60. Mass Effect
61. ADOM - Ancient Domains of Mystery
62. Neverwinter Nights 2
63. System Shock
64. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord
65. Wizardry IV: The Return of Werdna
66. Champions of Krynn
67. Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos
68. Star Control II
69. Dark Heart of Uukrul
70. Heroine’s Quest: The Herald of Ragnarok
71. Divinity 2: The Dragon Knight Saga
72. 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 and organized by RPS’s staff.

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. Zanzgang
19. Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines
20. NEO Scavenger
21. Deus Ex: Human Revolution
22. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
23. Anachronox
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 December 19, 2015

PC Gamer's list values fun over historical relevance, focusing on games that are still fun to play.

1. Planescape: Torment
2. Baldur's Gate 2
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. Fallout: New Vegas
14. Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura
15. Diablo III: Reaper of Souls
16. Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines
17. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II
18. Divinity: Original Sin
19. Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss
20. Pillars of Eternity
21. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
22. Gothic 2
23. Neverwinter Nights 2
24. Undertale
25. Arx Fatalis
26. Torchlight 2
27. Legend of Grimrock 2
28. Mount & Blade: Warband
29. Anachronox
30. Dungeons of Dredmor
31. South Park: The Stick of Truth
XP4T’s Best RPGs of the 1980s
From February 5, 2015

In this poll, over 1,000 visitors voted on 5 games from a list of great RPGs from the 1980’s.

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 5 games from a list, this time composed of RPGs from the 90’s.

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 February 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: http://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 (TOME)
22. Invisible, Inc.
23. Pillars of Eternity
24. Wasteland 2
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 favored over their often-improved sequels.

dnd (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 the Hero? (1989)
Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss (1992)
Ultima VII: The Black Gate (1992)
The Elder Scrolls I: Arena (1994)
Diablo (1996)
Final Fantasy VII (1997)
Fallout (1997)
Baldur’s Gate (1998)

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)
World of Warcraft (2004)
Mass Effect (2007)
Fallout 3 (2008)
Dragon Age: Origins (2009)
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011)
Dark Souls (2011)
Divinity: Original Sin (2014)

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
Chinese Paladin
D&D: The Rise of Warduke (OpenBOR fan game)
Dark Heart of Uukrul
Dungeons of Daggorath
E.Y.E.: Divine Cybermancy
FOnline (fan-made MMORPG of Fallout 1 & 2)
Freedom Force
Fugitive series (Severance: Blade of Darkness mod)
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)
Return of Heracles
Sengoku Rance
Star Control II
Tales of Maj’Eyal
The Aielund Saga (Neverwinter Nights module)
The Maimed God Saga (Neverwinter Nights 2 mod)
Underrail
Way of the Samurai 4
Wizards & Warriors
X-Piratez (OpenXcom mod)
ZanZarah: The Hidden Portal
v1.13 (Jagged Alliance 2 mod)
Further Reading

The goal of this book was always that of a complete CRPG guide, that would to touch 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:


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 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.


The inspiration to the book you’re currently reading, but with a different focus. Here Barton goes for a more academical approach, dividing and examining CRPG history in 7 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 much interesting content to be found here, especially on 80’s titles.

**Donovan, Tristan (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 Garriot 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.

**J. Tresca, Michael (2011) The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games**

A short, 200-page journey through Wargames, tabletop RPGs, play-by-mail and browser-based games, CYOA books, MUDs, CRPGs, MMORPGs and even live-action role-playing. Tresca talks about their evolution, the most important games and his personal experience with them. Not the most in depth or well-researched book out there, but still a good overview of role-playing.

**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 80’s and early 90’s PC titles. There are great sections on Cinemaware, SSI, *Ultima* and *Might and Magic*, and the entire book is filled with rare photos, concept arts, box covers and screenshots that will bring a tear to the eye of nostalgic gamers.
Kent, Steven L. (2001) The Ultimate History of Video Games

If you want to learn about the early gaming history, from Pong to the late 90's, 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.


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 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 rise of CRPGs. It's an incredibly dense, but rewarding read.


*Heroic Worlds* is a massive catalog with virtually all Pen-and-Paper RPG systems and scenarios published from 1974 until 1990, complete with articles by top game designers. Definitely a must-have on PnP RPGs, at least for those interested in its roots and early years, since sadly no further editions of the book were ever made.


Written like a script for a documentary, the book tells the history of selected games together with the life 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.


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.

Pen-and-Paper RPGs

Go to the roots, read the *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*. But don't stop there. Too many games today limit themselves to Tolkien and DéD, but the world of RPGs is vast, and there is much more to be seen than elven wizards rolling d20s to cast fireballs. See the worlds and mechanics of *GURPS*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Traveller*, *Burning Wheel*, *Toon*, *Paranoia*, *RuneQuest*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Shadowrun*, *The Dark Eye*, *Numenera*, *Gamma World*, *Legend of the Five Rings*, *Ars Magika*, *Twilight: 2000*, *Warhammer* and many more.

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 recent 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 at the website. Reading them like a travel back in time, and it's fun to see all the ads and reviews games had at release.

Emu Paradise - www.emuparadise.me

One of the largest and most reliable emulation websites around, hosts emulators and ROMs to all kind of computers and consoles, as well as game guides, music, old magazines and even gaming-related TV Shows.

Gamasutra - www.gamasutra.com

A website oriented towards game developers, it hosts articles written by upcoming indies and industry veterans alike. But its highlight are the dozens of post-morten articles, offering a great behind the scenes look on 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 classical 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 their Wizardy, Might & Magic and Ultima articles.

Internet Archive - https://archive.org

One of the most important websites on the internet, not only it allows 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 date, 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 2000's.
**Nexus Mods** - [www.nexusmods.com](http://www.nexusmods.com)

A popular website featuring thousands of mods for modern games, such as *The Witcher*, *Mount & Blade*, *Dark Souls*, *Dragon Age*, *Fallout*, *Mass Effect* and *Legend of Grimrock*. The website has an agile interface and very useful sorting options, plus offers an open-source mod manager to help you install and organize your mods.

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**PC Gaming Wiki** - [http://pcgamingwiki.com](http://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 & 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.

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**Replacement Docs** - [www.replacementdocs.com](http://www.replacementdocs.com)

Offers scanned versions of manuals, quirk-reference sheets, maps and copy-protection codex of pretty much every game out there. Because remember kids, winners always read the manual.

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**RogueBasin** - [www.roguebasin.com](http://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.

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**RPG Codex** - [www.rpgcodex.net](http://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.

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**RPG Watch** - [www.rpgwatch.net](http://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.

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**The CRPG Addict** - [www.crpgaddict.blogspot.com](http://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 game's developers.

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**The Digital Antiquarian** - [www.filfre.net](http://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.

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**Vogons** - [www.vogons.org](http://www.vogons.org)

An extremely useful forum dedicated to help people get their games running correctly, be them 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.
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