

# Dungeons and Desktops

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The History of Computer  
Role-Playing Games

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This book is dedicated to my father-in-law,  
Nick "The Captain" Katselis

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## 1

# An Introduction to Computer Role-Playing

“Beware, foolish mortal, you trespass in *Akalabeth*, world of doom!” These words graced the card insert of Richard Garriott’s first foray into computer role-playing games: *Akalabeth*, “a game of fantasy, cunning, and danger.” Inside the Ziploc bag was the treasure that launched a genre—a 5 ¼” Apple II floppy diskette containing “10 different Hi-Res Monsters combined with perfect perspective and infinite dungeon levels.” For obsessed *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* fans, it sounded like the Holy Grail: unlimited fantasy role-playing at the touch of a button! It truly was the beginning of a “grand adventure,” an adventure that is still going strong today.

Released by Garriott in 1979, *Akalabeth: World of Doom* is one of the earliest known examples of a computer role-playing game (CRPG). Although aesthetically primitive by today’s standards, *Akalabeth* included many of the conventions that are present in even the most modern CRPG, such as the choice of character class, attributes, a store from which to buy weapons and armor, a leveling system based on experience points, strategic combat with increasingly powerful foes, and a large area to explore. Unlike the later *Ultima* games, *Akalabeth* is represented entirely in first-person perspective using wireframe graphics. First published by Garriott himself and then by California Pacific Computer Company, *Akalabeth* sold tens of thousands of copies, providing the young “Lord British” with a comfortable income during his years at college. One must wonder how many of his classmates neglected their literature to battle his monsters in those infinite dungeons; as he himself once remarked to Steven Levy, author of *Hackers*, “I can’t spell, have no grammar techniques, and have read less than twenty-five books in my life.”



*Akalabeth: World of Doom* established many of the genre's conventions.

Today, CRPGs remain one of the most vital genres of computer game. Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006) had sold over three million units by January 2007,<sup>1</sup> and BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights*, originally released in 2002, is still being sold in various compilations today, having also sold over three million copies.<sup>2</sup> BioWare's 2003 licensed title *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* became the fastest-selling game in history for the Xbox game console, also selling millions of copies and winning over a hundred awards.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*, a "massively multiplayer online role-playing game" (MMORPG), boasted over 8.5 million subscribers in March 2007.<sup>4</sup> Although much has changed in the gaming industry since Garriott sold his first copy of *Akalabeth*, much has stayed the same. Gamers are still obsessed with "leveling up" their characters, acquiring the very best arms and armor, and demonstrating their might by vanquishing ever more powerful foes. They are still stomping around on one proving ground or another, enthusiastically searching for the next "grand adventure."

Although there are many genres of computer game, none seems to offer the raw intensity of a well-crafted CRPG, nor the variety of obstacles and

<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.elderscrolls.com/news/press\\_011807.htm](http://www.elderscrolls.com/news/press_011807.htm).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.gamespot.com/news/6168937.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.bioware.com/bioware\\_info/about/](http://www.bioware.com/bioware_info/about/).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.blizzard.com/press/070307.shtml>.

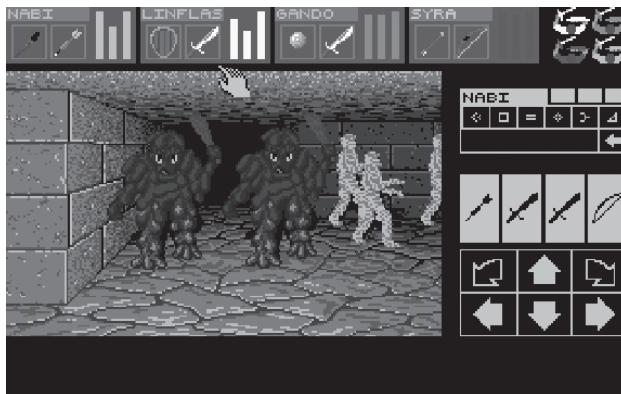
rewards. The best CRPGs require a diverse set of skills, such as tactics, long-term planning, problem solving, teamwork, and resource management. Some CRPGs demand advanced navigation and even cartography skills; otherwise, players will end up hopelessly lost in a maze or dungeon. Others are loaded with puzzles and riddles. A few punish players not only for losing but also for winning in an unethical way. Playing a CRPG is not a simple matter of agility with a joystick or luck with random numbers. Rather, CRPGs teach players how to be good risk-takers and decision-makers, managers and leaders. They teach, again and again, that persistence alone is not the key to success, but rather experimentation and constant adaptation in the face of progress. Many CRPGs also challenge players to create or assemble a whole cast of characters, each with a diverse skill set and specific strengths and weaknesses; success in these games means effective team management.

In any CRPG, struggle, strife, and adversity are inevitable, but they are also what make the game fun to play in the first place. However, CRPGs are more than just frivolous amusement. Indeed, they teach the four basic skills that Robert Reich, author of *The Work of Nations*, identifies as vital to success in the workplace of the future: “abstraction, system thinking, experimentation, and collaboration.” Like James Paul Gee, author of *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, I want to avoid the “video-games = waste of time” model and “say some positive things about them,” because, like Gee, I see so much more going on here than the violence and sex that dominate the media’s coverage of the subject. In short, CRPGs are not only the most fun and addictive type of computer game, but possibly the best learning tool ever designed. They are truly grand adventures with real rewards for dedicated players.

## What Is a Computer Role-Playing Game?

Before we advance much further in our history of the CRPG, we’d do well to sketch out a tentative definition of what we mean by the term. Specifically, we’ll need to differentiate the CRPG from at least three other genres: the adventure (or “interactive fiction”), strategy (both “real-time” and “turn-based”), and multiuser online games (MUDs, MOOs, MMOs, MMORPGs).

The CRPG often blends with other genres, and it can be difficult to isolate precisely those features that exclusively define it. I could offer dozens of examples of games that most certainly span genres and are best de-



FTL's *Dungeon Master*, released in 1987, introduced real-time combat and realistic dungeons.

scribed as hybrids, such as Infocom's *Zork Zero* (1987) and Ion Storm's *Deus Ex* (2000). Even among games commonly recognized as CRPGs, there can be so much variation that one wonders if they belong in the same category. For instance, take FTL's *Dungeon Master* and Masterplay's *Star Saga*, both published in 1987. Whereas *Dungeon Master* is a real-time, colorful three-dimensional game depicted in first-person perspective and based on a fantasy setting, *Star Saga* is a science-fiction CRPG with text-only graphics, booklets, and a printed map upon which players are instructed to move small tokens. Anyone presented with these games would have a difficult time explaining to a novice how they can be examples of the same genre, yet they are based on the same system of character stats, leveling, strategic combat, and exploration that is commonly found in CRPGs.

However, we can certainly identify several common characteristics of CRPGs, and I like to follow the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblances."<sup>5</sup> Except for identical twins or clones, of course, no two blood relatives ever look exactly alike. Indeed, long dormant genes may cause two brothers to look so different that we have a hard time believing they're from the same gene pool. On the other hand, if you get to know the family well enough, you'll soon start to see resemblances among them, such as that "big Barton nose" on a few of them, "Grandpa Joe's ears" on a few others, and so on. Even if a kid doesn't look like his parents, he no doubt shares some characteristics with their parents, or with relatives further back.

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<sup>5</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (ISBN 0-631-23127-7).

We can apply this concept quite nicely to CRPGs, where, again, it's rare to find two games (even in the same series) that follow precisely the same formula. For example, most CRPGs take place in a high fantasy setting usually derived from the fantasy works of J. R. R. Tolkien. However, there are also plenty of science fiction CRPGs, alternate reality games, and hard-to-categorize games like *Planescape: Torment* (1999). Likewise, most CRPGs place emphasis on tactical combat, though games vary greatly in how battle is handled (especially when we compare real-time and turn-based systems). Most CRPGs offer some type of combat support system, whether that be artillery (whether magical or science-based) or medical (clerics or medics). Many CRPGs force the player to deal constantly with "random encounters" with monsters, whereas others place much more emphasis on set battles. Finally, almost all CRPGs offer a "general store" of some sort where characters can buy new or better equipment. Often enough, the only purpose of the "towns" the characters visit is to provide these services. Other common characteristics are puzzles, riddles, and mazes, features more common in adventure games but which also show up quite often in CRPGs.

Less common characteristics include requirements for eating, drinking, and sleeping. Obviously, a real band of adventurers would need to do all these things, even though it's debatable whether this degree of realism really makes a game more fun to play. Is it fun or tedious to frequently backtrack to town, battling randomly encountered monsters along the way, just to stock up on food and drink? A closely related example is lighting. Should the player have to worry about carrying a torch or lantern into a dark dungeon? Making sure that one's party is equipped with a reliable light source is vital in several of the CRPGs we'll be discussing, but in others this requirement is totally ignored. The example does serve to illuminate the great diversity of this genre!

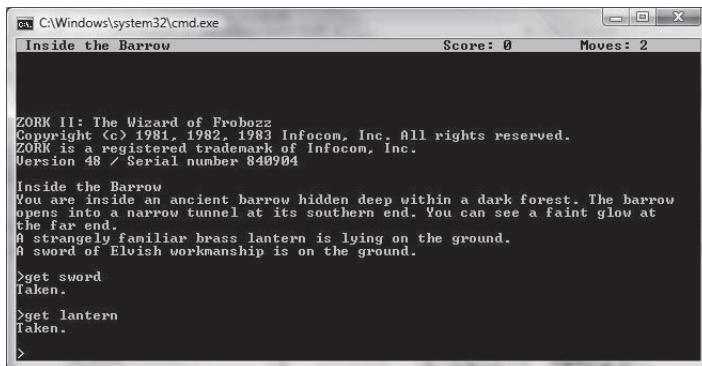
## CRPGs versus Adventure Games

Indeed, the only common factor that stretches across the entire span of CRPGs is the statistical system that determines how characters fare in combat (or whatever other tasks they are asked to perform). Unlike an adventure game, where tasks are always and forever solved by entering the correct commands (or performing the right sequence of tasks), there is always a random element to the outcome in a CRPG. Throwing the bucket of water at the dragon's face in Sierra's adventure game *King's Quest* (1984) will always take care of the dragon, whereas no two battles with the various dragons in BioWare's CRPG *Baldur's Gate II* games are identical. Likewise, although players

of adventure games typically find items, learn secrets, or gain new abilities that empower their characters, there is seldom (if ever) a formalized, numerical system of levels based on experience points.

More generally, adventure games place more emphasis on solving puzzles or resolving conundrums than CRPGs, though we can find isolated examples to the contrary. More important, though, are the cultural differences between the hardcore fans of these genres. To paint with a broad brush, we could say that the adventure gamer prioritizes deductive and qualitative thinking, whereas the CRPG fan values more inductive and quantitative reasoning. The adventure gamer works with definitions and syllogisms; the CRPG fan reckons with formulas and statistics. The only way for a character in a CRPG to advance is by careful inductive reasoning; if a certain strategy results in victory in six out of ten battles, it is better than another strategy that yields only three out of ten victories. This type of inductive reasoning is rare in adventure games but is plentiful in CRPGs, where almost every item has some statistical value (e.g., a longsword may do ten percent less damage than a two-handed sword, but allows the use of a shield).

Of course, gamers, developers, and retailers often use the term “adventure” to describe both CRPGs and traditional adventure games, and it can be hard to tell the difference in games such as Sierra’s *Quest for Glory* CRPG series, which we’ll discuss later. Many adventure games and CRPGs have a great deal in common. Let us compare, for instance, Infocom’s breakthrough adventure game *Zork II: The Wizard of Froboz* and Garriott’s famous *Ultima* (both published in 1981). Both games contain conventional fantasy elements, such as magic and magical creatures (though *Ultima* involves sci-fi elements as well). The plots of both games are concerned with thwarting evil wizards. Both games involve making epic journeys across dangerous realms, gathering items and treasure, and fulfilling quests given to the character at various intervals. However, the way players of *Zork II* and *Ultima* go about reaching these goals is quite different. For example, the player does use a sword to attack a monster (a dragon, to be precise) in *Zork II*, but only as part of a ruse to lead him into a trap. Likewise, a lizard guardian is defeated not by melee combat but rather by giving it candies that put it to sleep. There is no way for the character to get strong enough or deft enough with the sword to kill these monsters outright, and even if that were possible, it would seem to be against the spirit of the game—brains over brawn. Although it seems unfair to assert the opposite about *Ultima*, players of that game must spend a great deal more time engaged in combat to acquire funds for better equipment and experience points. Almost every obstacle is resolved by combat rather than cunning.



Zork and other fantasy adventure games have much in common with CRPGs, but the gameplay is entirely different.

Is this to say that adventure games are simply more cognitively challenging than CRPGs? The common argument one hears in favor of adventure games is that they require more ingenuity, and that CRPGs are often little more than “dungeon crawls,” tedious exercises in dice rolling and number crunching. However, these sorts of arguments typically fail to acknowledge the high degree of tactical thinking that goes into those combats, much less the long-term planning required to complete such games. *Ultima* players must constantly worry about their characters’ hit points, food supply, and gold. They must constantly calculate the odds of a battle, weighing a staggering number of variables. Furthermore, like most CRPGs, *Ultima* isn’t purely about combat, but involves, like *Zork II*, acquiring and using key items, such as the gems needed to operate a time machine or the vacuum suit needed to survive in space.

For the moment, let’s say that the adventure game becomes a true CRPG when it incorporates a numerical leveling system based on some type of experience point system, which is itself based on the outcome of unpredictable events. If that sounds too technical, let me put it this way: a CRPG needs randomness (e.g., dice rolls) and a formal promotional system (e.g., if a player kills ten orcs, he gains 1,000 experience points, which promotes him to a level 2 fighter). Though effects of promotions vary from game to game, they usually at least boost the character’s hit points, or the amount of damage the character can withstand without dying. We’ll talk frequently about how different games handle promotions later on, but what’s important here is that these promotions have a direct effect on the gameplay. We can contrast the

effect to the score or rank in many adventure games, which exists only as an abstract indicator of the player's progress or skill.

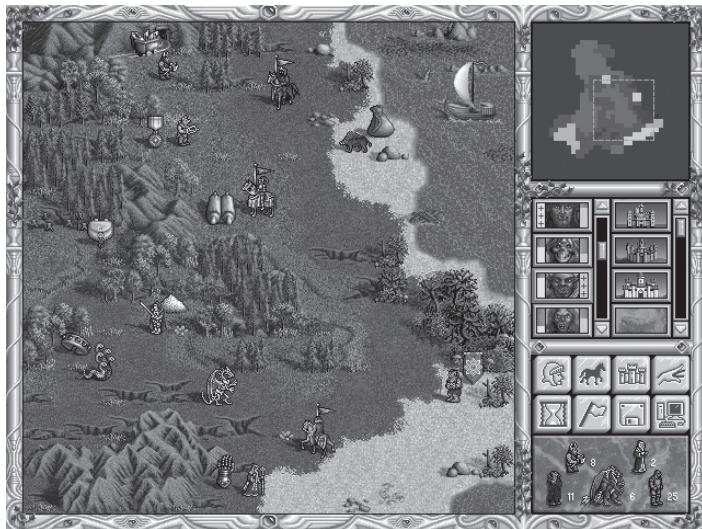
## CRPGs versus Strategy Games

We should take a moment to contrast CRPGs with what are commonly called “strategy games,” such as Blizzard’s real-time strategy (RTS) *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* (1994) or New World Computing’s turn-based strategy *Heroes of Might and Magic: A Strategic Quest* (1995). The reason I chose these two examples is that they have a great deal in common with most CRPGs. Both are loaded with traditional fantasy elements, such as magic and mythical creatures. Both place a great deal of emphasis on tactical (and randomized) combat, exploration, and resource management. However, we see major differences when we actually sit down to play these games. The most immediate is that unlike in CRPGs, the player controls not one or even a party of adventurers, but rather large armies. Likewise, the player gains power by building up larger armies; the soldiers in these armies do not “gain levels” or acquire new abilities. An orc will always have the same skills, abilities, and stats no matter how many battles he survives (we’ll see this same distinction when we compare wargaming and role-playing in the next chapter). However, some real-time and turn-based strategy games do incorporate these elements (including the sequels to these games), so it’s not a mutually exclusive basis for differentiation.

A much sounder basis for contrast is perspective. Put simply, strategy games put players in the role of a general or even a god-like being; they are above the action, controlling things from a discrete distance. According to Chris Taylor, who has designed both strategy games and CRPGs, “Strategy happens when you play on a large theater of war. Strategy happens within a war context, and tactics happen within a battle context.”<sup>6</sup> In a battle between orcs and humans, for instance, players of strategy games are not asked to take on the role of an individual orc or human on the battlefield. CRPGs, on the other hand, almost always ask the player to personally identify with a single character (or in some cases a party of characters). Very seldom is the player put in the position of controlling a large army or of governing cities or towns (a common part of many strategy games). Furthermore, though CRPGs frequently involve large-scale war, the player’s characters are almost always performing smaller tasks or vital quests rather than engaging in massive staged

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<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.shacknews.com/extras/2006/080806\\_chris\\_taylor\\_1.x](http://www.shacknews.com/extras/2006/080806_chris_taylor_1.x).



Strategy games such as *Heroes of Might and Magic* often closely resemble CRPGs, but the player commands armies, not individual adventurers.

battles alongside regular troops. The player's character or characters are always somehow unique and needed for other, more pressing needs that can best be solved alone or in small numbers. What sociologist Gary Alan Fine writes about wargames is entirely true of most strategy games: "one does not act as *oneself* in the game."<sup>7</sup>

Even this criterion is somewhat hazy when dealing with CRPGs that allow players to control a whole party rather than a single adventurer. For instance, the top-down tactical combat screens in SSI's *Wizard's Crown* (1985) look very much like what we might expect to see in a strategy game. Furthermore, the player is free to hire and remove characters from the party at will, so it is quite unclear with *whom*, if anyone, the player is supposed to identify directly (this is true for many but not all party-based games). In practice, many players name one of the characters after themselves; I've lost track of the "Sir Bartons" I've created and left behind over the years. The boundary between strategy games and CRPGs is much more opaque when dealing with party-based rather than single-character games. I might add here that the single-character model seems to have won out.

<sup>7</sup> See Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (ISBN 0-226-24943-3).

CRPGs borrow heavily from both adventure and strategy games, and finding a pure specimen is difficult. One game that is frequently nominated as such is *Rogue* (c. 1980), which derived on the UNIX platform. Although we'll talk more about this game in the next chapter, *Rogue* is an ASCII-based barebones CRPG with quasi-randomized dungeons. Unlike other popular mainframe games of the day (such as *Zork*), no two sessions of *Rogue* will ever be identical. Gameplay consists almost entirely of exploration and tactical combat, with only a simple quest ("descend into the dungeon to retrieve the 'Amulet of Yendor'") to otherwise preoccupy players. The key challenge of *Rogue* is survival; doing so requires carefully managing resources such as food, potions, and scrolls—and, of course, securing the best arms and armor. Despite *Rogue*'s simplicity it has remained a popular game and has enjoyed countless ports and remakes (called "Roguelikes"). It's not difficult to find gamers who insist it is the quintessential CRPG. For these critics, any other elements (i.e., plot, dialog, puzzles, even graphics) do little more than pollute a CRPG and detract from what's really important.

Obviously, if I shared such a view I'd be writing the history of *Rogue* instead of the history of computer role-playing games. However, it is an opinion I understand and respect, and throughout this book I'll be returning to it many times.

## CRPGs versus MUDs and MMORPGs

The final distinction we should make here is between CRPGs and what are commonly referred to as multiuser dungeons (MUDs) and massively multiplayer online games (MMORPGs). Although I'll talk more about these genres later, the important thing to know about them is that they're more focused on social interaction than CRPGs. While they certainly share many of the same elements, such as the all-important leveling system based on experience points, the gameplay is substantially different.

Indeed, someone who approaches a MUD or MMORPG with the same gameplay practiced in most CRPGs is often derided as a "munchkin," a term reserved for those who ignore the social elements in these games and focus only on combat, leveling, and acquiring treasure—in short, "roll-playing" more than "role-playing." The correct way to play these games is to focus on joining and making valued contributions to the community. To this end, most modern MUDs and MMORPGs have guilds and other social structures that exist to help players create and maintain their social networks. Although some guilds emphasize combat, others exist primarily as a way to make friends. The

members of these guilds may not even go on quests at all, but rather spend their time chatting, much as they would with an instant messenger program.

Some MUDs and MMORPGs require (or at least attempt to require) players to act in character, playing along with the theme of the game. For example, if the game has a medieval setting, then players should not talk about their computers or any topics that would be anachronistic in the Middle Ages. In short, these games have more in common with live action role-playing (LARPs) and the events at the Society for Creative Anachronisms (SCA) than with the typical one-player CRPG. That said, the genres are related and at times quite intertwined. I'll discuss them off and on throughout this book but will focus mostly on the single-player, standalone CRPG.

## The Six Ages of Computer Role-Playing Games

As you'll see as we progress through the dawn of the CRPG and into modern times, the genre has evolved quite radically over the years, particularly in terms of graphics and interface. However, the story of the CRPG is also one of paths not taken, of very promising trails that ended suddenly and often inexplicably in dead ends. CRPG development has not taken a straight path, and, as we will see, the most successful games of any given era may not necessarily be the most technologically sophisticated or innovative. Indeed, time and time again, we'll see that good design and attention to detail are often enough to trump advanced graphics or interfaces. We can see this advantage clearly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when turn-based two-dimensional games sat comfortably alongside the new real-time three-dimensional games on the shelves.

Nevertheless, we'll need some way to keep our bearings, and what seems most logical is to proceed more or less chronologically. To that end, I've divided this history into six general sections, or ages. The first of these is the Dark Age, so named because many of these games are lost to history, and comparatively little is known about them save from the recollections of those few privileged enough to play them. The Dark Age begins in 1974, when the first CRPGs were being developed for mainframe computers such as DEC's PDP-10, and ends in 1979 with the publication of the first two CRPGs for personal computers, Garriott's *Akalabeth: World of Doom* and Epyx's *Dunjonquest: Temple of Apshai*. These two games usher in the Bronze Age, which extends to 1983 and ends with the debut of two very important CRPG se-

ries, *Wizardry* and *Ultima*. Since the CRPG developers of this era were still refining their skills and consolidating their gains, I refer to it as the Silver Age. What follows is, in many ways, the most significant era of CRPG development, a period I've termed the Golden Age, which extends from roughly 1985 to 1993. The Golden Age saw the debut of a number of outstanding series, such as Electronic Arts' *The Bard's Tale* and SSI's celebrated "Gold Box" games such as *The Pool of Radiance* and *Curse of the Azure Bonds*. It is during this age that we see the first serious stirrings of real-time 3D CRPGs, first with *Dungeon Master* in 1987 and later with SSI's "Black Box" games, starting with *Eye of the Beholder* in 1990. The final two ages are the Platinum Age (1996–2001) and the Modern Age, which we are in today. The Platinum Age is so named because it is during this time that we see the finest CRPGs yet designed, such as Bioware's *Baldur's Gate*, Black Isle's *Planescape: Torment*, and Interplay's *Fallout*. The Modern Age begins with the arrival of Bioware's *Neverwinter Nights* and *Knights of the Old Republic*, two of several new games that introduce real-time, high-resolution 3D graphics. The last chapter will discuss the current state of the CRPG and the future of the genre.

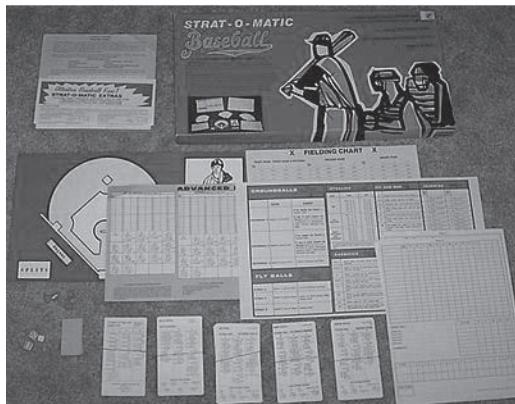
We'll start, however, not with the first CRPGs, but rather with the games that inspired them: pen-and-paper strategy games like *Strat-O-Matic*, wargames like *Chainmail*, the fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, and finally, *Colossal Cave Adventure*, the first adventure game. Each of these games exerted a marked influence on the CRPG that is still being felt today.

## 2 Origins

When most people ponder the origins and inspirations of CRPGs, they quite naturally turn to Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's *Dungeons & Dragons* fantasy role-playing game. *Dungeons & Dragons*, or *D&D* for short, was published in 1974, quickly swept across the country, and is still actively played by many tens of thousands. There really is no doubt that *D&D* played a vital role in the development of the first CRPG. Richard Garriott, creator of *Akalabeth* and *Ultima*, was himself a dedicated fan of the game, and many of the most successful CRPGs are licensed by TSR and later Wizards of the Coast, publishers of the popular tabletop role-playing game. However, if we look a bit further into the issue, we can identify three other influences that were at least as important as *D&D*, if not more: sports simulation games, tabletop wargames, the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien, and Will Crowther's *Colossal Cave Adventure*, the first true computer adventure game. Each of these sources made a unique and significant contribution to the genre.

## Baseball Simulation Games

Although not so well known today, tabletop sports simulation games were quite popular in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly among teenagers and young adults. Although there were dozens of spinoffs and competitors, the most successful of these games were *Strat-O-Matic* (1961), *APBA* (1951), and *All Star Baseball* (1941). All of these games attempt to recreate the excitement and anticipation of baseball using a combination of cards and dice (*All Star Baseball* uses spinners instead and is intended for younger players).



Tabletop sports simulation games introduced many of the statistical concepts that would later appear in fantasy role-playing games. (Courtesy of Tabletop Baseball Games.)

Statistics from current professional baseball players are used in these games, necessitating annual updates, thereby generating steady revenue for the game makers (players value the accuracy of these statistics and their ability to predict actual seasons). Steven Johnson, author of *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, sums these games up as “games of dice and data.” *Strat-O-Matic* and *APBA* have been and remain quite popular and boast of celebrity players like Spike Lee (moviemaker), Trip Hawkins (founder of Electronic Arts), and both President Bushes.

Although the games are not identical, both *Strat-O-Matic* and *APBA* put players in the position of team managers. Players make decisions about batting order, starting lineups, and pitchers, then use the dice and tables to simulate the ballgame. In the case of *Strat-O-Matic*, gameplay involves cards for every baseball player and five different dice: three six-sided dice (one white, two colored), and a twenty-sided die. Players roll the six-sided dice to determine the outcome of the batting (the numbers correspond to tables on the cards). There are a fair number of rules to learn, and the more advanced versions of the game take into consideration even the weather and differences among ballparks. In any case, the game can be quite complex, and avid players soon gain the ability to discuss minute details of professional baseball. Although the baseball-themed games have been most successful, there have been versions for football, hockey, boxing, and other sports.

We can clearly see how this type of game has much in common with *D&D* and CRPGs. First, there is the effort to use dice and statistics to more

realistically model fantasies, whether these are imaginary sporting events or battles with fantastic creatures. Rather than just watch sports and discuss them with their friends, *Strat-O-Matic* and *APBA* players feel more directly involved in the sport, even though many no doubt play the games from their armchairs (no doubt, many such gamers haven't played baseball in years, if not decades). Later on, we'll see the same sort of trend among *D&D* players, when Tolkien-obsessed fans want to do more than simply read about fantastic battles with orcs and dangerous treks into dank, dark corridors. All of this involvement comes from what some would see as a very unlikely source: the mathematical science of statistics. While the subject of statistics seems hopelessly dry and abstract to many people, it nevertheless drives some of the most compelling and addictive games ever designed.

While we're on the subject, it's worth asking a few questions about why these statistical games emerged when and where they did. The formal study of statistics became important after World War I, when the United States and other nations were becoming increasingly more industrialized. Leaders of both government and industry needed more accurate ways to measure populations and the effects of policies. Of particular interest to the government, of course, were better ways to run the census and collect taxes. It's certainly no coincidence that it was during this time that the computer industry really took off—companies like IBM were desperately needed to help the government manage the massive amounts of occupational data needed to comply with the Social Security Act of 1935.

*Avid players of games like APBA and Strat-O-Matic found themselves prepared for the many new jobs that required familiarity with statistics.* These games are still going today but have been eclipsed by the rise of fantasy sports, hugely popular games based on many of the same principles (but typically involving a computer to handle the statistics). Some other key differences are that players draft their own teams and follow their statistics through the real-time season (rather than the previous season). Several prominent commercial sports hubs offer fantasy sports for free on their websites, probably to garner and maintain general interest in professional sports.

## Tabletop Wargames

Wargaming is a much older genre than the sports simulation games mentioned above. The first such game probably arose among Prussian officers in the early 19th century, where it was used as a type of training exercise. The

game, called *Kriegspiel* (“war play”), involved both dice and an experienced officer who could umpire the game based on his own combat experience (much as a Dungeon Master presides over *D&D* play). This practice spread to other countries and other branches of the military, such as the U.S. Naval Academy, where it continues to serve as useful tool for training officers and analyzing actual tactical situations. Although the professional activity and the hobby have much in common, they are often differentiated as “war gaming” and “wargaming,” the former designating professional and the latter hobbyist games. It’s the hobbyist game we’re concerned with here.

In the early 20th century, H. G. Wells, one of the true godfathers of science fiction, wrote two books outlining rules for games involving toy soldiers and spring-loaded miniature cannons. There were also naval wargames available, such as *Naval War Game*, developed by Fletcher Pratt in 1940. This game involved small wooden ships, complicated mathematical formulas, and the use of a tape measure to mark off distances to scale. In any case, the key factor in these early wargames is the use of a random element (usually dice) to make the outcome of any battle somewhat unpredictable. This random factor is what differentiates wargames from other games such as chess, which in other ways seem quite comparable.

“Miniature wargames,” whether involving toy soldiers or ships, were of course fairly expensive hobbies, owing to the large number of materials they required. Nevertheless, gaming clubs arose throughout the 20th century, and by 1952, Charles S. Roberts published the first mass-market wargame, *Tactics*. This game included maps and cardboard counters rather than miniature soldiers. It was played on a square grid and took into consideration the effects of different types of terrain on troop movement. Roberts went on to found Avalon Hill, which soon became the dominant publisher of war and strategic board games. Later wargames from Avalon Hill introduced many features common in CRPGs, such as hexagonal movement and “zones of control.” Avalon Hill went on to publish several highly successful wargames based on specific historical battles, such as *Panzerblitz* (1970), *Midway* (1964), and *Blitzkrieg* (1965).

Miniature wargaming made a return in the 1970s, when economies of scale placed them at least within reach of the average teenager. In ways similar to train modeling, fans of miniature wargaming lavish time and energy on painting miniatures and reproducing scenery to look as realistic (or as fantastic) as possible. These games offer a much more tactile and visual experience than other wargames, allowing gamers to think in three dimensions well before the rise of advanced computer graphics. Of particular interest for our

purposes is a 1971 miniatures wargame named *Chainmail*, designed by Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren.

*Chainmail* is, as the name implies, a medieval-based wargame, and it introduced several conventions that would become standard in later fantasy role-playing games and CRPGs. Of particular interest is a “fantasy supplement” that added fantasy creatures made popular by J. R. R. Tolkien’s works, including hobbits, balrogs, and ents. It also had wizards that could cast powerful spells to produce fireballs and lightning bolts. Furthermore, some of the miniatures in the game represented individual heroes rather than corps of troops. It is this game that led most directly to *D&D*, and the first edition of *D&D*’s rules even suggested players own a copy of *Chainmail*. Both Gygax and Dave Arneson (creators of *D&D*) were avid wargamers, and *Chainmail* is a clear precursor to what would soon evolve into fantasy role-playing as we know it today.

There are other connections between wargaming and CRPGs. SSI, one of the most influential CRPG developers, first made its mark publishing computer-based wargames. There has also been a persistent tension between the more wargaming aspects of CRPGs (e.g., the strategy and tactics component) and the role-playing aspects (i.e., stories, characters, and dialog). Throughout this history, we’ll see that developers have experimented quite often to find the perfect ratio of math and make-believe.

## J. R. R. Tolkien and Fantasy Role-Playing

In some ways, games like *Strat-O-Matic* were the most socially acceptable of the games we’ve identified as precursors to the CRPG. The reason for this blind eye was probably the close association with professional sports, a traditionally manly activity and thus an appropriate interest for men and boys of all ages (indeed, it was frequently played by fathers and sons). Wargaming, particularly of the historical variety, can also seem normal. After all, men throughout the centuries have been quite interested in famous battles and brilliant tactics, and, if nothing else, few parents have a problem with their teenagers learning history.

However, fantasy role-playing may seem alien and far less acceptable. It’s one thing to walk past a group of boys obsessively discussing baseball and the statistics of their favorite pitchers and batters, or to saunter past a few wargamers engaged in a heated discussion of the Battle of Gettysburg—even if the sight of grown men moving painted miniatures may seem childish to

some. However, it's quite another matter when people are displaying the same sort of passion for sorcery and dragons, much less for demons and priests of darkness. In particular, by the time we get to *D&D*, some parents and concerned but misinformed citizens consider fantasy role-playing games a serious threat—both to the people who play them and to society at large. But before we get into this topic, let's take a look at the history of fantasy role-playing and try to determine the scope of its influence on CRPGs.

Perhaps the best place to start is with the work of the English novelist J. R. R. Tolkien, specifically his *The Lord of the Rings* novel (although Tolkien intended for the work to constitute one massive volume, it was broken into volumes and first published during 1954 and 1955). However, it wasn't until the ready availability of the authorized mass market paperback editions by Ballantine Books in the 1960s that the Tolkien phenomenon really kicked off. Of course, nowadays it's hard to find anyone who hasn't read Tolkien or at least seen the movies. More important, it's difficult indeed to find a serious *D&D* or CRPG fan who hasn't read the books at least twice (or more often!).

Tolkien's work influenced much of what would later become staples of the fantasy genre, such as our conceptions of magic, elves, dwarves, orcs, and so on; and plenty of role-playing games (computerized or otherwise) borrow directly from his stories. I think what's more critical, though, is Tolkien's obsessive attention to detail: he didn't just write novels; rather, he spent a lifetime creating a new world. Unlike typical "swords and sorcery" novels and stories, Tolkien's works were much deeper and complex, involving epic struggles rather than the personal battles of a single swashbuckling hero.<sup>1</sup> Tolkien's key academic interests were language and philology, and he created artificial languages for the various peoples in his book. Finally, he studied ancient mythologies, particularly those of the Celts, Scandinavians, and Germans, assimilating this diverse information into a coherent whole. The effect was to make Tolkien's Middle Earth a fictional world so vivid and detailed that it seemed to many readers to be a real place, an alternate reality that they longed to visit. Passing references and allusions in the books hinted at vast, untold

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<sup>1</sup> This distinction helps separate Tolkien's work from the "Swords and Sorcery" genre, which includes Robert E. Howard's *Conan*, Michael Moorcock's *Elric*, and Fritz Leiber's *Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser* stories. Tolkien's grander style is usually labeled "High Fantasy" instead. Later, authors would begin writing "High Fantasy" novels set in the various campaign settings of *AD&D*, such as Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman's *Dragonlance* series.

stories and rich histories. Adoring fans pored over the many appendices, references, and other materials devised by Tolkien or others. In short, the Tolkien phenomenon paved the way for a new type of game, one that would allow fans to go beyond reading and actually enter exciting worlds of fantasy to play a role in their own adventures.

Two diehard wargamers would soon offer them that chance. In 1974, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson created *Dungeons & Dragons*, published by Gygax's company, Tactical Studies Rules (TSR). Dave Arneson had been experimenting with fantasy-based miniature wargames for some time in Blackmoor, a medieval barony of his own creation. One of Arneson's key innovations was having players control single characters who gained increased strength and new abilities as they won battles. Arneson's players were quite pleased with the game but unhappy with the rather arbitrary way Arneson handled combat. Fortunately, he was in contact with Gygax, who sent him a copy of *Chainmail* to provide a more coherent structure to the fighting portions of the game. When Gygax himself sat down with Arneson to play the new game, he knew they had a hit on their hands. The new rules worked up by Gygax and Arneson became *Dungeons & Dragons*.

A combination of *Chainmail* and Arneson's Blackmoor sessions,<sup>2</sup> *Dungeons & Dragons* offered several key innovations to the established wargaming model. For instance, each player controlled a single character rather than an army, thus playing the role of adventurer directly rather than from a distance. The game also introduced the Dungeon Master (later called the Game Master) role, a narrator and referee who keeps the story going and ensures that the rules are properly followed—innovating as necessary. Players first choose a character class, such as a warrior or wizard, and then gain experience points as they progress through the game, finding treasure and other items and conquering ever more powerful foes. In essence, it's simply the playing out of the quotation often attributed to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Once enough of these points are accumulated,

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<sup>2</sup> Some contention exists between creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson about this connection. In statements published in Lawrence Schick's *Heroic Worlds: A History and Guide to Role-Playing Games* (ISBN 0-87975-652-7), Arneson claims that the "Chainmail connection was the use of the Combat Matrix and nothing more." Gygax, on the other hand, claims that "The D&D game was drawn from [Chainmail's] rules, and that is indisputable. Chainmail was the progenitor of D&D." The real problems arose when Gygax published *AD&D* without crediting Arneson as his coauthor. Arneson subsequently sued for royalties.

the character can gain a level, thereby gaining a number of new skills, abilities, and hit points. A character's hit points is a number indicating how much damage he or she can take without dying. Once the number reaches 0 (or below), the character either dies or is knocked unconscious. Thus, higher level characters have more hit points and can survive tougher battles. This class and level system would prove vital for countless role-playing games to follow.

In a typical game of *D&D*, players go on an adventure, or story-based quest, either designed by the Dungeon Master or derived from a published module. A series of interconnected adventures is called a campaign, and the shared setting of these campaigns is called a campaign setting. TSR is still widely regarded today for its detailed and imaginative campaign settings, such as *Forgotten Realms*, used in many of the most successful CRPGs. Most are fantasy based, though there are others with science fiction and horror themes. Of course, TSR is not the only publisher of role-playing games. Following in the wake of *Dungeons & Dragons* came a number of competitors, such as Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels and Trolls* (1975) and the much later *Generic Role-Playing System* (GURPS), published in 1986 by Steve Jackson Games. The advantage of GURPS is that it can be applied to any setting whatever, fictional or historical. Between 1977 and 1979, TSR published *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, a better-organized and much expanded version of the original that many consider less a sequel than an entirely new game. Volumes like the *Monster Manual* provided rich detail to the game, making it seem nearly as vivid as Tolkien's Middle Earth.

Early *D&D* players often used miniatures imported from *Chainmail* or other wargames, though this feature was soon pushed to the margins of fantasy role-playing. Since combat and other matters could be handled verbally, the miniatures seemed to many players an unnecessary expense and a hindrance, even if they could help players visualize combat. Interestingly, though, there have been very few purely text-based CRPGs, and even the earliest CRPGs were quite graphically advanced for their time. At any rate, the verbal nature of *D&D* is one of its main appeals, since a great part of the fun is in the play-acting. Specifically, players are asked to speak in character and to use first-person to describe their actions (e.g., "I cast a lightning bolt at the minotaur!").

Perhaps the extreme form of this play is called live-action role-playing, or LARP, which can described as improvisational theater. LARP players will often dress up in costumes, wield harmless weapons, and address each other strictly as characters within the setting. In some ways, LARP is comparable to the activities of the Society for Creative Anachronism. Founded in 1966, SCA is a historical reenactment group focused primarily on the Middle Ages



Renaissance or “Ren” Fairs provide opportunities for fantasy enthusiasts to role-play in a public setting. Participants often create elaborate costumes and effect appropriate accents. (Photo by George Katselis.)

and the Renaissance. SCA events typically include jousting, fencing, and archery, as well as noncombat skills like cooking, dancing, and even embroidery. A similar activity is the Renaissance Fair, though these are much more audience-oriented (visitors aren’t expected to dress up or act in character, though this may be encouraged). Though the SCA and Renaissance Fairs are much less rule-oriented than LARP, they’re worth keeping in mind as part of the overall cultural milieu that led to (and continues to fuel) the CRPG. One good example of this cultural overlap is Richard Garriott, who was quite active in the SCA and who begins his masterpiece *Ultima IV* with a visit to a “RenFair”!

If playacting is so vital to fantasy role-playing, one might wonder where the statistics come in. During the typical role-playing game, much of the number crunching is provided by the Dungeon Master, who has a bevy of look-up tables and charts at his or her disposal (and, hopefully, a good understanding of the rules). Players will be asked to roll their dice at certain intervals to determine the outcome of various events (such as who will strike first in combat, whether a trap is successfully disarmed, and so on). One of the key tensions in all such gaming is whether the mathematics should be the focus of the gameplay or transparent, handled mostly “behind the scenes” by the Dungeon Master.

For example, a warrior might be described in the game as a Level 3, but it seems silly to suggest that warriors would actually use this kind of terminology. Many parodies have been made over the years, usually involving some arrogant wizard warning his enemies, “Back off—I’m a Level 20.” Other wits



Although tabletop RPGs have changed over time, the basics remain the same: stats, dice, and finely detailed miniatures. (Courtesy of Carsten Tolkmitt, [http://www.flickr.com/photos/laenulfean.](http://www.flickr.com/photos/laenulfean/))

have poked fun at the idea of experience points. Other role-playing games introduced alternative systems, such as the skills-based system introduced in the 1977 science fiction game *Traveller*. The key difference here is a character creation system that factors in education and background. Basically, players could opt to have their characters begin with more education and better skills but would then face penalties incurred by age. Rather than striving to gain levels, characters must follow a chosen career path, trying to rise in rank and acquire wealth, titles, and political power (we'll see this model adapted for several CRPGs). The 1978 game *RuneQuest* further refined the skills-based system, abandoning the class system and focusing entirely on skills (comparable to the role-playing system in Ion Storm's *Deus Ex*). Combat is just considered another branch of skills, and gamers can easily adapt the system to cover other genres.

Nuances aside, all fantasy role-playing games require a statistics-based rule system to provide structure for the playacting and make believe; without them, the game would seem hopelessly arbitrary and probably not much fun to play. What we'll see over the course of this history of CRPGs is this tension between math and narrative, with some games hiding most of the math from the player, whereas others foreground it.

In 2000, Wizards of the Coast (who had acquired TSR in 1997) published *Dungeons & Dragons 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, based on the "d20 system" of twenty-sided dice. The third edition also introduced a "skills and feat" system and fewer class restrictions. These changes allow players significantly more options to personalize their characters. The third edition also simplifies some of the more complicated calculations such as THAC0 (to hit armor class zero; used to partially determine whether an attacker hit or missed). Not all of the pur-

ists are happy with these changes, naturally, arguing that they simply dumb down the game so that younger or less-dedicated players can understand the gameplay. We'll see a similar sort of complaint when we discuss the action role-playing games like Blizzard's *Diablo* (1996), which many old school CRPG fans found far too simplistic and designed purely for the masses.

*D&D* and later fantasy role-playing games affected CRPGs in some obvious and vital ways. The most obvious correlation is that two of the most successful and best-known CRPG developers, SSI and BioWare, have enjoyed lucrative licensing arrangements with TSR. However, the influence of fantasy role-playing does not stop there. On a more general level, the mathematics behind most CRPGs are derived (or outright copied) from various editions of TSR's rules, though developers have felt free to modify them. Most familiar are the player stats and experience point systems, attributes such as strength and intelligence, and of course hit and damage rolls. Likewise borrowed are stereotyped races such as cave-dwelling dwarves, aristocratic elves, and the occasional dexterous hobbit, all of which ultimately lead us back to Tolkien. While it's true that TSR's influence is felt more strongly in some games than in others, it's hard to deny their vital role in shaping CRPG development, both past and present. The innovations TSR introduces into their tabletop role-playing games frequently crossover into CRPGs. For example, BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights* (2002) is based on *AD&D 3rd Edition* rules, whereas their earlier *Baldur's Gate* (1998) is based on the previous edition. Many CRPG fans consider TSR to be the premier designer of fantasy role-playing games, and they want their CRPGs to be as close as possible to what they consider the real thing.

On the other hand, it is easy enough to get carried away and assume that CRPGs are little more than computerized adaptations of *D&D*. This claim disregards one of the most critical aspects of conventional *D&D*—namely, the playacting. As Daniel Mackay, author of *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, puts it, "In the role-playing game the rules are but a framework that facilitates the performance of the players and the game master." Though it's certainly possible for a CRPG fan to pretend to be his character, even going so far as to dress the part, it is doubtful indeed whether his computer is capable of appreciating these antics. Furthermore, the scope of possible actions is greatly reduced when a gamer is playing with a program rather than a creative and deft Dungeon Master, who can always find ways to deal with unexpected developments and even reward such behavior. This limitation is particularly felt during dialog sequences in CRPGs, where the player is often presented with only a small menu of preprogrammed choices.

Of course, one place where we see this distinction wearing away is in online role-playing games, first in MUDs (multiuser dungeons) and now in MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games). With sophisticated equipment such as headset microphones and ever more realistic graphics, it is possible that the performance aspects of traditional fantasy role-playing will reemerge. However, let us table this discussion for the moment (pun intended).

## *Colossal Cave Adventure*

So far, we've identified sports simulation games, wargaming, and fantasy role-playing games as the progenitors of the CRPG. The technical correlations are easy to see. Each of these games relies on statistics and random numbers (dice) to model imaginary events, be they baseball games, Civil War battles, or wizard duels. More important, however, is their cultural impact. Although people have played games in every society, it's still common to hear them described primarily as activities for children, with the few exceptions (board, card, and dice games) viewed either as frivolous amusements or opportunities to win money.

What games like *Strat-O-Matic*, *Chainmail*, and *D&D* did was create a subculture of gamers, particularly among teenagers and young adults. The more hardcore of these gamers spent a great deal of time not only playing but thinking about and discussing the games with others. Many created their own variations or even entirely new games to share with their friends. For a small but increasing number of people, gaming was no longer just a hobby or something to be grown out of, but a preferred lifestyle—one that demanded active entertainment. It was not, however, entertainment for the masses. According to one large manufacturer, "It's not a mainstream hobby; it requires too much active participation from the participants to ever capture a significant part of our society who have been spoon fed passive entertainment all their lives."<sup>3</sup> Of course, these gamers would long be viewed with suspicion or disdain by many around them. Undoubtedly, the game that caught the most flack was *D&D*, which was soon accused of all manner of wild and unfounded accusations that we need not rehearse here. However, it would take more than a few rabble rousers to quash gaming culture.

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<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in "The Business and the Culture of Gaming," by W. Keith Winkler. Published in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity, and Experience in Fantasy Games* (ISBN 0786424362).

One man who contributed greatly to gaming culture is Will Crowther, known to history as the author of the famous *Colossal Cave Adventure* and the founder of the interactive fiction or adventure game genre. Also known as *Adventure* or simply *Advent*, *Colossal Cave Adventure* immersed players into a virtual world full of puzzles and perils. Although graphical games had existed at least since 1962, Crowther's game is composed entirely of text, a fact which would cause countless critics and gamers to describe it as new interactive fiction. Gameplay consists of reading brief passages of text (describing the character's location or visible objects) and responding with simple, two-word commands (e.g., "GET TORCH," "GO NORTH"). Although primitive even by the standards of later text-based adventure games, *Colossal Cave Adventure* established a new gaming paradigm.

Crowther, a professional programmer, designed his game sometime in 1975 and distributed it on the ARPANET, the progenitor of today's Internet. Since it was available only on large and expensive mainframe computers, its audience was understandably quite limited. Nevertheless, word got around. While many *Colossal Cave* fans were content to play the game, others wanted to take it in new directions. In 1976, a 22-year-old Stanford graduate student named Don Woods acquired Crowther's blessing to improve and expand his game, adding several fantasy elements (though Woods officially denies using Tolkien's works or *D&D* as inspirations for his work). Later adventure games like Infocom's *Zork* (c. 1977) and Sierra On-Line's *King's Quest* (1984) are descended from Crowther and Woods' groundbreaking game.

```
PAUSE INIT DONE statement executed
To resume execution, type go. Other input will terminate the job.
go
Execution resumes after PAUSE.
WELCOME TO ADVENTURE!! WOULD YOU LIKE INSTRUCTIONS?

SOMWHERE NEARBY IS COLOSSAL CAVE, WHERE OTHERS HAVE FOUND
FORTUNES IN TREASURE AND GOLD, THOUGH IT IS RUMORED
THAT SOME WHO ENTER ARE NEVER SEEN AGAIN. MAGIC IS SAID
TO WORK IN THE CAVE. I WILL BE YOUR EYES AND HANDS. DIRECT
ME WITH COMMANDS OF 1 OR 2 WORDS.
(ERRORS, SUGGESTIONS, COMPLAINTS TO CROWTHER)
(IF STUCK TYPE HELP FOR SOME HINTS)

YOU ARE STANDING AT THE END OF A ROAD BEFORE A SMALL BRICK
BUILDING . AROUND YOU IS A FOREST. A SMALL
STREAM FLOWS OUT OF THE BUILDING AND DOWN A GULLY.
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Will Crowther and Don Woods' famous text adventure demonstrated the story-telling possibilities of the medium.

Although many people acknowledge the link between *Colossal Cave Adventure* and the first CRPGs, the relationship is not as transparent as many might think. *Colossal Cave Adventure* is not a CRPG, though it introduces several key innovations that paved the way to that genre. To help us better understand the relationship between this early adventure game and CRPGs, it's worthwhile to compare Crowther's original game with Woods' revised version. Crowther was an avid caver, and he and his wife Pat had spent a great deal of time exploring Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. The cave, with its spectacular caverns with wonderful names like "Hall of the Mountain King" made a lasting impression on Crowther. Crowther wanted to create a game for his daughters that would combine the pleasures of caving with that of his other hobby, fantasy role-playing.<sup>4</sup> The end result was mostly a caving simulation, albeit with a few fantasy elements, treasures, and puzzles thrown in for fun. Woods' contribution was to make these "fun" elements much more central to the gameplay.

In effect, by focusing the player on puzzles, Woods pushed the game away from role-playing and further towards what would eventually become the adventure game as we know it today. The text-based version of this genre would peak in the 1980s with the many hits of Infocom but is still survived by independent developers and even limited commercial operations. Sierra On-Line introduced the first graphical adventure game (*Mystery House*) in 1980, but it really wasn't until their *King's Quest* series (1983) that the industry began moving away from text. Of course, later companies like LucasArts and Cyan further refined the genre, but today most of these games are published by The Adventure Company. Since we've already discussed the differences between adventure games and CRPGs in the previous chapter, we can recall that it's the lack of a statistical-based combat or skills system that really marks the difference between the genres.

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<sup>4</sup> At least one historian, Shay Addams, denies that Crowther or Woods had played *D&D* before they had completed development of *Colossal Cave*. In a letter to the editor in the March/April 1985 issue of *Computer Gaming World*, Addams writes that "Crowther said he wrote the original version in 1967 or '68, which predates Gary Gygax's role-playing game by several years." However, Crowther apparently played a game called *Mirkwood*, created by a friend, that seems to be at least somewhat similar to *D&D*. The upshot of this is that it's quite possible that neither Crowther nor Woods was directly influenced by *D&D*, which makes the caving and exploration themes even more significant.

Indeed, the brilliance of *D&D* is precisely this statistical system for determining the outcome of combat and other unpredictable events (whether characters spot a trap, detect an illusion, and so on). Rolling some dice and looking up the outcome on a standardized table seems much fairer than, say, a Dungeon Master declaring a character dead because a player swiped the last Mountain Dew. As Lawrence Schick, author of a book on the history of role-playing games, puts it, “The rules hold the group creation together and keep it from becoming mere chaos by committee.”<sup>5</sup> In short, what’s really clever about *D&D* is the way it’s able to combine the illusion of “anything goes” with this practical and formalized set of rules.

It’s revealing to consider how adventure games handle the same issue. Although adventure games *Colossal Cave Adventure* and *Zork* may provide the illusion of “total freedom,” in actuality the player is quite limited by the relatively small set of commands recognized by the parser. Indeed, one of the most common complaints hurled against any adventure game (textual or graphical) is that only one solution to a problem has been implemented, when the player can easily imagine several very plausible alternatives. In short, this “linearity” often causes even bright players to get hopelessly stumped.

As we’ll see, CRPGs typically ease this problem by channeling the player’s energies into a much smaller set of activities, particularly combat. Players are typically given no choice but to fight wave after wave of monsters, usually in pursuit of some mandatory quest or mission. However, the tradeoff here is that even though these battles may be difficult, there’s always a chance the player will succeed if he or she is persistent (eventually those dice rolls will work out to the player’s advantage). On the other hand, if an adventure gamer gets stuck on a puzzle, the game might very well be over. Furthermore, even though a CRPG might seem linear because players have no choice but to engage in so many battles, they can usually take these opportunities to improvise new strategies. Indeed, in all but the most uninspired dungeon crawls, players are offered a wealth of options for dispatching their foes (i.e., combinations of spells, melee or ranged combat, party configurations). Particularly difficult battles can require substantial trial and error before players stumble upon a viable means of achieving victory.

Furthermore, the randomness of CRPGs makes them fun to play over and over, even after the last dragon is defeated. One of the most common criticisms of games like *Colossal Cave Adventure* is that once players have figured

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<sup>5</sup> Schick, op. cit.

out all the puzzles, there is little reason to replay the game. One approach to this issue is simply to make the games longer and longer, adding more puzzles and rooms, or ratcheting up the difficulty level to force players to spend more time getting through the puzzles (this tactic usually leads more to frustration than satisfaction, however). Even today, adventure game developers wrestle with these issues.

Other programmers who played Crowther's game took it in a much different direction than Woods and Infocom. These programmers, whom we'll discuss in the next chapter, took the concept of text-based exploration pioneered in *Colossal Cave Adventure* and wedged it to the statistical combat system made popular by TSR's fantasy role-playing games. Although the earliest examples of these computer games are lost to history, one of the earliest is Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle's *MUD*, created in 1978. Unlike most of the early CRPGs, *MUD* (multiuser dungeon) allowed many players to explore the virtual world together, teaming up to fight monsters, and the name MUD is now commonly used to describe any game that matches this description. I'll discuss MUDs and other early mainframe CRPGs much more in the next chapter.

In short, Crowther and Woods' *Colossal Cave Adventure* demonstrated a number of feats that would prove essential to modern CRPGs. The most important of these is the creation of a virtual world and the means to explore it. The game also contained magic and monsters to overcome, though the combat was not based on a statistical system. For instance, players must periodically throw an axe at dwarves to kill them. However, the character doesn't level up no matter how many dwarves are slain. Furthermore, when the player encounters a dragon, the solution is simple—the player just kills it with his bare hands! This battle seems more like a spoof of *D&D* than anything, since players expect a battle with a dragon to be quite a serious undertaking. The way such encounters are lampooned here suggests a line in the sand between the two genres. In short, the manner by which a player dispatches a dragon is one way to distinguish the adventure game from the CRPG.

In the next chapter, we'll at last turn to the first true CRPGs, which emerged as early as the late 1970s. Unfortunately, many of these games are not extant, and a great deal of critical information (release dates, names of programmers, and so on) is lost to history—thus warranting the name Dark Ages for this obscure but historically vital period.

# 3

## The Dark Age

“Let’s have fun with rules and statistics!” Saying such a thing to a group of young people will likely garner more groans than gratitude. However, rules and statistics are what make games such as *Strat-O-Matic*, *Chainmail*, and *Dungeons & Dragons* possible. Take them out, and these games become little more than make believe. While there’s nothing wrong with kids pretending to be knights and orcs (as opposed to the impolitic “cowboys and Indians”), a real game needs more formal structure—rules or guidelines that players can refer to in times of disagreement (“What—you’re a wizard! You can’t wield a longsword!”). Without such rules, these games would be hopelessly arbitrary; some kid would always be making up whatever rules were needed for him to win the game.

However, the rules need to be flexible enough to accommodate the unpredictable and the unexpected. In real life, we seldom (if ever) know precisely what will happen as a result of even our best-informed decisions, and a realistic game should take the whims of fortune into account. On the other hand, if the game is too random, it could quickly get absurd. Sure, it’s possible that a tiny kobold might kill a giant ogre with a well-aimed stone, but it’s highly unlikely. What’s needed is a careful balance, with just enough randomness to make the game exciting. One of the many reasons *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* became so popular was the rational and sophisticated way it handled so many unpredictable phenomena, requiring just the right ratio of luck to cunning.

However, working with so many complex calculations can soon get tiring, and it's easy to make mistakes. Furthermore, the rules are often intricate and sophisticated, leading to conflicts among players and Dungeon Masters that seem more reminiscent of courtrooms than Camelot. Today, of course, the solution to this problem is obvious—let a computer handle the math and enforce the rules. However, affordable personal computers were still out of reach in the late 1970s, and players had to make do with funny-shaped dice, pocket calculators, and a set of thick volumes to help them resolve disputes. Many of the rules and conventions had been borrowed from the world of wargaming, in which an obsession with accuracy and meticulous calculation was the norm. For many players, though, these features of the game were merely necessary evils. A computer could shoulder some of this burden and allow players to focus on the activities they found much more appealing.

Thankfully for the future of CRPGs, at least one group of gamers did enjoy at least intermittent access to computers—college students. By the early 1970s, it was rare to find a major college campus that didn't have at least a few mainframes, such as DEC's PDP-10. The earliest CRPGs and MUDs would emerge during the 1970s on these powerful but expensive machines. Of course, many university administrators, faculty members, and no doubt a few boards of regents didn't want to see these machines being "wasted" on gaming. On most campuses, computer gaming was strictly forbidden, and when games were noticed by the wrong people, they were promptly deleted. Until programmers learned to print out their source code as a backup measure, many historically critical CRPGs were lost to history.

## PLATO and the Mainframe Era

Many students had access to a powerful and flexible learning system called PLATO, an advanced timesharing system that supported many simultaneous users on one mainframe (the typical model at this time was to have a giant mainframe computer connected to several "dumb" terminals). Although PLATO had been designed and promoted as a way for students to work on lessons, users quickly discovered that it could be used for chatting and gaming; it led to the first online communities. It also allowed users to easily make new lesson modules using a programming language called TUTOR.

It didn't take long for a few enterprising students to throw together the first CRPGs, though we know very little about these early efforts—they

were, after all, expressly forbidden by campus policy, and few people had the foresight to recognize that history was being made. All they saw were some unruly students (denigrated as “z-brats”) breaking the rules. The result is that we have only the sketchiest details of these early CRPGs—they truly existed in a Dark Age, with little to no written records or credible sources to verify what people at the time seem to remember. In any case, it is certainly irresponsible to declare any of these early games the first CRPG until more reliable information becomes available. Indeed, I’ve encountered at least a few websites so unreliable as to claim that one or another CRPG was released before Gygax and Arneson released *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974! Such a feat seems unlikely at best, though not impossible—after all, Gygax and Arneson had been developing and play-testing the system before 1974, and it’s possible that word leaked out to programmers.

The best we can do here is discuss a few of these early efforts to create CRPGs and try to give some impression of what playing these games must have been like. One such game was *pedit5*, ostensibly authored by someone named Rusty Rutherford for PLATO. Apparently, the rather odd name of this game was an intentional effort to mislead the rather ruthless administrators at Rutherford’s school, who would have deleted an obvious game<sup>1</sup>. The program was nevertheless found and deleted, though similar games soon took its place. The deletion of *pedit5* taught later programmers on these systems to keep hard copies of their source code. If we can believe second- or third-hand accounts of Rutherford’s game, it contained many of the conventions that were standard in *D&D* and later CRPGs, such as magical spells, a large monster-infested dungeon to explore, treasure to collect, and the ability to save one’s character for later sessions. The game even featured graphical dungeons, though, sadly, no screenshots exist.

Another game that might lay claim to being the first CRPG is Don Daglow’s *Dungeon*, written sometime between 1975 and 1976 for the PDP-10 mainframe. Daglow’s game offered multiple players the chance to band together to explore a dungeon, earning experience points and leveling up as they progressed. Though represented entirely in textual characters, it featured a line-of-sight display, realistically depicting what the characters could and couldn’t see. The game was distributed by DECUS, a user group composed of DEC programmers. DECUS also played a role in distributing and popularizing other important games of the era, such as the mainframe versions of *Colossal Cave Adventure* and *Zork*.

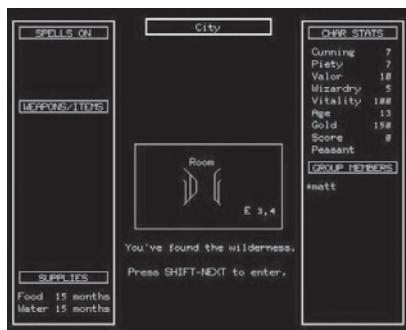
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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ulvlist.net/it/game-160119-Pedit5>.

We know much more about Gary Whisenhunt and Ray Wood's *dnd*, a graphical CRPG for the PLATO platform programmed in the mid 1970s. The game contains most of the genre's staples, such as the ability to create a custom character, a leveling system based on experience points, a general store, and monsters that get tougher the deeper a player descends into the dungeon. The game also has a plot: enter the Whisenwood Dungeon, kill a dragon, and retrieve his orb. This orb-fetching quest will show up again and again in later CRPGs. The game was in continuous development until 1985 and influenced many pioneering CRPG developers.

Incidentally, around this same time Daniel Lawrence created a game named *DND*, not to be confused with Whisenhunt and Wood's game, *dnd*. Lawrence's game was written for the TOPS-10 operating system, which ran on DEC's PDP-10 mainframe. The game was a bit hit at Purdue, where Lawrence was a student. Lawrence later ported it to the TOPS-20 system, and it circulated among DEC's employees. The game would later cause a legal headache when Lawrence used *DND*'s code in his *Telengard* game, a commercial product published by Avalon Hill for home computers. In September of 1983, DEC officially ordered the game purged from all of its computers to avoid litigation. Further legal issues over *DND* would arise in 1984, when a company named R.O. Software ported the game to MS-DOS under a \$25 shareware license—without bothering to get Avalon Hill or Lawrence's permission. We'll talk more about these issues in the next chapter, but we can see here how the open and share-alike days of precommercial game development were coming to an end.

There were several other CRPGs written for PLATO between 1976 and 1979, such as *Oubliette* (1977), *Moria* (1978), *Avatar* (c. 1979), and



Early PLATO games such as *Moria* were years ahead of their time, offering first-person perspective and multiplayer gameplay.

*Orthanc* (1978). These games were largely based on *dnd*, though they offered innovations. For example, they all allowed simultaneous multiplayer romps through their dungeons. Except for *Orthanc*, they also all offered a first-person, 3D view of the dungeons, which would crop up later in Sir-Tech's *Wizardry* games.

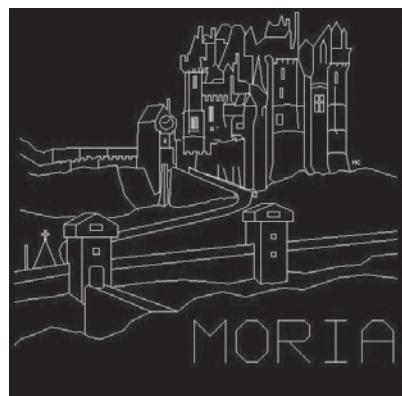
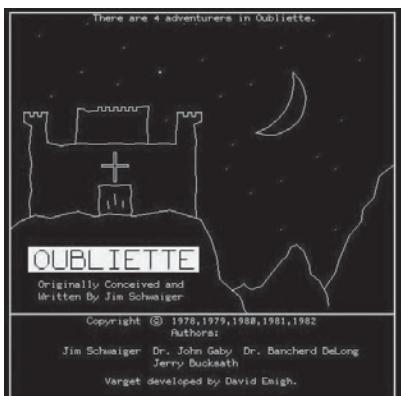
*Moria*, *Avatar*, *Orthanc*, and *Oubliette* are the only PLATO games I've been able to play myself. The version of *Moria* I played was apparently updated in some fashion in 1984, though the earliest copyright notice was 1978. The authors credited for the game are Kevet Duncombe and Jim Battin, and they did some impressive work. The in-game user guide and help options are highly detailed and well written, apparently in stark contrast to most of the early CRPGs for personal computers, which were forced by memory restrictions to print such material in an accompanying manual. Like *Oubliette*, *Moria* offers a tiny first-person, 3D view of wireframe dungeons and allows for multiple players (indeed, many of the more interesting aspects of the game require players to play with a group of other adventurers). There are many intriguing innovations here that I haven't seen in other games, such as a magical string that players can tie in a room and then follow back if they get lost (the manual warns that monsters will occasionally chew through the string). The screen also displays other useful information, such as the player's condition and inventory.

There are only four player stats in *Moria*: cunning, piety, valor, and wizardry, which link up nicely with the four guilds advanced players may join: the Thieves' Guild, the Brotherhood, the Union of Knights, and the Circle of Wizards. Members of these guilds gain special powers that affect the entire group the player is traveling with—for instance, a wizard can teleport the party to a new location. There is also a skill system here that tracks the players' actions and awards skill boosts depending on their frequency. Instead of hit points, characters have vitality, which is used up by engaging in combat or other actions. Vitality will recharge automatically if the player has food and water on hand. All in all, *Moria* is a very playable game with sophisticated gameplay.

*Avatar* is in many ways comparable to *Moria*, though perhaps less inviting to novices. The version I played listed 1979 as the earliest release date, but several later versions were produced (up to 1984). Though I'm not certain of who did what or when, the six authors credited on the menu screen are Bruce Maggs, Andrew Shapira, David Sides, Tom Kirchman, Greg Janusz, and Mark Eastom. *Avatar* is a good example of a game that was freely modified and built up over time—what we now call the open-source or free-software model of development.

The screen setup is almost identical to *Moria's*, though the small first-person view of the dungeon is located in the top center of the screen rather than on the left. *Avatar* offers ten races (including odd ones such as "cillian" and "morloch") and a more traditional stat system with hit points and standard attributes (strength, intelligence, wisdom, constitution, etc.) One of the game's strengths is its extensive inventory of items that range in quality—such as bronze, iron, or steel swords. Combat is very similar to *Moria's*; the player simply exchanges blows in the random encounters until one combatant prevails. The game is quite challenging; I created two different characters, equipped them, and died a few minutes after leaving the safety of the city. No doubt it would be much easier if I were journeying with a party of companions!

*Oubliette* is yet another first-person, 3D game, again with plenty of options for creating rather diverse characters. Of the lot, it's probably the one most closely based on TSR's official rules and J. R. R. Tolkien's writings. There are 15 races with various stat bonuses and penalties, as well as 15 available classes, each with a preferred type of armor, shield, helm, and weapon. Although single characters can wander the dungeons, it's advisable to travel in parties (the manual recommends at least four companions), which can be found in the various taverns in the city. There are also guilds for players to join and "charmees," or animal companions. Combat is also loaded with options, including the unusual option to seduce, which can only be performed by females. A failed seduction can result in instant death, whereas success will force the opponent to become a loyal and dedicated companion. All in



Most PLATO games offer well-drawn introductory splash screens, a tradition that has lasted to modern times.

all, it's a highly sophisticated game. In 1984 it was ported for personal computers by the main author, Jim Schwaiger. We'll talk about this port more in Chapter 6.

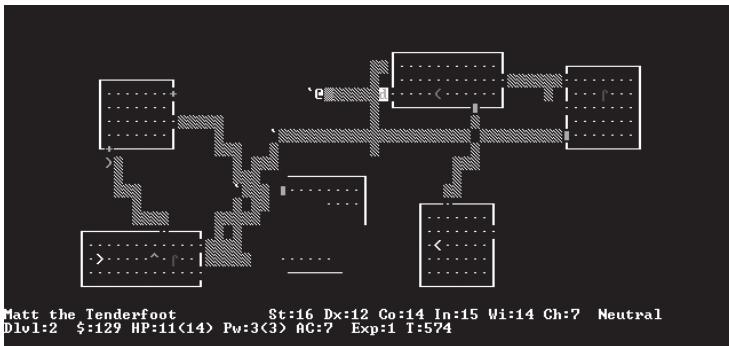
Unlike the previous three games, *Orthanc* offers a top-down perspective and a wonderful automapper tool in the lower right corner. It's quite helpful while exploring the game's 20 levels (based on 24 by 20 cell grids). From what I've been able to ascertain about the game, it's based on the lost *pedit5* and is still undergoing development. For instance, the automapper was apparently added only recently.

Though PLATO is not so well known today, the platform served these pioneering CRPG developers well, and no doubt many successful CRPG developers cut their teeth on these early programs. However, we should of course bear in mind that only a select few had access to these powerful systems; many, if not most, CRPG fans would have to wait for the personal computer revolution before getting hands-on experience with one of these fascinating games.

## Rogues in the Computer Labs

Perhaps the most famous of all the mainframe CRPGs, however, is *Rogue*. The game was created in the early 1980s by Michael Toy and Glenn Wichman, who found that Ken Arnold's "curses" software routines allowed them to create a graphical CRPG for UNIX. The game really gained a boost when it was included with BSD UNIX, a very popular version of the operating system developed at the University of California at Berkeley (where Toy was a student). This meant that the game was now available at university campuses all over the world. Later on, the *Rogue* team signed a deal with Epyx to distribute the game for home computers, but, sadly, their commercial efforts failed miserably (the authors blame piracy). However, the game was wildly popular on the public domain and shareware scenes and has been ported to hundreds of different platforms since its release.

There are three features that set *Rogue* apart from most CRPGs. Perhaps the most obvious distinction is the graphics, which are entirely composed of the character set available on any particular platform; numbers, letters, and symbols are mixed together to depict the scene. For example, the player's character is usually represented with the @ sign. However, a more fundamental characteristic of *Rogue* is that the dungeons are randomized each time a player starts a new game—thus, there are always new areas to



Pictured here is a modern version of *Nethack*, one of the most popular roguelikes.

explore. The mission is simply to descend into the Dungeons of Doom and fetch the Amulet of Yendor (it's easy to see the similarity to Whisenhunt and Wood's earlier *dnd*). Another interesting aspect of the game is that it doesn't offer a General Store where the player can buy new equipment. Instead, all arms, armor, and magic items must be found in the dungeons, either on the floor or on corpses.

*Rogue* inspired hundreds of other games that are usually categorized as "roguelikes." These include *Hack* (1982), *Larn* (1986), *Moria* (1983)<sup>2</sup>, *Ancient Domains of Mystery* (1994), and *Angband* (1990) to name just a few. *Hack* added stores and pets, which follow the player's character and serve as sidekicks, fighting and even leveling up along with the character. *Nethack*, released in 1987, is a later version of *Hack*, whose development was facilitated by the Internet (one of the earlier projects to benefit from the Internet). *Angband* is based on Tolkien's works and has also spawned many derivatives. *Ancient Domains of Mystery*, the most hardcore of the bunch, offers a myriad of options for character development and is celebrated for its die-and-learn gameplay—players are not allowed to have multiple saved versions of their character, so there is no way to restore a dead character.

In 1984, Toy would join with Jon Lane to form Artificial Intelligence Design, a company that published the first commercial version of *Rogue* for the IBM PC and Apple Macintosh platforms. We'll have more to say about these efforts in Chapter 6.

Even for many modern CRPG fans, *Rogue* or one of the many roguelikes are the best games the genre has to offer. Indeed, efforts to update these games with a graphical interface, such as Hansjörg Malthaner's *Iso-Angbad*,

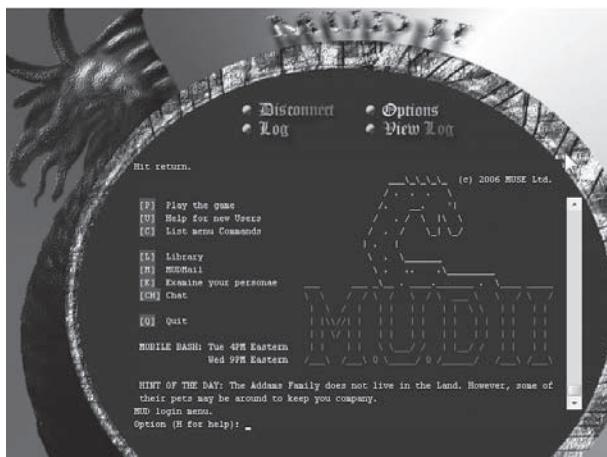
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<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with the earlier *Moria* for PLATO.

have failed to impress fans of the originals. Indeed, in my interview with Malthaner, the developer claimed that “some people were openly hostile towards the idea of a graphical front-end.” To date, most roguelikes are still based on character set-graphics.

## Wallowing in the MUD

I’ve already mentioned a few games that catered to groups of players rather than solo adventurers. As I discussed in Chapter 1, these games typically focus more on social interaction among players rather than on tactical combat and earning experience points. They were well suited for mainframes, where users were already connected via a series of terminals; in short, users were already networked together, so making a multiplayer CRPG was a simple matter of programming. By contrast, owners of home computers were not networked and thus were limited to self-contained games, though proprietary online services such as America Online and CompuServe would grant fee-based access to multiplayer online games (at a price which was compounded if the gamer had to dial long-distance). Furthermore, slow modem speeds and lack of graphics support made anything beyond ASCII-based graphics impractical. In any case, since playing these games could get quite expensive, it wasn’t until the rise of the Internet in the 1990s that graphical MUDs (or MMORPGs, as they would come to be known) really hit the mainstream.



Although MUDs are still primarily text-based, some offer graphical front-ends. Many players still rely on plain old telnet, however.

In short, when we study the history of the MUD, we see quite a lag between the dawn of personal computing and the rise of the Internet (pun intended).<sup>3</sup> Although plenty of single-player CRPGs would be released for machines like the Apple II and Commodore 64, online multiplayer games were mostly limited to gamers with access to a mainframe. The bulk of these were noncommercial, free-to-play games that had few graphics beyond what could be done with text or ASCII characters. Nevertheless, thousands of gamers would come to love these games, and it's understandable why many of them would scorn the humble offerings on personal computers, which didn't allow any of the social elements that made MUDs so addictive and compelling.

Besides the multiplayer PLATO games we discussed earlier, the first known MUD was created in 1979<sup>4</sup> by Roy Trubshaw and later expanded and improved by Richard Bartle. Both men were students at the University of Essex in the UK. Written for the DEC PDP-10 with the TOPS 10 operating system, the game was simply titled *MUD*, an acronym for multiuser dungeon. The name pays homage to an adventure game named *Dungeon*, which would later be published as the *Zork* trilogy by Infocom (both Trubshaw and Bartle had played both *Zork* and *Colossal Cave Adventure*). When Trubshaw was introduced to *Dungeons and Dragons* by Trubshaw, he "got to thinking about writing my own version of ADVENT but based on D&D type character generation."<sup>5</sup> When Trubshaw serendipitously uncovered the source code for *Colossal Cave Adventure*, he was finally inspired enough to begin work on *MUD*, incorporating a database to make the system more efficient to program. When Bartle joined the project, he began creating a dungeon and requested that Trubshaw extend the parser to enable more creative gameplay—including the all-important randomized combat system. After Trubshaw left the

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<sup>3</sup> One of the most common (and detested) problems with MUDs is "lag," or periods in which, for one reason or another, the flow of data from the server to the client is temporarily interrupted. This can have fatal consequences if it occurs in the midst of a battle, but it's always annoying.

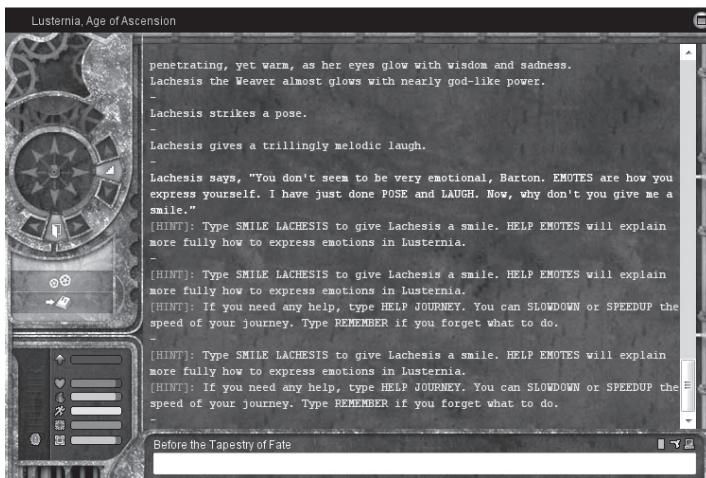
<sup>4</sup> There is some disagreement about the date of the first release. I found two different versions of an email sent by Richard Bartle on Nov. 15, 1990. In one version of this email hosted by the Luleå Academic Computer Society, Bartle is quoted, "Date-wise, it was Spring 1979." In another version of the email hosted by Multi-User Entertainment, the line is "Date-wise, it was Autumn 1978." The *Wikipedia* and most other sources seem to agree with the earlier date.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://archive.gamespy.com/articles/january01/muds1/index5.shtml>. Also, remember that *ADVENT* and *ADVENTURE* are other common names for Crowther and Woods' *Colossal Cave Adventure*.

project, he handed Bartle roughly 25% of the code that Bartle would expand into *MUD*.

*MUD* became wildly popular—so popular, in fact, that administrators fretted the game was wasting too much of their computers' resources. However, the officials allowed gamers to continue to play—so long as they logged on only in the wee hours of the morning, with a bit more flexibility for weekend hours. Even with these restrictions, the game had no shortage of players. Several derivatives were soon underway, including *MIST*, *BLUD*, and *Rock*, a game based on the TV show *Fraggle Rock*. *MUD* was eventually hosted by the commercial CompuServe network under the name *British Legends*, where it attracted a large American following. Once he realized that the game had commercial potential, Bartle officially placed the name *MUD* into the public domain so that it could be used as a generic term rather than a trademark. Besides, according to Bartle, CompuServe found the name unattractive.

The influence of the early text adventures is easy to see in Trubshaw and Bartle's *MUD*, where the main goal is simply to gain enough points to "make wiz." The *Zork*-tradition of finding treasures and depositing them in the right location (in this case the swamp) is preserved, as well as the tongue-in-cheek descriptions of rooms. Furthermore, players can earn points by performing actions (e.g., shaking a baby rattle) as well as in combat. Combat is a relatively simple affair—players simply tell the parser what to kill and what weapon to use. Success boils down to three variables—the character's strength, dexter-

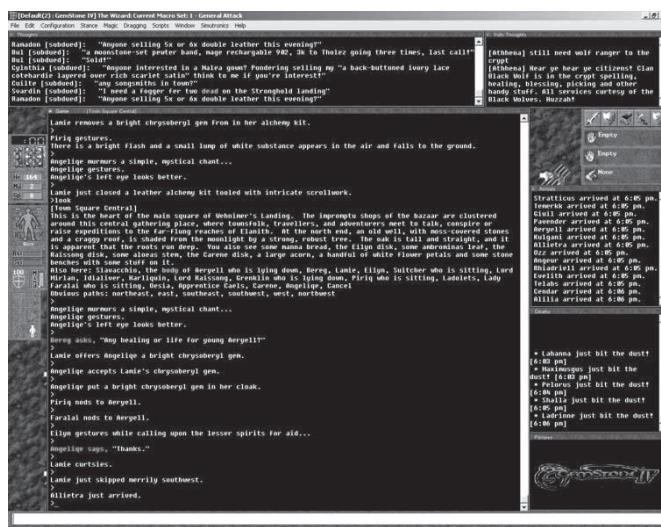


Social skills are very important in almost every *MUD*. Here, a modern *MUD* is explaining the emote function, which allows players to smile, pose, laugh, and so on.

ity, and stamina. As players accumulate points, their characters gain levels, a process that boosts their stats. Furthermore, characters at higher levels have a better percentage of success when trying to cast spells. However, it seems safer to say that the appeal of the game is more about interacting with other players than roaming about the countryside killing things.

Another early MUD that might predate Trubshaw and Bartle's is *Milieu*, a program written by Alan E. Kleitz in 1978. *Milieu* was written in a language called Multi-Pascal and ran on a CDC Cyber mainframe. It was originally intended only for educational purposes, but Kleitz rewrote the game in C and ported it to the IBM XT in 1983, renaming it *Scepter of Goth*. Kleitz ran the system on a pay-to-play system, supporting up to 16 simultaneous users who connected via modem. The system was franchised out, with rates running somewhere between \$2 and \$4 per hour (in addition, of course, to relevant long-distance charges).

Later MUDs, such as *Mirrorworld*, *AberMUD*, *Gods*, and *Shades*, added plenty of new features and polished the design. Some of these were free, but others charged for access and were located on commercial rather than public networks. For instance, Simutronics' *GemStone* series ran on the commercial network GEnie. The game was first demonstrated in 1987 (*GemStone*), play-tested in 1988 (*GemStone II*), and finally officially launched in 1990 (*Gem-*



Even with an elaborate graphical front-end, *Gemstone IV* requires the ability to read and process information quickly.

*Stone III*). By the third iteration, the game was stable and attracting a healthy following (GENie used an interesting gambit to promote the game: some players who found gems in the game would receive real gems as prizes). *GemStone* is based on Iron Crown Enterprises' *Shadow World* campaign setting, a competitor with TSR's *Dungeons and Dragons* franchise. Unfortunately, the relationship faltered, and the developers removed all references to the setting from *GemStone*, a move which also entailed substantial changes to the gameplay mechanics. Shortly afterwards, the game became available on CompuServe and Prodigy, generating another large surge of players. The latest version of the game, *GemStone IV*, is currently offered directly by Simutronics on the web—for \$15 a month.

Flying Buffalo, the role-playing game publisher that introduced *Tunnels and Trolls*, had a different approach to commercial online role-playing with its play-by-mail game *Heroic Fantasy*, which the publisher converted in 1982 for use on an early commercial network called TheSource. When the costs are tallied, this was quite an expensive game to play, and gameplay consisted of only one to two turns per week. It cost \$100 to register and \$10 per hour to access TheSource, and each turn on *Heroic Fantasy* cost \$2.50 (these figures are all in 1982 dollars; adjusting for inflation more than doubles these numbers). The system was no doubt more popular in its play-by-mail pen-and-paper version, in which such costs could be kept within the budgets of more gamers. The high costs of most commercial online games would keep them out of the hands of most gamers until well in the 1980s.

Of course, there was nothing stopping groups of *D&D* fans from forming their own groups to play with over commercial networks. Special interest groups (SIGs) like the GameSIG on CompuServe were popular hubs for this type of grass-roots gameplay. Players and Dungeon Masters simply typed out the things they would ordinarily have said in a tabletop game, such as the result of dice rolls and room descriptions. Participants were often avid gamers who couldn't find fellow gamers in their local area, and again the members of these impromptu groups often became good friends who explored their other mutual interests. Players might also be folks too shy to participate in face-to-face sessions; one magazine describes how a "five-foot tall teenager with a poor complexion can become a courageous fighter" or an "overweight housewife with a sink full of dishes may be transformed into a sylph-like minstrel or a cunning sorceress."<sup>6</sup> Despite these advantages, however, the games came

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<sup>6</sup> See Patricia Fitzgibbons's "Tele-gaming: Fantasy Role-Playing" in the April 1984 edition of *Computer Gaming World*.

at a high price: two hours of gaming per week could cost up to \$50 (or \$103 in 2008 dollars) on CompuServe.

In 1989, an American named James Aspnes authored *TinyMUD*, based largely on an older MUD named *Monster*, an ambitious but poorly written program. *TinyMUD* allowed players to work together to create and extend virtual worlds. Aspnes envisioned it as a “vehicle for user-generated *Adventure*-style puzzles” but soon realized that the “social aspect seemed to be much more important.”<sup>7</sup> Though many users found the creativity liberating and fulfilling, at least a few critics complained about the haphazard construction of the worlds. Furthermore, players spent more time creating new areas than exploring the ones already there. Bartle quipped, “*TinyMUDs* are indeed limited only by the imagination of the builder—with heavy emphasis on the world ‘limited.’”<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, *TinyMUD* became one of the most popular MUDs available on the internet. Aspnes eventually made the source code publicly available, and derivative projects such as *TinyMUCK*, *TinyMUSH*, and *TinyMOO* quickly followed. One revealing aspect of these derivates is their new acronyms; the multiuser dungeons were evolving away from their roots in fantasy role-playing and towards more general uses as online social environments, in essence becoming little more than sophisticated chat programs.

What’s interesting about the history of MUDs is how they slowly evolve (or, I suppose, some might say “devolve”) from gaming to socializing. Even in MUDs that place more priority on combat and leveling up, there is still a strong emphasis on conversing with other players; indeed, several people have found their spouses on MUDs, and MUD weddings are commonplace. In my own extensive experience playing MUDs throughout the mid-1990s, I saw the pattern repeated many times. First, players are obsessed with roll-playing, that is, with finding the best equipment, fighting monsters, gaining levels, and rising in rank. Eventually, though, they are drawn into parties of other adventurers, where they not only pool their resources to fight bigger battles but also make friends. Inevitably, the player will spend more time socializing with these friends, or role-playing, than going on quests or earning experience points. After a certain point, actually playing the game is worthwhile only when a player’s friends are not online. Bartle describes this phenom-

<sup>7</sup> These comments are from an email interview I conducted with Aspnes in July of 2007.

<sup>8</sup> For Bartle’s thoughts on a whole range of MUDs, see <http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/imucg5.htm>.

enon as the main sequence, borrowing the term from the entropy of the life of stars.

It's for this reason that I insist on maintaining a distinction between MUDs (and their descendants, MMORPGs) and CRPGs. Although the two are related and have much in common, the socializing impulse of MUD players is too strong to ignore. We'll come back to this topic in later chapters that explore the rise of MMORPGs, so let's end our analysis of MUDs for the moment.

## The End of the Dark Ages

As we've seen, the early history of both CRPGs and MUDs is often obscure. Since so many of these early yet pivotal games were intentionally deleted, poorly documented, or simply forgotten, reliable facts are hard to come by. This makes identifying the first CRPG a risky business. Indeed, as we'll soon see in the next chapter, it's just as difficult to name the first CRPG available for home computers, since publishers had a bad habit of postdating their copyright notices, and few had an adequate understanding of copyright law (a dire situation that led to countless court cases throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s).

Nevertheless, with the arrival of the first commercial games for home computers, history becomes much easier to document. For one thing, it's much easier to acquire these games and run them on a modern computer, whereas we must rely on second-hand accounts of games such as *pedit5* and *orthanc*. Emulating a PLATO system, while certainly possible, is not an endeavor to be undertaken casually, particularly by people who aren't already familiar with the platform. Also, once game developers began releasing their games commercially, they had a greater stake in asserting authorship and protecting their code. In the next chapter, we'll explore the earliest CRPGs available for home computers. They debuted during a period of bold but often crude experimentation I've termed the Bronze Age.

# 4

## The Bronze Age

By the late 1970s, America was getting its first taste of the personal computer revolution. 1977 in particular is a vital year for the industry, seeing the introduction of three historic machines: the Apple II, Tandy's TRS-80, and the Commodore PET. Though astonishing for their time, these computers were woefully underpowered compared to IBM or DEC's families of mainframes. Nevertheless, the home, or personal, computer opened up a world of possibilities for game programmers, who at last saw the potential to earn real profits with their favorite hobby. This trend would only increase as hardware dropped in price while simultaneously skyrocketing in performance. Personal computers were emerging from the extreme niche audience of a few dedicated hobbyists to the public at large.<sup>1</sup> There was money—serious money—to be made in this new industry.

Indeed, it's this profit motive that marks the steep contrast between the old mainframe programming days and the personal computer revolution. While the older culture operated mostly on what we'd today call an open-source or free-software model, in which many programmers freely share their code, the personal computer culture would operate on much different assumptions.<sup>2</sup> The most obvious and important difference is the much larger

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the earliest home computers were sold in kits that required an astonishing level of technical knowledge, precision, and dedication to assemble. These kits had little appeal to users other than hardcore hobbyists.

<sup>2</sup> The reason for this divide is that the early hardware manufacturers (particularly IBM) assumed the money was in the hardware and made little effort to protect their software, generally benefiting from improvements suggested or implemented by others outside the company. Other software was typically made in-house and was of little use outside the company or institute that designed it. This would all change

market for software. Whereas before, the computer industry consisted of a few hundred giant mainframes sprinkled across the country and used primarily for serious applications, Apple and other manufacturers were putting computers in front of thousands of eager consumers with leisure time and disposable income. Furthermore, although some computer makers, such as Texas Instruments, discouraged third-party software development, most actively encouraged it, and profits soared.

Besides marginal but ever-present public-domain programs, the bulk of software is designed to be sold and protected by whatever copy protection and legal apparatus can be mustered to support the publisher. Rather than view themselves as part of an open community, commercial game developers live with fierce economic competition, and code is understandably treated as a trade secret. After all, clever and innovative code might give the developer a critical edge—to give it away could be financially suicidal. Furthermore, whereas in the older culture games and other programs were often freely distributed, without fear of legal retribution, the new culture deemed this piracy and fought it vigorously.

Although there are many reasons for the shift towards proprietary software, perhaps the most obvious is the emphasis on removable storage media, such as data cassette drives, floppy diskettes, and ROM cartridges. Relatively few personal computers were equipped with modems, and even the ones that were suffered miserably slow transfer rates over copper phone lines—not to mention the steep fees incurred by long distance charges and commercial telecomm networks. The vast majority of software would not be downloaded, but purchased from the store in a package, just like any other widget. This model made sense to American consumers, but it led to a fundamental difference in the way most personal computer owners viewed software—as a product to be purchased, not as a resource to be shared. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your perspective), not all personal computer owners were happy buying software, and some resorted to making their own copies and distributing them among their friends or the many user groups or computer clubs that had sprung up across the country. Later in the 1980s, this distribution would be enhanced by the rise of BBS, of bulletin board systems that allowed personal computers equipped with modems to, among other things, illegally exchange commercial games via telephone lines. The industry's fight against piracy will play out all through the rest of this book, and we'll see many clever

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dramatically in the 1980s as a result of the separation of hardware manufacturers and software publishers.

(and some not so clever) techniques devised to stamp it out. Many failed game publishers have cited piracy as the cause of their downfall, though it's always possible that other factors—such as quality—were also responsible.

Besides concerns about illegal distribution, the neophyte industry also began grappling with legal issues of trademarks and copyrights. As with the early mainframe programmers, many makers of commercial software for home computers freely borrowed from tabletop role-playing games such as TSR's *D&D* as well as literary sources such as J. R. R. Tolkien or the TV show *Star Trek*. Although these borrowings went unnoticed for a brief while, when the publishers and copyright holders caught on, they demanded the infringing games be taken off the shelves. Later on, TSR and other publishers of tabletop games would forge lucrative licensing agreements with computer game developers, proving that their trademarks and copyrights were well worth protecting.

As we might expect, the first CRPGs for home computers are quite crude compared to later games. Programmers had to work with extreme restrictions on memory, and graphics technology was severely limited in terms of resolution and the number of colors that could be displayed on screen. Unlike modern programmers, who have a deep well of previous triumphs and proven routines to draw from, the first CRPG developers had to find their own solutions. Furthermore, concerns about copyrights and competition also drove them to make efforts to protect their code, a situation that led to the constant reinvention of the wheel. Nevertheless, even in the face of these problems, aspiring programmers turned out games that demonstrated the true potential of the CRPG, laying the foundation for the countless games to follow. Though few of the games we'll discuss in this chapter are in use much today, they play a vital role in the history of the CRPG and are eminently worthy of our attention.

## The First CRPGs for Personal Computers

While it would certainly be satisfying to identify a single game as the first CRPG to grace a home computer, doing so would be irresponsible at best. First, there could have been any number of hobby programmers who created workable CRPG games for their own enjoyment (or perhaps for a group of close friends) and never released them to the public. During the early days of home computing, one of the main appeals was learning to program and thereby learning the skills necessary to procure a good job in the burgeoning indus-

try. Many students set themselves the daunting task of building a CRPG, and a few succeeded. Richard Garriott claims to have written 27 CRPGs before 1979. Garriott's games were text based, but other programmers may have integrated graphics into their projects. My guess is that most of the earliest programs were used as aids for the tabletop version of *D&D*, taking over the burdensome task of calculating and maybe even dice rolling for the Dungeon Master. I'd consider these to be utility programs rather than games, and they are a fairly common find in shareware or public domain libraries.<sup>3</sup>

Even when dealing strictly with commercial releases, we encounter inconsistencies regarding copyright notices (the game itself might indicate one year, and the box or printed materials another). Simply knowing the year often won't help us much, since we'd need more specific dates to make an accurate judgment. Furthermore, developers then and now have an interest in being "first" with a new concept, and not just for the prestige—no one wants to risk being sued for copyright infringement or accused of blatantly ripping off a competitor. A logical course of action might be simply to contact the publishers themselves and ask to see their official records, but many of them are long defunct, their records long since lost or destroyed. As far as software catalogs are concerned, these can at best give us only a rough idea of when the game was available to a certain company, not necessarily when it first appeared on shelves. Finally, promotional materials are also untrustworthy, since it was then (and still is) a common practice to assert that a new game was to be released on a certain date, only to have it show up much later—or never. Computer magazines of the era are loaded with ads for such vaporware.

Perhaps we should adapt an observation of Francis Darwin, son of the famous scientist,<sup>4</sup> to suit our own ends: "In science the credit goes to the man who convinces the world, not the man to whom the idea first occurs." Even if Richard Garriott's games weren't the first CRPGs to hit home computers, there's really no doubt that his early work was by far the most influential.

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<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.dndadventure.com/dnda\\_dm\\_resources.html](http://www.dndadventure.com/dnda_dm_resources.html) for a huge list of such programs for modern PCs.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Darwin faced a similar problem regarding his theory of evolution by natural selection. A fellow scientist named Alfred Russel Wallace had developed the same theory independently of Darwin but made the "mistake" of sending his manuscript to Darwin for review. Darwin, who had been sitting on his thumbs regarding publication of his theory, was stunned by Wallace's manuscript and rushed his own off to the publisher in fear that he might be scooped. At any rate, Darwin is the man we remember as the father of evolution, and few know of Wallace today.

The earliest CRPGs for personal computers I've been able to find are Joseph Power's *Wizard's Castle*; Donald Brown's *Eamon*; Edu-Ware's *Space*; Highland Computer Services' *The Tarturian*; Synergistic Software's *Dungeon Campaign*, *Wilderness Campaign*; Automated Simulations' *Dunjonquest: Temple of Apshai*; and Richard Garriott's *Akalabeth: World of Doom*. The last two are the best known today, since they launched important franchises that lasted well into the 1980s and 2000s, respectively. A close look at each of these games will give us a pretty good idea of what CRPG fans of the late 1970s could expect from their shiny new personal computers.

## *Wizard's Castle* and *Eamon*

The first two games I'd like to discuss are good examples of how the early computer gaming industry was much different from what we see later. *Wizard's Castle*, for instance, was not released on disk or cassette but rather printed in a magazine. This practice, virtually unheard of today, was common in days when removable storage media (e.g., cassettes and diskettes) were prohibitively expensive. Furthermore, since most computers had such limited supplies of memory, games were by necessity written in as few lines of code as possible—fully playable games could be typed out in as little as a few hours by a good typist. Besides, many people bought computers specifically to learn programming, and typing in games seemed like an easy (if not altogether effective) way to pursue that goal. *Wizard's Castle*, then, was one of no doubt many of these games that were fun to play and helpful to other aspiring CRPG developers.

Originally written by Joseph R. Power for Exidy's obscure Sorcerer platform, *Wizard's Castle* was eventually ported to a variety of systems, a relatively easy feat since it was programmed in BASIC. Of course, it is a fairly simple game, with no graphics and only a meager story. The player's character ("a bold youth") must descend into the subterranean castle of the gnomic wizard Zot to fetch the all-powerful Orb of Zot. Nevertheless, players could choose a race (elf, dwarf, man, or hobbit) as well as gender and allocate attribute points into three stats: strength, intelligence, and dexterity. They could purchase armor, weapons, lamps, and flares. Players could also find magical items that benefited them in various ways, such as a green gem that prevents memory loss, an opal eye that cures blindness, or manuals that permanently boost stats. Again, what's most impressive about this game is that all of these features were crammed into some five thousand lines of code! The game is survived today by a freeware version with sprite-based graphics, programmed

by a man calling himself “Derelict” who also hosts the source code to the original game.<sup>5</sup>

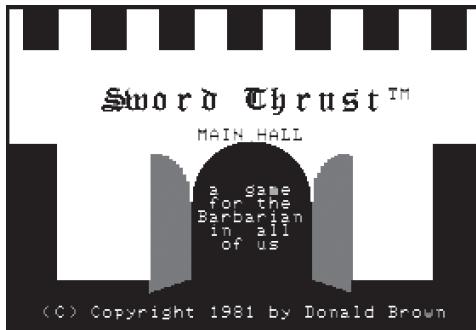
In an email exchange with me concerning his game, Power remarked that his first encounter with a CRPG was at a science fiction convention held in 1975. Power was presented with a very obscure mainframe game named *HOBBIT*, which featured “minimal character creation” and a “messy” stat-based combat system. Power remembers playing the game via a printer terminal (there was no monitor display). Nevertheless, Power enjoyed the game and decided he wanted to make his own, though improving on the areas he found deficient.

Donald Brown’s *Eamon*, also known as *The Wonderful World of Eamon*, was never released commercially but was distributed as part of the Apple II’s public domain library, particularly by the many Apple user groups. The game is mostly text-based and resembles a text adventure, but is focused on “defeating horrible monsters and finding glorious treasures.” The CRPG elements are fairly simple, such as a three-attribute system based on hardiness, agility, and charisma. There are five types of weapons and three types of armor, and characters slowly gain proficiency with them with time and experience (e.g., the more hits a player lands with an axe, the greater the player’s likelihood of doing so again; luck slowly becomes skill). There is also a rudimentary magic system based on four spells. The system was later expanded by John Nelson and Tom Zuchowski after Brown left to focus on *Sword Thrust*, a commercial project.

Perhaps what is far more interesting about *Eamon* is the ease with which other people could create their own modules or expansions to the game. The distribution included a Dungeon Designer Diskette that allowed players to make their own adventures for *Eamon*, and these did not need to be fantasy-based. Over 250 games were developed for the system, with dozens of writers contributing their talents to the project. The system was eventually ported to other platforms, including MS-DOS, and developers are still making modules and improving the code even today.<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on user-generated content would crop up again later, most noticeably after the rise of the Internet, which greatly facilitated this type of grass-roots development. BioWare’s *Neverwinter Nights* (2002) is a recent striking example of this phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> The source code for the Heath Microsoft BASIC version and Derelict’s remake are available at <http://home.comcast.net/~derelict/winwiz.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://eamon-guild.blogspot.com/> and <http://www.eamonag.org/whatsnew.htm>.



With the exception of this colorful splash screen, *Sword Thrust* is a text-only game.

Brown's commercial project *Sword Thrust*, published in 1981 by CE Software, is quite similar to the public domain version, though with some nice innovations such as save game capability, the ability to wield a weapon in the left hand, new spells, a fatigue system, and a separate window for the room description and the player's status. A further complication was the vulnerability of weapons and armor, which, like the real objects, break under trying conditions. Like the earlier *Eamon*, *Sword Thrust* is a modular system, and seven expansions were published—six by Brown himself, and the last, "The Hall of Alchemie," by Peter Wityk. The series fared fairly well, and contemporary reviewers praised it by comparing it to the popular skills-based fantasy role-playing game *Runequest*. However, unlike *Eamon*, *Sword Thrust* is rarely spoken of or played today.

### Edu-Ware's *Space and Empire*

Edu-Ware's *Space* was developed by Steven Pederson and Sherwin Steffin, and probably released in 1979 (though some sources posit 1978). As the name suggests, Edu-Ware was primarily a publisher of educational software, though the company also produced some truly innovative CRPGs they called interactive fantasies. *Space*, a science fiction CRPG, is set in a futuristic society and is based on the *Traveller* tabletop role-playing game developed by Game Designers Workshop (GDW). Like *Traveller*, *Space* avoids the common practice of starting the player off with a weak and unprepared character. Instead, players can specify how long and what kind of training their character has already received, as well as a career path (Army, Navy, Scouts, Merchant Marines, or other services)—assuming the player isn't content simply to be drafted. After this selection, the character is run through a series of physical and psychological tests to determine his or her suitability. I had to



Early space sim games such as *Empire: World Builders* immersed gamers in a galaxy of detail.

create several characters before finding one who wasn't too "out of touch with reality," and the game advised me to create a new character rather than play as a "defective product." Likewise, I struggled with all sorts of health issues that rendered me unfit for combat, such as 30 decibels of hearing loss and cardiovascular problems. Though the game is mostly text-based, the level of detail is staggering!

Players also have considerable choices to make regarding how the character is trained, though much depends on the results of the initial exams. For instance, a character with little education may wish to focus on learning, whereas other characters may want to focus on skills such as bribery or operating all-terrain vehicles. These four-year training cycles are repeated throughout the character's life. Between these training periods, the player can embark on six different scenarios, which range from defending a planet from aliens to engaging in the stock market. All in all, *Space* is an amazingly ambitious game. In 1979, Edu-ware released *Space II*, an expansion containing two additional scenarios, one of which was "Psychodelia." This scenario puts the player on "the Zintarian colony, homeworld of the Galaxy's supply of recreational drugs."<sup>7</sup> Characters can explore these drugs at their own discretion, though doing so can have either positive or highly negative effects: "It is up to the player to determine the exact nature of a drug through experimentation, knowledge of the character, and clues provided by the program." The other scenario was hardly less controversial—this time the player was out to recruit followers into his or her religion. Needless to say, such gameplay is hardly typical of most CRPGs, then or now.

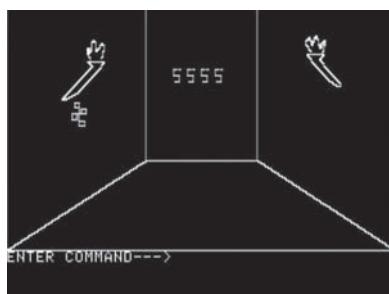
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<sup>7</sup> These quotations are taken from the game's manual.

Unfortunately for Edu-Ware, GDC, the makers of *Traveller*, were not pleased when they discovered *Space*. The game clearly violated their copyrights, and neither Steven Pederson nor Sherwin Steffin had bothered to ask them for permission beforehand. GDC planned to release its own computerized version of the game and viewed *Space* as unfair competition.<sup>8</sup> The game was taken off the shelves, and David Mullich was asked to remove the infringing material and salvage the rest for a new game. That project eventually became a trilogy named *Empire*, which was published exclusively for the Apple II between 1981 and 1984, offering better graphics and sound than their predecessors. The award-winning games were ahead of their time but have faded into obscurity.

### *The Tarturian*

An even more obscure game from this era is *The Tarturian*, a graphical Apple II game released in 1980 (some sources claim 1981). The game is similar to Sierra On-Line's classic *Mystery House* (1980), the first known graphical adventure game. Unfortunately, the game depends heavily on its printed manual to guide the player—which literally stops players at the gate if they don't know the right command to start the game. Much of the gameplay consists of exploring the 160 rooms, “gathering weapons and treasure that will prepare you for the final battle against the TARTURIAN,” though there are plenty of adventure game elements such as deciphering the “YUMMY YAKKY’s”



Early CRPGs were virtually unplayable without the printed manual, which listed possible commands and described what the crude graphics were supposed to represent.

<sup>8</sup> Despite some ambitious plans announced as early as 1982, GDC wouldn't officially license any games until the 1990s.

secret code and navigating mazes. The simplistic combat system would hardly impress *D&D* fans, and the text parser is crude even by 1980 standards.

One aspect of the game that would be duplicated in other games of this type is the effects of class selection on gameplay. Rather than control a single character of a given class, the player is put in charge of a large team (ten each) of the various classes. The classes (cleric, thief, gladiator, strongman, magician, elf, or wizard) have certain powers that are needed at various points in the game. For instance, only the thief can pick locks, and only the strongman can move or smash things. However, only the character leading the party can perform actions, so the player must change to another character to find the right way to solve a puzzle. To further complicate matters, slave traders roam the dungeons and will randomly capture a number of the party (say, three clerics, four thieves, two gladiators, and so on). Creatures can also randomly attack and kill the leader, at which point the mortician takes over. Thankfully, the player has some 40 morticians in the party to handle the burial of dead teammates!

The game is virtually unknown today, but at least one well-known modern developer, John Romero, liked it enough to contribute a description of it for the website *Mobygames*.<sup>9</sup>

## *Odyssey: The Compleat Apventure*

Sometime between 1979 and 1980, a programmer and entrepreneur named Robert Clardy formed Synergistic Software, which he used to publish his game *Dungeon Campaign, Wilderness Campaign* for the Apple II. As the name implies, this is a game consisting of two scenarios, though both are quite similar in terms of gameplay. Featuring an overhead map view combined with text, the game puts the player in charge of an army of nameless adventurers—and the numbers can swell to well over 90. The group roams either a dungeon or the countryside looking for treasure to claim and monsters to fight. Combat is a relatively simple affair that depends mostly on the size of the combatants' armies and the quality of their equipment, though other elements such as a luck roll are factored in. The luck roll is an interesting twist: random numbers rapidly flash on the screen, and the player must hit the spacebar at the opportune moment to secure the best roll for the party. The player then rolls again for the enemy—this time hoping for a low roll, naturally. There is also an innovative haggling system based on the player's charisma, which is randomly assigned at the start of the game. Players can attempt to wheedle

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.mobygames.com/game/apple2/tarturian>.



Clardy's *Odyssey* game may look crude today but was praised at the time for its intuitive interface and colorful graphics.

down merchants, but they run the risk of offending them—in which case the merchant will permanently withdraw the item.

Obviously, winning victories calls for a large party, but this comes at a price—the player must feed the party, and the men can only carry so much weight (which must also include the treasure). The weight limits and food requirements lend the game a more sophisticated strategic element than is present in many games. The player must constantly think about feeding and equipping a large army, making the game seem more like a strategy game than a true CRPG.

After *Dungeon Campaign*, *Wilderness Campaign*, Clardy produced *Odyssey: The Compleat Apventure*. It features better graphics than his previous effort, but borrows heavily from the previous game. However, rather than present players with two distinct campaigns, this game strings three scenarios together into an epic. The resulting product felt like a much larger game than many gamers had experienced before.

The first chapter takes place on a dangerous, monster-infested island. The party must explore it, searching for treasure and items necessary to proceed to the next level. Specifically, the party must procure a ship and sails, but also a variety of apparently useless items (such as a monkey) that are needed to complete the game. The second chapter is solved when the player finds a magical weapon and arrives at the island of an evil wizard, who must be vanquished in the third chapter after the party overcomes some obstacles. *Odyssey* was a surprisingly ambitious project that received praise from critics and was popular among Apple II gamers. Clardy published a sequel called *Apventure to Atlantis*, which also sold well. Surprisingly, despite some rather innovative gameplay and a fairly intuitive interface, Clardy's games are virtually unknown by modern fans of the genre.

## *Dunjonquest: The Birth of Apshai*

Compared to the other games we've discussed, Automated Simulations' *Dunjonquest: Temple of Apshai* (c. 1979) is much better known. No doubt, part of its success is due to the exposure it received by virtue of being ported to so many different platforms—it originated on the TRS-80 and was soon ported to the Commodore PET. Later ports include the Apple II (1980), Atari computer (1981), DOS (1982), and the Commodore VIC-20 and 64 (1983). For many non-Apple II owners, the *Apshai* games were likely the first (if not the only) commercial CRPGs available for their systems. Automated Simulations would later change its name to Epyx and produce several other top-selling games throughout the 1980s, only to go bankrupt in 1989.

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Dunjonquest* is its manual, which offers a colorful overview of fantasy role-playing games and their unique appeal. The following excerpt provides a good gist of the style and tone of the work:

Did you grow up in the company of the Brothers Grimm, Snow White, the Red Fairy Book, Flash Gordon serials, The Three Musketeers, the knights of the Round Table, or any of the three versions of The Thief of Bagdad? Have you read the Lord of the Rings, the Worm Ouroboros, The Incomplete Enchanter, or Conan the Conqueror? Have you ever wished you could cross swords—just for fun—with Cyrano or D'Artagnan, or stand by their sides in the chill light of dawn, awaiting the arrival of the Cardinal's Guard? Ever wondered how you'd have done against the Gorgon, the hydra, the bane of Heorot Hall, or the bull that walks like a man? [...] If any or all of your answers are "yes," you're a player of role-playing games—or you ought to be.<sup>10</sup>

The manual goes on at some length in this fashion, arguing that "RPGs allow you a chance to step outside a world grown too prosaic for magic and monsters." Games like *Dunjonquest* allow nerds and other social outcasts to test their mettle and "can and often do become, for both you and your character, a way of life."

What's perhaps even more intriguing is how the manual argues that the CRPG is simply a more convenient way to engage in fantasy role-playing, portraying the tabletop version as tedious and time-consuming: "Ordinary role-playing games require a group of reasonably experienced players, an

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<sup>10</sup> The manual is available online at [http://www.cstone.net/~rich/Temple/temple\\_of\\_apshai.html](http://www.cstone.net/~rich/Temple/temple_of_apshai.html).

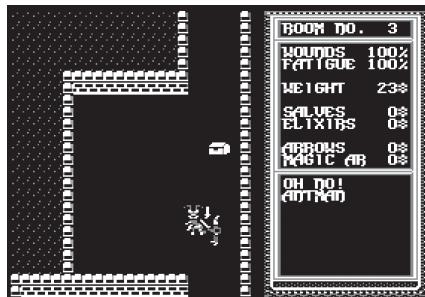
imaginative dunjonmaster willing to put in the tremendous amount of time necessary to construct a functioning fantasy world, and large chunks of playing time." Indeed, the manual insists that "twenty-four hour marathons are not unheard of." What the CRPG offers is a preconstructed world and fast, error-free calculation of all those complicated math problems.

However, anyone familiar with the tabletop game realized that there was more to the game than calculation—there are also the elements of role-playing and making important decisions that directly affect the narrative. The manual acknowledges the "greater practical limits to your actions" imposed by computerized role-playing, but argues that there are still "a large number of options to choose from." Indeed, many of the more intriguing features of the game seem to be attempts to bridge the gap between RPGs and CRPGs. As with *Odyssey*, players can haggle with the storekeeper. Furthermore, much of the in-game text is in character, with medieval dialectical markers such as *ye* for *you* and *thy* for *your*.

The manual also includes textual descriptions of each room of the dungeon—probably a concession to the limited memory of early home computers. However, these brief prose passages are also reminiscent of the way a real dungeon master might describe a room. Here is the description of Room 15:

Room Fifteen is an irregular cave of native rock. The walls and floor are covered with a heavy matting of multi-hued moss. The walls are brilliant reds, greens, and blues, while the floor is a pastel yellow. A wooden box lies topless in the middle of the cavern floor. Inside lies a well-made cloak. The material of the cloak seems to shimmer in the torchlight.

Obviously, these descriptions add a great deal of important context and ambiance to the game, making the manual a necessary part of gameplay. In-



The *Apshai* games offered more intuitive gameplay and better graphics than most of the competition. Players could look up the Room Number in the manual to read a description of the scene.

terestingly, though, the same feature would show up in some later games, such as Interplay's *Wasteland* and SSI's *Pool of Radiance* (both 1988). My guess is that by then, placing important information in a game manual was a subtle form of copy protection, since the necessity of making photocopies would add considerably to the costs of illegal distribution.

Another important aspect of the *Apshai* games is the combat system. The manual claims that the developers were inspired by "historical research, a knowledge of various martial arts, and practical experience in the Society for Creative Anachronisms." In any case, there is a fatigue system that limits how often the character can attack and how far he can run (the character's wounds and the weight of his equipment also influence the fatigue rate). The character can also "hearken," or listen for the presence of a monster in an adjoining room, and even try to talk monsters out of combat. If a character dies, he suffers one of four fates—consumption by a roaming monster, or rescue by a dwarf, mage, or cleric. If the dwarf or mage performs the rescue, the character loses equipment. The game also allows for ranged combat (bow and arrow), which is an effective way to dispatch monsters without risking damage. Unlike most games of the era, the *Apshai* series is set in real-time. Even if the player is away from the keyboard, the monsters will continue to roam about the dungeons.

While the player's goals are typical of CRPGs of this era—explore ruins, loot as much as possible, and kill anything that gets in your way—critics still found much to praise. In a 1979 review of the game published in the very first issue of *Compute!*, Len Lindsay describes it as "a game for anyone who is tired of simple 'video games.'" The game was even named "Computer Game of the Year" by the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Design.

*Temple of Apshai* was followed by *Datestones of Ryn* (1979), *Morloc's Tower* (1979), and *Curse of Ra* (1982). The Apshai or related games and expansions include *Hellfire Warrior* (1980), *The Keys of Acheron* (1981), *Upper Reaches of Apshai* (1981), and *Gateway to Apshai* (1983). Epyx released the Trilogy compilation for a variety of platforms in 1983, but perhaps the best of these was the Commodore Amiga version released in 1986. The Trilogy combined all of the sequels and add-ons and offered enhanced graphics and sounds. Anyone seriously desiring to play the series today may prefer the Amiga version's enhanced graphics and control scheme, though purists still prefer the older versions. In any case, the Trilogy sold very well and was, for many players, the first time they had experienced this wonderful series—making it both a Bronze Age as well as a Silver Age phenomenon.

A final game we should discuss is *Dragon's Eye*, published by Automated Simulations and released in 1981 for the Apple II and the Commodore PET, and later for Atari's 400 and 800 computers. Developed by Southern Software, *Dragon's Eye* is one of many games that cross the sort of twitch gameplay found in most arcade games with the more cerebral pleasures of the CRPG. After choosing a name, title, and preferred type of sword, the player is presented with a complex map (almost a schematic diagram) that offers a view of the land (movement is essentially a matter of traveling between interconnected nodes on this map). It doesn't take long, however, for the character to randomly encounter a monster. During these combat sequences, the perspective shifts to third-person, and we see the character standing to the left and the monster on the right of the screen. A real-time battle commences, and players must select and properly time their attacks if they wish to win. For instance, hitting "F" fires an arrow; this must be done quickly, before the monster gets too near the character. After that, players can hit "C" to chop, "S" to smash, or so on depending on what type of sword their character is wielding. Complex strategies are possible, such as leaping forward several steps, stabbing, and withdrawing before the monster can react. The ultimate goal of *Dragon's Eye* is to find the titular amulet and return to Fel City before 21 days have gone by (we find similar fetch quests in many games of the era).

Unfortunately, despite all of its innovations, *Dragon's Eye* is seldom played or even mentioned today. However, it does illustrate how long CRPG developers have been experimenting with inserting arcade elements into their games, perhaps in a futile attempt to interest gamers more familiar with *Pac-Man* than paladins. We'll see such grafting in many other games, especially when we discuss Sierra's *Quest for Glory* series.

## *Akalabeth: The Birth of Ultima*

By far the most famous game that emerges from the Bronze Age is *Akalabeth: World of Doom*, known by many fans today as *Ultima 0*. It's the game that launched the career of Richard Garriott, who calls himself "Lord British" (a nickname he received during high school summer studies at Oklahoma University). Garriott was obsessed both with computer programming and fantasy role-playing and earned a reputation not only for his keen intelligence, but also for his determination and attention to detail. He claims to have written 27 "small fantasy roleplaying games" during high school, but it wasn't until after he graduated and started work at a Texas computer store that he be-

gan work on *Akalabeth*.<sup>11</sup> The store's owner was happy to let Garriott write a new game on the new Apple II+ computer, the next generation of the nearly highly successful platform.

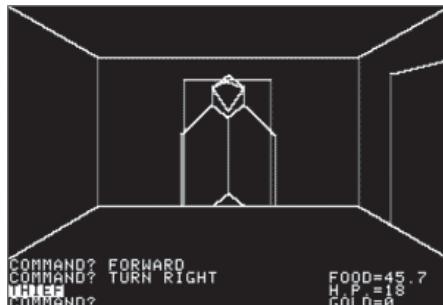
Garriott called his game *Akalabeth* and was convinced by his employer to self-publish it. However, he'd only sold five copies before being summoned to California to sign a contract with California Pacific, a large software publisher at the time. Garriott's boss had been impressed enough with the game to send it the company, and it's easy to see why. Whereas most CRPGs of the era are crude, text-only affairs, *Akalabeth* offers a mix of first-person perspective (with wireframe graphics) in the dungeons and top-down views on the surface, a clever technique that made the virtual world seem much larger and that would show up in several later games. What's perhaps most impressive about the game is that it is entirely written in AppleSoft BASIC; one might easily suppose such a feat would require a more advanced and powerful language.<sup>12</sup> The game sold tens of thousands of copies, earning Garriott a tidy income and no doubt stoking his ambition.

The name *Akalabeth* is a somewhat obscure reference to Tolkien's work, specifically the fourth part of *The Silmarillion*. However, the name seems intended as a sign of respect, since Tolkien's story has little in common with the game. In fact, *Akalabeth*'s storyline is a subtle variation on the hopelessly clichéd "stop the evil wizard before he takes over the world" plot. In this case, the wizard has already been dispatched by Lord British, "Bearer of the White Light," but his monsters still roam about the dungeons beneath Akalabeth. Lord British charges the player with the task of sanitizing these dank chambers. Of course, the player will also help himself to whatever treasure he finds there, and gain experience with each vanquished foe. As the player completes quests for Lord British (mostly consisting of killing increasingly ferocious critters), the noble liege advances him in rank from peasant to knight.

When players begin *Akalabeth*, they are presented with a few text screens with information about the game. The first establishes the back story. Subsequent screens explain the player's stats, list the keyboard commands, and so on. Finally, players are given the choice between playing as a fighter or magi. As might be expected, the fighter can't use the magic amulet, whereas the magi can't fight with rapiers or bows (though axes are allowed). The magic

<sup>11</sup> See "Inside Ultima IV" in issue #26 of *Computer Gaming World* (1986).

<sup>12</sup> This fact also made it very easy for players to cheat, since they could list the source code and make whatever changes they wanted.



Richard Garriott considered *Akalabeth* an amateurish product, though it pioneered the type of first-person gameplay seen in many later CRPGs.

amulet was a powerful but unpredictable item—sometimes it even turns the player into a mighty Lizard Man.

Although the players can select a difficulty level from 1 to 10, the game is always challenging since the character gobble down food with every step. If the food supply runs out, it's game over—a situation that can easily put even the most powerful players in an unwinnable situation. To make matters even worse, thieves roaming about the dungeons are more than adept at swiping the character's gear, so players learn to carry a few extra of each item as a precaution.

Many claim that *Akalabeth* was the first commercial CRPG for personal computers, but this is rather unlikely. The claim hinges on whether the game was officially released in 1979 or 1980. The individually numbered disks for Garriott's own release (the one before California Pacific) clearly state "©Richard Garriott 1980." However, Garriott himself claims that it was first sold in the summer of 1979. In any case, even if the game were in fact released then, there is a good chance that it was predicated by some of the other games we discussed (such as Clardy's *Dungeon Campaign*, *Wilderness Campaign* or Automated Simulations' *Dunjonquest: Temple of Apshai*). Edu-ware's *Space* may well have appeared as early as 1978. In any case, if history is indeed written by the winners, there can be no doubt that Garriott is the clear victor. Unlike most of these other developers, Garriott would continue to exert a formative influence on the genre throughout most of the next two decades, whereas the rest would find themselves in the "Where are they now?" file, seldom discussed by anyone but historians.

*Akalabeth* was ported to the PC and rereleased in 1997 as part of Origin's *Ultima Collection*, where it was given the name *Ultima 0*. Unfortunately,

this collection hasn't been published for some time and is a collector's item. It's also been made into a game for mobile phones.<sup>13</sup>

## The End of the Dark Ages

The first batch of CRPGs for personal computers was at best ambitious, at worst virtually unplayable. It's not hard to see why. The programmers worked virtually without precedent, save for those few lucky enough to have played mainframe CRPGs. Slow processor speeds and terrible memory restrictions on the early personal computers were severe obstacles, but a bigger problem was that programmers simply hadn't had enough time to optimize their coding practices. Many were programming strictly in BASIC, which is an easy but inefficient language compared to more difficult assembly languages. As we'll see in the next chapter, primitive computers such as the Apple II were capable of much more sophisticated programs.

Besides historians, about the only people that play Bronze Age games today are those who played them back in the day and enjoy them for their nostalgic value. However, when we enter the Silver Age in the next chapter, we'll encounter games that are much better known, such as the first *Ultima* and *Wizardry* games. As CRPGs became more sophisticated, fans grew more selective. The days were numbered for the lone teen in his bedroom, cranking out games in BASIC and stuffing them into Ziploc bags for sale at the local Computer Mart. The industry was about to flex its wings.

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<sup>13</sup> See [http://www.dimjon.de/midlet\\_akalabeth\\_about.htm](http://www.dimjon.de/midlet_akalabeth_about.htm).

# 5

## The Silver Age

In 1981, the CRPG was still in its infancy. Programmers were refining their techniques and discovering the true capabilities of personal computers. More importantly, standards were emerging that would greatly improve interfaces, making CRPGs much more intuitive and far less cumbersome. So far, most CRPGs had been of interest only to hardcore role-playing fans already intimately familiar with *D&D* conventions. These games lacked the sort of user friendliness that would have made them accessible to a larger audience. In any case, many gamers didn't relish the idea of learning one role-playing system just to abandon it when the next game came out. The solution came in the form of long-running series, such as *Ultima*, *Apshai*, and *Wizardry*. Once gamers had mastered the interface, they could move on to the next game in the series with relative ease. As we'll see, these series had benefits for both developers and gamers, and they mark an important turning point in the history of the CRPG.



Garriott had justifiably high expectations for his new *Ultima* series, which soon became the standard by which all other CRPGs were judged.

The most important games of the Silver Age are *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* and *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* (both 1981). Both games launched successful and influential series that lasted into the 2000s, but it was *Ultima* that catapulted the genre into the mainstream—indeed, its influence even extended overseas and inspired the Japanese console RPGs that so many of us are familiar with today. We'll talk about the first three *Ultima* games in this chapter.

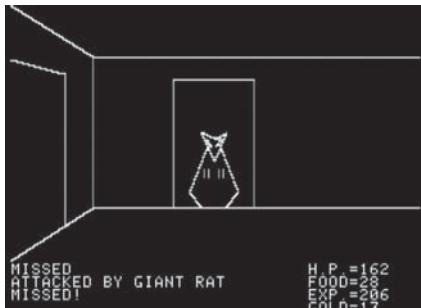
*Wizardry*, meanwhile, earned a reputation for challenging, hardcore gameplay. It also demonstrates what would become a long and established practice of “engine recycling,” or reusing the bulk of a game’s code in subsequent games. This technique allowed developers not only to create games faster and for less cost, but also to focus more on developing content, such as graphics and stories. Tension began to build between gamers who expect sequels to be quite radical revisions and those who resent such changes and demand consistency—a tension brought out nicely by comparing the *Ultima* and *Wizardry* series.

The Silver Age also saw several other important and influential games, such as *Telengard*, *Sword of Fargoal*, *Dungeons of Daggorath*, *Tunnels of Doom*, and *Universe*. Each of these games introduced or affirmed gameplay concepts that would show up in countless later games, and each vividly demonstrates the diversity of the genre in the early 1980s. They’re also some of the more beloved of the early CRPGs and are still regularly played today by hundreds if not thousands of nostalgic gamers around the world.

## The Birth of *Ultima*

After his success with *Akalabeth*, Garriott was infused with ambition and determined to make a new game that would make the other seem primitive by comparison. Garriott considered his earlier game a hobby project that had stumbled into the commercial sector by accident: “I had been working for my own enjoyment and edification, not my dinner.”<sup>1</sup> The new game would be a commercial endeavor from the start, targeted at a larger audience. Garriott teamed up his friend and coworker Ken Arnold (nicknamed “Sir Kenneth”) to create a tile-based graphics system reminiscent of a miniatures tabletop, which requires much less storage space and allows for large, colorful environments. Garriott used this system to depict the vast countryside but incorpo-

<sup>1</sup> See “Lord British Kisses and Tells All” in *Computer Gaming World* (July 1988 Issue).

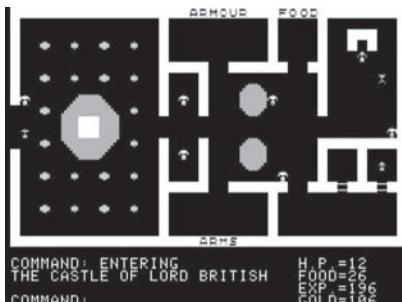


The early *Ultima* games offered monochromatic wireframe perspective in dungeons. Garriott had developed these techniques in the earlier *Akalabeth*.

rated the wireframe, first-person perspective of *Akalabeth* for the dungeons. Switching between these perspectives gave players of the game an impression of vastness; the game felt more like a world than a dungeon. The product was finished in 1981, and *Ultima* was published by California Pacific, the same company Garriott had relied on for *Akalabeth*.

Perhaps what impressed gamers and critics more than the graphics was the truly epic size of the game. Indeed, rather than limit itself to one time period, the setting moves from the Middle Ages to the Space Age. There's even a sequence featuring first-person perspective space flight and combat! Critics marveled at how characters starting off with maces and other crude weapons ended the game with phazors and blasters. There are also several nice twists, such as monsters (gelatinous cubes) that destroy armor and others that take the character's food. As with the previous game, food is a serious and constant concern. However, if the character dies, the player can try to resurrect him. The only problem here is that the character might materialize on a water tile and be unable to move away—an infuriating bug.

The game also handles hit points in an unusual way. Instead of regenerating by resting or healing, the character must either buy hit points from the king or receive them as he leaves dungeons. Of course, if the player runs out of hit points, the character dies and must be resurrected. I'm not sure the system makes much logical sense, but it didn't seem to arouse much disdain from critics. The system also differs somewhat from *D&D* rules for character creation—instead of rolling randomly for stats, the player is given 90 points to distribute across six categories: strength, agility, stamina, charisma, wisdom, and intelligence. Of course, a sensible distribution depends on the choice of type, or class: fighter, cleric, wizard, or thief. There are four races



In addition to the 3D dungeons, *Ultima* featured colorful top-down modes. Here's the famous Castle of Lord British, who is seen here in the throne room on the upper right.

to choose from, one being hobbits—perhaps a nod to Tolkien. We'll see this point distribution system show up in many later games, though it's unclear if it's really an improvement over the more traditional model based on rolling three six-sided dice.

The storyline builds on *Akalabeth*'s. The evil wizard Mondain has enslaved the lands of Sosaria using a gem of power that makes him completely unstoppable. It's the player's mission to travel back in time and kill him before he can make the gem and take over the world. Solving the game means traveling across vast distances, fighting random encounters along the way.

The game was originally available only for the Apple II+, though ports followed for the Atari 8-bit computers in 1983. In 1986, the game was rewritten in assembly language and updated with better graphics and a few other small changes. This version was ported to the Commodore 64, MS-DOS, and MSX platforms and is more familiar to most gamers than the original.

### *The Revenge of the Enchantress*

*Ultima* was an unqualified success, and Garriott wasted little time producing the sequel. However, *Ultima II: The Revenge of the Enchantress* (Aug. 1982), was published by Sierra On-Line rather than California Pacific, which had somehow managed to bankrupt in the interval. Garriott, always a stickler for how his games were packaged, chose Sierra because the company was more responsive to his idea to include a cloth map with the game (apparently, this decision was influenced by Garriott's obsession with Terry Gilliam's 1981 film *Time Bandits*, which features a similar contrivance). The second game offers several improvements, such as the ability to talk to nonplayer characters and some routines written in assembly language that increased the game's speed.



The second *Ultima* game was as ambitious as the first, though Garriott's relationship with Sierra eroded quickly.

It also doubled the number of tiles used for the graphics, a noticeable and desirable improvement.

Like the first *Ultima*, *The Revenge of the Enchantress* is another mix of fantasy and sci-fi elements. This time, it's not Mondain but rather his apprentice and lover, Minax, who aims to eradicate the human race by instigating a nuclear war. Again the player has to track down a magical item needed to destroy her, a quest that involves traveling to several villages, time periods, and even planets. It's an enormous game whose impressive scope is comparable only to Sierra's other big game of 1982, *Time Zone*, a sprawling \$100 graphical adventure game by Roberta Williams. However, *Ultima II* contained several bugs, and some critics complained that the game had a rushed, unpolished feel. Nevertheless, the game sold even better than the previous one.

When it was time for *Ultima III*, Garriott decided to break from Sierra and publish the game under his own new company, Origin—primarily a family company consisting of his brother and their two parents. Garriott did not leave Sierra on good terms, however. According to a 1986 interview published in *Computer Gaming World*, he felt that Sierra “did not seem very author friendly” and that “I never really knew if I was getting a fair shake.”

What exactly did Garriott have in mind when he made these comments? Some sources claim that the comments refer to an argument about the royalties for the IBM PC port of *Ultima II*. When Garriott had signed his contract with Sierra, the IBM PC didn't exist, and was not factored into the royalty agreement. According to Garriott, Sierra offered him a “take it or leave it” arrangement with lower royalties than he felt he deserved. This is the explanation offered by Shay Addams in his *The Official Book of Ultima* and suggested by Wikipedia.

However, the problem may have something to do with an exceptionally rare game called *Ultima: Escape from Mt. Drash*, published in 1983 exclu-

sively for the Commodore VIC-20. The game was programmed by Keith Zabalaoui and released without Garriott's knowledge or permission (and most likely against his wishes). Ever the perfectionist, Garriott was likely upset with the *Mt. Drash* fiasco, seeing it as the worst sort of exploitation. In any case, *Escape from Mt. Drash* was a poor seller and is so ultra rare today that it has become a Holy Grail for many collectors of vintage software. In 2003, the loose data cassette alone fetched \$865 in an online auction. The game itself is a rather simplistic dungeon crawl, though one featuring a three-sectioned interface and 3D dungeons. A review in the July/August of *Computer Gaming World* praises its "unique graphics and marvelous musical score," but its collectability undoubtedly owes more to controversy than quality. Addams doesn't even mention it in his *Official* book.

## *Exodus: Ultima +3*

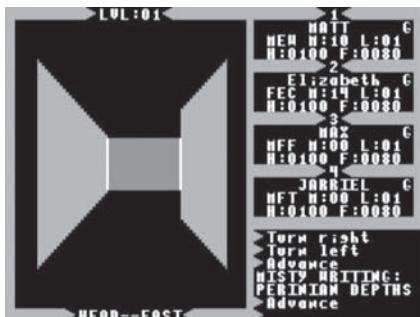
If the first two *Ultima* games were impressed critics and pleased gamers, *Ultima III: Exodus* knocked their sabatons<sup>2</sup> off. First published in 1983 by Origin, the third *Ultima* was an instant success, forever establishing Garriott as a true master of the genre: a "veritable J. R. R. Tolkien of the keyboard," according to one magazine reviewer. The game would go on to influence not only countless other CRPGs in both the West and the East, where it led to the development of Japan's console RPGs such as *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*. It's certainly no exaggeration to call it one of the most important CRPGs ever made and the pinnacle of the Silver Age.

Several innovations make the game stand out from the earlier games. The most obvious is that the player is asked to control a party of four adventurers rather than a single hero. By this time, another CRPG series called *Wizardry* (which we'll discuss later in this chapter) was making its presence felt, and Garriott felt that since "*Wizardry* had multiple characters, I needed them too."<sup>3</sup> It also features a tactical, turn-based combat system with strict time limits (if a player takes too long to move a character, the game automatically skips to the next character or monster's turn). There are 16 hand-to-hand and ranged weapons, eight armor types, and 32 magic spells with names inspired by Latin. One unusual and somewhat frustrating aspect of the combat system

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<sup>2</sup> As the context suggests, "part of a knight's armor that covers the foot" (from *Wikipedia*).

<sup>3</sup> As quoted by Shay Addams in his *The Official Book of Ultima* (ISBN 0-87455-228-1).



The third *Ultima* game offers solid-color dungeons and a sharp layout.

is that only the character striking the deathblow gets any experience points for the battle—a fact that can quickly lead to a severely unbalanced party. Garriott also reworked the scenes involving sea travel, introducing a ship-to-shore combat system and wind navigation. To top it all off, the Garriott added a dynamic musical score that changes with various settings, though Apple II owners needed the optional Mockingboard expansion card to hear it.

Another important innovation is the fixed dungeons. Rather than random and mostly irrelevant dungeons, *Ultima III* integrates a series of stable dungeons directly into the gameplay, perhaps as a response to the frequent complaint that the dungeons in the previous games were practically superfluous. Furthermore, the dungeons in *Ultima III* aren't wireframe, but solid color and reminiscent of later CRPGs such as *The Bard's Tale* (1985), though predicated by Texas Instruments' *Tunnels of Doom* (1982).

The storyline is rather typical and avoids the sci-fi elements that played such an important role in the first two games. Simply put, the player must seek out and kill an evil overlord, this time one named Exodus. Exodus is the offspring of Mondain and Minax and has been terrorizing the land of Sosaria with no regard for diplomacy. Solving the game requires seeking out the mysterious Time Lord and working out the secrets of the Moon Gates. It isn't enough just to build up a strong party, though—players must interact with townspeople to gather enough clues to solve a series of puzzles.

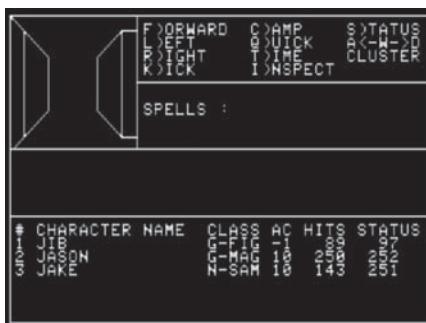
*Ultima III* was a smash hit, selling some 120,000 copies and cementing Lord British as the foremost maker of CRPGs. It was ported to most of the available platforms of the day and later even to the NES. The *Ultima* series would dominate the CRPG scene for years, and even after its popularity waned in the face of increasingly fierce competition, plenty of loyal fans hung on. Even today, over 100,000 gamers still subscribe to *Ultima Online*, an

MMORPG based on the franchise. We'll have more to say about the series as we discuss the later ages.

## *Wizardry: The Proving Grounds*

Although Garriott's *Ultima* series is the best known CRPG of the early 1980s, it was certainly not alone. As early as 1981, a worthy competitor had thrown down the gauntlet: Sir-Tech. Founded by Robert Woodhead and Norman Sirotek, Sir-Tech would soon earn a reputation for extraordinarily challenging yet well-designed CRPGs. Its *Wizardry* series did much to standardize the genre, and would remain vital throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (the eighth and final game was published in 2001).

The first of these games is *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord*, published in 1981 for the Apple II (and in 1987 for other platforms). Unlike *Ultima*, *Wizardry* allowed players to create their own parties of up to six characters, who could be *almost* any mix of five different races (humans, elves, dwarves, gnomes, hobbits), four starting classes (fighter, mage, priest, thief), and three alignments (good, neutral, evil). (I say *almost* here because good and evil characters can't join the same party.) After these selections, the player must distribute a random number of bonus points among six stats (strength, I.Q., piety, vitality, agility, and luck). Needless to say, going through this cycle six times can be quite a bit of work, particularly if the player is determined to create the best possible party. The manual puts it well: "Playing *Wizardry* for the first time is like kissing for the first time—you want to do it right, and you're not quite sure exactly what you are supposed to do."



*Wizardry* offers a smooth first-person interface and puts the player in charge of a whole party of adventurers.

Creating a group rather a single character leads to a much different gameplay dynamic, since players have to carefully balance their parties to ensure that they have the right combination of skills necessary to complete the ten-level dungeon. In other words, players are required to make many important decisions before gameplay commences; the character creation process is long, involved, and of paramount importance. A few poor selections can easily make the game extremely difficult, if not unwinnable. Many less experienced gamers were no doubt overwhelmed by the whole process. We'll return to the "party versus single hero issue" later.

Further complicating the party issue are four elite classes, which are more or less hybrids of the four basic classes: bishop (priest/mage), samurai (fighter/mage), lord (fighter/priest), and ninja (fighter/thief). The ninja is similar to what many later games would call the monk, a fighter that shuns weapons and armor and excels at critical strikes. There are some alignment restrictions as well: bishops can't be neutral, samurai can't be evil, lords must be good, and ninjas must be evil. The elite or prestige class is something that will show up again later in *The Bard's Tale* (1985) and many later CRPGs.

The magic system is also fairly elaborate, with some 50 total spells for priests and mages. Perhaps as a tactic to ensure that players purchased a legal copy of the game, these spells can only be cast by entering their names—printed in the manual, of course. Although most of the spells are combat-related, a few are useful in other ways. For example, the mage spell "DUMAPIC" reveals the player's current position in the maze relative to the stairs leading out of the maze, and "MALOR," if cast in camp, will teleport the party to a precise location. The magic system uses a special spell point system involving slots for each level of spell. These points can only be replenished by resting in The Castle.

Like *Akalabeth*, *Wizardry* portrays the dungeons (called The Maze) in 3D wireframe graphics and first-person perspective. However, one nice innovation is that when battle is joined, the dungeon graphic is replaced by a color portrait of one of the attacking monsters (up to four groups of them can attack). It's a great opportunity for art, and we'll see it countless later games, such *The Bard's Tale* and *The Pool of Radiance* (1988). The dungeons are arranged on a 20 x 20 grid, which makes them ideal for mapping onto graph paper. Since the dungeons are fixed rather than random, players could really benefit from having a good map laid before them. The manual offers detailed instructions on making such a map and lets player know that "mapping is indeed one of the most important skills that successful Wizardry players possess." Whereas some gamers found the task irksome, others enjoyed it almost

as much as playing the game. I find the cartography fascinating, especially when I consider how CRPGs evolved from *Colossal Cave* and other exploration games. Mapmaking remained a critical skill for many years to come, at least until CRPGs began featuring automapping tools.

The storyline of *Wizardry* is standard fare. The Evil Wizard Werdna has stolen a magical amulet from Trebor (*Robert* spelled backwards), the Mad Overlord. Furthermore, Werdna has used the amulet to create a ten-level fortress maze beneath Trebor's castle. Trebor has declared this maze his bodyguards' proving grounds, and of course it's up to the party to descend into it, battling whatever monsters stand between them and the amulet. It's easy to see the connections to the older mainframe games, many of which offer the same quest for an all-powerful magical amulet.

*Wizardry* was created by Andrew C. Greenberg and Robert Woodhead, then students at Cornell University, who spent some two and a half years developing it. The reason for the delay was that the game had originally been programmed in BASIC, but that language had proven too inefficient for the game to run smoothly on an Apple II. They converted the game to PASCAL, a decision that it made it much easier to port the game to other platforms later on. Unfortunately, PASCAL programs required 48 K of RAM to operate, and Apple II needed an optional RAM expansion called a Language Card to run them. It wasn't until 1979 that Apple introduced the Apple II+, which came preequipped with the required 48 KB of RAM. In short, Greenberg and Woodhead were at least a year ahead of the technology and had to wait for gamers and the computer industry to catch up with them.

## Fighting for Your Right to Party

*Wizardry* brings us to an interesting question about CRPGs. Is it better to control a party or a single adventurer? One way to answer this question is by posing another: which is more like tabletop role-playing games? On the one hand, almost all conventional *D&D* games involve groups of players and their characters. Usually, Dungeon Masters will encourage the players to select characters who complement one another, the ideal being at least one of each basic type (fighter, thief, cleric, and mage). This way, the characters can work together to devise strategies and overcome obstacles—for instance, a sorceress might be extremely vulnerable in hand-to-hand combat, but devastatingly effective at range; it becomes the fighters' job to occupy the monsters so that she can cast her spells. Thus, it would seem that party-based games like *Wizardry* and *Ultima III* are closer to the *D&D* model.

On the other hand, *D&D* players only control one character at a time and are asked to assume the role of that character during the session. Looked at from this perspective, single-hero games like *Ultima* and *Rogue* are closer to the ideal, since it's much easier (theoretically, at least) to identify with a single character than a whole group of them. Unfortunately, this problem has yet to be solved, and CRPG fans and developers have long been divided on the issue. Currently, the industry seems to have settled on the single-hero model; of the top three CRPGs currently available, none is party-based. We'll return to this critical issue throughout the book.

## *The Knight of Diamonds and Legacy of Llylgamyn*

The next two *Wizardry* games are *The Knight of Diamonds* (1982) and *Legacy of Llylgamyn* (1983). Unlike Garriott's strategy to reinvent the engine with each new game, Sir-Tech seems to have followed the old adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." On a technical level, these games are practically identical to *Proving Grounds*, though of course they offer new stories and areas to explore.

*The Knight of Diamonds* involves another fetch quest, this time to find the staff of Gnilda, a powerful magical item which formerly protected the City of Llylgamyn from attack. Unfortunately, the evil Davalpus was immune to the staff's power by virtue of being born in the city (the staff's fatal flaw). Davalpus slew the royal family except for Princess Margda and Prince Alavik, who used the staff and the armor of the Knight of Diamonds to battle the usurper. Alavik was not successful, however, and after the battle all that was left was a "smoking hole in the ground." It's the player's mission, of course, to get back the staff, but that will mean first procuring all five pieces of the fabled armor. To complicate matters, each of these pieces is a living being that must be defeated in combat. As expected, solving the game means plunging into a dungeon (this time one with only six levels) and battling whatever beasts stand in the way.

Originally, *The Knight of Diamonds* required that players first complete the first game, the idea being to carry the players over into the new scenario—an early example of an expansion pack. However, this plan didn't prove financially sound at the time, and later versions allowed players either to load a pregenerated party or to create new characters. Of course, since the dungeons are calibrated for characters of level 13 or more, new characters are very unlikely to survive their first encounter.



Sir-Tech's *Wizardry* series earned a reputation for being difficult and addictive.

The final game of the original trilogy is *Legacy of Llylgamyn*. The goal this time is to find a dragon named L'Kbreth, whose mystical orb can save the city of Llylgamyn from the recent surge of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Characters could, again, be imported from previous games but were stripped of their experience (they are supposed to be a new generation of adventurers). However, there is an elaborate rite of passage ceremony by which the new characters can receive a blessing from their ancestors (a boost in stats and skills). Furthermore, they can choose a new moral alignment, which determines what parts of the world they can visit. Perhaps the most intriguing innovation is that the typical dungeon crawler setup is reversed: rather than start at the top and work their way down, the party begins at the bottom of a volcano and must work its way back up.

Certain traditions carry across all three games, such as Boltac's Trading Post, the Temple of Cant, and odd monsters such as Creeping Coins. Connections such as these add coherence to the series and are quite memorable for those who played the games. Another interesting bit of lore is *Wizplus*, a \$40 program released by a company named Datamost and released in 1982. *Wizplus* was one of the earliest commercial utility programs designed to allow players to freely edit their characters as they saw fit, including making them invulnerable. Sir-Tech came out against the product, arguing that such "cheat programs" interfered with the "subtle balance" they had achieved over "four years of careful adjustment."<sup>4</sup> It seems more of a testament to the game's difficulty, though, that such a product received so much attention in the first

<sup>4</sup> The source of these quotes is a brief review in the June/July 1983 issue of *Computer Gaming World*. The product is reviewed again in more detail in the July/Aug issue of the same year.

place. Sir-Tech went so far as to refuse to honor their warranty on *Wizardry* disks that had been tampered with using *Wizplus*.

## *Return of Werdna*: Turning the Tables

Although the next game in the series, *Wizardry IV: The Return of Werdna*, would not be published until 1987, it's similar enough to the first three to merit discussion here. Four years had passed since *Legacy of Llylgamyn*, and when the game finally arrived, it no doubt took most fans of the series by surprise—this time, the player gets to be the evil wizard hell-bent on getting his revenge. The plot is perhaps the only one of its type in the history of CRPGs. In this game's narrative, Werdna (the wizard defeated in the first *Wizardry*) has awakened, but he's now without his powers and trapped in the bottom of his ten-level dungeon. Furthermore, all of the monsters and traps that existed to keep out wily adventurers now serve the opposite purpose—to keep Werdna imprisoned. Getting Werdna out of the dungeon will take time and patience, but the revenge will no doubt be sweet. Thankfully, Werdna is able to summon monsters to help him out, though the players are unable to control them directly.

*The Return of Werdna* is widely considered to be the most difficult CRPG ever created, and it's definitely a game suited only for veterans of the first three games. The dungeon is resistant to mapping, and there are several brain-stumping puzzles sprinkled throughout. To make matters worse, the ghost of one of Werdna's slain enemies, Trebor, haunts the dungeon and will instantly kill Werdna if he stumbles upon him. Finally, every save of the game resurrects all the monsters on the current level. Rumors of this game's difficulty have not been exaggerated! There's also a nice bit of history here that's not often discussed in modern reviews of this game: Sir-Tech used some of the characters from disks it had received from gamers, who either wanted them repaired or sent them to show they had indeed solved the game. The company used some of these purloined characters as do-gooder enemies for Werdna. The game also features three separate endings, the most difficult of which entitles players to the hallowed rank of Wizardry Grand Master.

The first three *Wizardry* games were quite successful and were eventually ported to the Commodore 64, DOS, and even the NES platform (which features the best graphics). Sir-Tech has published them in a various compilations, starting with the *Wizardry Trilogy* in 1987 for DOS. The latest publication is *The Ultimate Wizardry Archives* (1998) for DOS and Windows, which includes the first seven games in the series. The fourth game is perhaps

the least known, since its graphics and audiovisuals were hardly competitive for its release date, and its difficulty level ensured that no one but hardcore fans of the original games could complete it.

Though we'll have opportunities to discuss *Wizardry* in later chapters, what's important to note here is that *Ultima* wasn't the only game in town. The *Wizardry* series was tremendously successful. Furthermore, *Wizardry* has been highly influential, even for Garriott (who, as you'll remember, acknowledged that his decision to make *Ultima III* a party-based game was in response to the popularity of *Wizardry*). Finally, it's a useful game to have in mind when discussing issues still pertinent to modern CRPGs, such as whether it's better for sequels to allow players to import their characters from previous games or to require players to start from scratch.

Gamers wanting to play these *Wizardry* games today have few options. If you happen to speak Japanese, you can check out *Wizardry Llylgamyn Saga*, a remake of the first three games available for Windows, Sony's PlayStation, and Sega's Saturn. An effort is underway to translate this game into English.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, the only options are either to track down the old software and a system capable of running it (the NES version would probably be the best choice for this purpose) or to illegally download the games from countless abandonware sites on the web.

## Other Highlights of the Silver Age

Although *Ultima* and *Wizardry* are by far the most popular and well-known CRPGs of the era, there are at least five other games that are either influential or innovative enough to deserve mention. These are *Telengard*, *The Sword of Fargoal*, *Tunnels of Doom*, *Dungeons of Daggorath*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, and *Universe*.

### *Telengard* and *DND*

Perhaps the most historically interesting of these games is Daniel Lawrence's *Telengard*, published by Avalon Hill in 1982 for the Commodore PET (ports for other systems, including the Commodore 64, quickly followed). If nothing else, it's an enlightening study of how commercial imperatives were undermining the older mainframe policies of openness and free distribution. In the case of *Telengard*, this shift would result in a legal morass.

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://twpa.net/twpa/llylsaga/>.

*Telengard* was based on a 1976 game entitled *DND*<sup>6</sup> that Lawrence had programmed in BASIC on a PDP-10 mainframe. *DND* was quite a success at Purdue University, where Lawrence was a student. Later, Lawrence was invited by the engineers at DEC's factory in Maynard, Massachusetts, to port the game to the new DECSYSTEM-20. The engineers were big fans of the game and distributed it widely.

At some point in 1978, Lawrence ported the game to the Commodore PET, implementing a clever procedure to generate dungeons on the fly. This was necessary because of the PET's extreme memory limitations (8K of RAM!). He shopped the game around at conventions, finally impressing the famous tabletop wargaming publisher, Avalon Hill, enough to secure a contract. By this time, the game had become known as *Telengard*, no doubt to avoid possible litigation with TSR over its trademarks and copyrights.

The publication of *Telengard* meant that Lawrence no longer had the desire to see the engineers at DEC freely distributing *DND*. After a brief period of legal wrangling, DEC had the game purged from its servers. It's not entirely clear if the pressure to do so was coming from Lawrence, Avalon Hill, or TSR, but likely it was simply a common sense decision to avoid litigation from any of them. Unfortunately for Lawrence, DEC didn't move fast enough to keep his code from ending up in the hands of "Bill," a programmer who formed R.O. Software to distribute a \$25 shareware version of *DND* that he released in 1984. The game was successful enough to attract Lawrence's attention; he saw it as unfair competition and did what he could to prevent its distribution. For his part, Bill claimed that he had done enough work cleaning up the "spaghetti code" of the original game that he had in fact created a new product. In any case, Bill updated the game and rereleased it as *Dungeon of the Necromancer's Domain* in 1988, which he claimed was a "ground-up rewrite" in an effort to avoid future conflict with Lawrence.<sup>7</sup>

As for *Telengard* itself, the game introduced several innovations that were much ahead of their time. For instance, it offered procedurally generated dungeons, which essentially meant that no two games would play alike (for this reason, the game is often compared to the mainframe classic *Rogue*). It also meant that these dungeons occupied very little of the computer's memory. This trick allowed *Telengard* to offer gamers "50 levels with 2 million

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<sup>6</sup> Not to be confused with the aforementioned *dnd* for the PLATO platform.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://dnd.lunaticsworld.com/> for more information about the history of *DND* and *Telengard*, as well as links to download the source code and binaries of many of the games in question.



*Telengard* offers procedurally generated dungeons and is based on Lawrence's earlier mainframe CRPG. The screenshot here is from the Commodore 64 version.

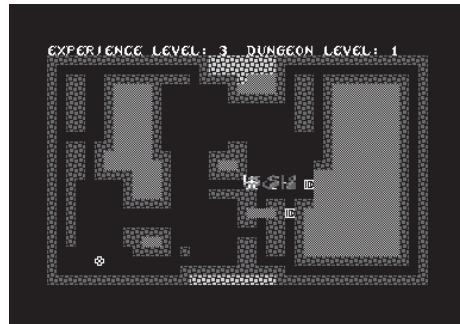
rooms" at a time when other developers were bragging about ten. We'll see this technique in Blizzard's *Diablo* (1997). *Telengard* is also set in real-time, so that gamers taking a bathroom break might very well find their character dead upon their return. *Telengard* features 20 different monster types and 36 spells, as well as fountains, thrones, altars, and teleportation cubes that produce random effects on the character. However, the game lacks a storyline; it's a pure dungeon crawler with "hack'n slash" style gameplay. Anyone wanting to experience the game today may want to check out Travis Baldree's *Telengard* remake for Windows.<sup>8</sup> Daniel Lawrence has also made the IBM PC version freely available from his own website.<sup>9</sup>

### *Sword of Fargoal*

Another early game similar to the mainframe classics is Jeff McCord's *Sword of Fargoal*, published by Epyx in 1982 for the Commodore VIC-20 (a significantly enhanced version followed in 1983 for the Commodore 64.) Though McCord denies having played *Telengard*, his game shares many of its features, such as randomized dungeons, but differs by incorporating the quest motif: descend into the dungeon, fetch the eponymous blade, and escape. Perhaps its most visible innovation is a "fog of war" effect, which obscures parts of the overhead map until the character has explored them; it amounts to an automapping tool. However, it's really the sound effects that set this game apart. Besides the catchy ditties that play between levels, an ominous chord

<sup>8</sup> See <http://buildingworlds.com/telengard/>.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.aquest.com/telen.htm>.



*Sword of Fargoal* is a fun and intuitive CRPG that has aged gracefully.

progression plays whenever the monsters move in the dungeon. Players can hear the monsters without seeing them, a technique that greatly ratchets up the tension. McCord acknowledges Steven Spielberg's 1975 blockbuster *Jaws* as inspiration.

*Sword of Fargoal* has a fairly severe time limit (2,000 seconds) and is difficult to win. However, the relative simplicity of the interface makes it one of the more playable and accessible of the early CRPGs, and it was popular among gamers and critics—indeed, it ranked on *Computer Gaming World's* “150 Best Games of All Time,” published in 1996, and remains a fan favorite among Commodore fans. It’s recently been remade for Windows by Paul Pridham and Elias Pschernig.<sup>10</sup> Jeff McCord is working with Pridham and Pschernig to release an updated version of the game for Apple’s iPhone.

McCord wrote *Sword of Fargoal* on a Commodore PET owned by his high school in Lexington, Kentucky. It’s primarily based on *Gammaquest II*, an unpublished dungeon crawler with randomly generated dungeons that McCord designed to show to publishers. McCord’s computer science teacher, a Mr. Syler, was fond of admonishing his class that there were to be “no games in the computer room.” Nonetheless, the acerbic teacher recognized McCord’s gift and loaned him a key to the lab, which he used during off-hours to program and play-test the game. The finished project weighed in at a compact 14 kilobytes, an impressive feat given the depth of gameplay. McCord, the son of a computer science professor and an avid *D&D* Dungeon Master, was only 19 years old at the time. Incidentally, the title was originally to be *Sword of Fargaol*, based on the old spelling of *jail*. However, Epyx felt that few gamers would appreciate the somewhat obscure reference.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.fargoal.com/>.

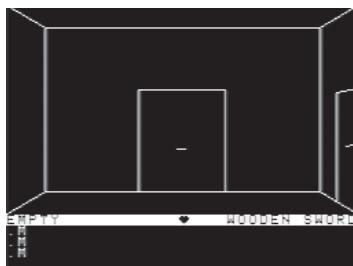
Although the game is well-known among Commodore 64 fans, it did not represent a significant financial windfall for McCord, who admits that he earned no more than \$40,000 in royalties during its publication run. Nevertheless, *Sword of Fargoal* is, in my opinion, the best of the early CRPGs. Unfortunately, McCord's next project, *Tesseract Strategy*, was never completed, though its intended publisher, Electronic Arts, had expressed enough interest to fly McCord to San Francisco for a photo shoot.

## *Dungeons of Daggorath*

The next two games we'll discuss, *Dungeons of Daggorath* and *Tunnels of Doom*, are examples of games that were released only on a single, relatively minor platform (the Tandy CoCo and Texas Instruments' TI-99/4A, respectively). Thus, we have an intriguing question of whether their success owes more to their intrinsic qualities or to the lack of direct competition. In any case, they are highly innovative games that are certainly worth our attention.

*Dungeons of Daggorath*, developed by DynaMicro and published by Tandy in 1982, offers a 3D, first-person perspective in wireframe of the dungeons quite similar to that seen in *Akalabeth* and *Wizardry*. The storyline is the standard "kill the evil wizard buried deep in a monster-infested dungeon." There are only five levels, a dozen creature types, four rings, and of course the usual shields, swords, scrolls, and torches (like many games of the era, players must carry a lit torch to see in the dungeons).

However, what makes *Dungeons of Daggorath* stand out is its real-time fatigue system. The system is represented by a pulsating heart at the bottom of the screen; it beats faster or slower depending on the level of stress the player is experiencing. Taking damage or moving too quickly will cause the



*Dungeons of Daggorath* offered real-time, first-person gameplay long before FTL's *Dungeon Master*.

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://mspencer.net/daggorath/dodownload.html>.

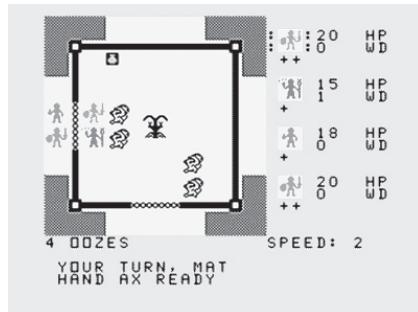
heart to pulse rapidly. If the heart beats too furiously, the character will faint (and likely become monster meat). This fatigue system does away with the numerical hit point or vitality systems so prevalent in other games. Instead, players must listen to the beating heart, a sound well known for its unsettling effect in horror films. This sound effect makes for a more visceral, arcade-like experience than most CRPGs, then or now. The game was recently remade for Windows and is freely available for download.<sup>11</sup>

## *Tunnels of Doom*

If *Dungeons of Daggorath* was the big CRPG for the Tandy CoCo, *Tunnels of Doom* was most certainly the best CRPG going on Texas Instruments' TI-99/4A. Texas Instruments is one of the few personal computer manufacturers that actively discouraged third-party development, preferring to publish all software for their systems themselves. Rather than generate a collection of must-have exclusives that would help sell the platform, the policy disenfranchised developers and no doubt proved disastrous for Texas Instruments. The inevitable result is that the TI-99/4A had one of the smallest game libraries in the industry; only 40 or so games were ever published for it, the bulk being remakes of popular arcade games.

Nevertheless, at least one gem really stands out. Programmed by Kevin Kenney and published by Texas Instruments in 1982, *Tunnels of Doom* contains many of the features that will show up in later games such as SSI's "Gold Box" games, which debut in 1988 with *The Pool of Radiance*. Perhaps the best way to describe the game is as a combination of themes from *Telengard* and *Wizardry*. Like *Telengard*, *Tunnels of Doom* features fountains, altars, and thrones that have random effects on players willing to experiment with them. However, the game imitates *Wizardry* by allowing the player control a party of adventurers (four, to be precise) rather than a single character. It also predates *Ultima III* in offering different screens for combat and exploration, as well as in using solid colors for the first-person, 3D dungeons rather than monochrome wireframe graphics. It even offers an automapper!

Like *Ultima III* and the later "Gold Box" games, *Tunnels of Doom* switches to a top-down, tactical screen whenever the party engages in combat. Combat is turn-based and offers ranged as well as hand-to-hand weapons. Another nice touch is the ability to target specific monsters with ranged weapons, rather than just firing them in a straight line. Although there are only three classes available (fighter, wizard, and rogue), a special hero class was available to players who opted to lead a single adventurer in the randomly-generated,



*Tunnels of Doom* offers a combination of two perspectives: first-person in the dungeons, and top-down during combat. We see a similar system in SSI's *Pool of Radiance*, published years later.

ten-level maze. All in all, it's an intelligent system that was relatively easy to learn and quite flexible.

The game shipped with two adventures: "Pennies and Prizes" and "Quest for the King." The first of these was more or less a tutorial designed to familiarize users with the interface (or to entertain small children). "Quest of the King" is the standard "fetch the orb" quest, though players must also locate the king and return him and the orb to the surface. A strict time limit ratchets up the tension.

However, what most people remember about *Tunnels of Doom* are the many third-party modules created with Asgard Software's *Tunnels of Doom Editor*, created by a Chicago police officer named John Behnke. Fans of the game would often design their own scenarios and distribute them at conventions and club meetings, and a few were even available commercially in compilations sold by Asgard. One of the more unusual of these is a game where the dungeon is a K-Mart store. Another was based on the popular TV show *Star Trek*, though I doubt seriously whether this scenario was authorized by Paramount.

Although the game was one of the most successful for the TI-99/4A, Texas Instruments laid off Kenney shortly after its release. Kenney speculated in a 2002 interview that the company was unhappy with his "liberal political bent," but TI later contracted him to do some additional databases for the game (they were never released).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See [http://bellsouthpwp.net/e/d/edb700/classic-gaming/tunnels/kevin\\_kenney\\_interview.html](http://bellsouthpwp.net/e/d/edb700/classic-gaming/tunnels/kevin_kenney_interview.html).

## Ali Baba and the Forty Players

Many of the games we've talked about so far have been assigned to one player, and the few exceptions were online games. Arguably, most party-based CRPGs can be played with a group simply by assigning each player a character; the person behind the keyboard takes the players' orders and acts accordingly (in theory). Indeed, some early manuals hint at exactly this kind of gameplay. However, two early CRPGs written by Stuart Smith for Quality Software integrated cooperative multiplayer options into the interface.

The first of these games was *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, published in 1982 for the Atari 400 and 800 and the Apple II. As the title suggests, the game is based loosely on the old Arabic stories from *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, which makes a pleasant departure from the conventional high fantasy motif, though a quest to rescue a Sultan's kidnapped daughter is hardly extraordinary. While relatively simple compared to games like *Ultima* and *Wizardry*, the game stands out because of its dynamic multiplayer options. New players can be added at any point during the adventure, and they are allowed to roam about the dungeons independently of the main character, Ali Baba. Ostensibly, gameplay would have been arranged in the "hot seat" fashion, where players either took turns behind the keyboard or simply handed their joystick or paddle to the next player.

The game was reasonably successful, and Smith soon created a very similar game called *Return of Heracles* (sometimes *Herakles*), based on the famous Greek stories retold by Robert Graves. This time, gameplay is structured around the fulfillment of twelve tasks, mostly involving slaying beasts, fetching items, or rescuing damsels in distress. Again, the most innovative



*Ali-Baba and the Forty Thieves* allows players to control multiple characters, who can act and move independently.

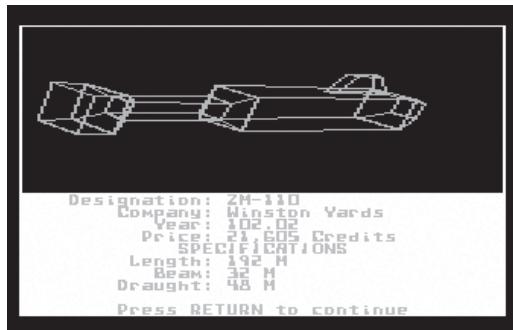
aspect of the game is the cooperative multiplayer options, though critics made note of the 250 different types of creatures and intuitive gameplay. Critics did complain that the game didn't follow the Greek legends closely enough, and there are plenty of anachronisms, such as the use of iron and steel during what is ostensibly the Bronze Age (if not earlier). Apparently, even Doctor Who, the character from the famous British television show, makes an appearance!

Both games were updated and repackaged in 1986 as *Age of Adventure*, published by Electronic Arts for the Apple II, Atari 400 and 800, and the Commodore 64. Reviews were generally positive, though the graphics certainly looked quite dated. Stuart Smith would gain far more notoriety for his *Adventure Construction Set*, published by Electronic Arts in 1985 for the Apple II and later for a variety of platforms. The highly successful program made it easy for CRPG fans to create their own tile-based, *Ultima*-style CRPGs and adventure games, and included two scenarios. One of these was "Rivers of Light," based on the legend of Gilgamesh, the hero of Sumerian mythology. Again we see Smith's preference for ancient mythology over the standard swords and sorcery theme. We'll have more to say about this program and others like it later in the book.

## Omnitrend's *Universe*

William Leslie and Thomas Carbone's *Universe* game, published in 1983 for the Atari 400/800 and later for the Apple II, is reminiscent of Edu-Ware's *Space* and *Empire* series that we discussed in the previous chapter. It's a very interesting game for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the rather shocking retail price of \$89.96, which adjusts to \$193.32 in 2008 dollars. The game shipped with a 75-page manual encased in a three-ring binder, as well as four floppy diskettes (a record at the time).

Like *Space* and *Empire*, *Universe* is a futuristic CRPG that has players flying spaceships rather than slaying dragons. The game is set in the Local Cluster, a galaxy colonized by Earth but now apparently abandoned by the motherworld. Chaos is beginning to take hold in the outlying sectors, and piracy is threatening to disrupt trade and fling the galaxy into barbarism. In the midst of the crisis, rumors surface of a Hyperspace Booster, which, if found, could reunite the Local Cluster with the Milky Way. However, players are given considerable leeway in achieving this goal. For instance, they might opt to become merchant traders, shipping cargo back and forth among the 21 star systems of the Local Cluster. Or they might take to mining, touching



Omnitrend's *Universe* is another ambitious space sim. It offers better graphics than its predecessors.

down on mineral-rich planets in a search for the mother lode. Finally, they might opt to become pirates themselves, earning rich rewards at the expense of civilization.

Technically speaking, it might be a stretch to define this game as a CRPG, since there is little in the way of character development. Although players must hire a crew, they are represented almost entirely by number and do not benefit from experience. However, players can turn their earnings into upgrades for their ship, making it more efficient or effective in combat. During this history, we'll encounter several of these space simulator/CRPG hybrids that resist easy classification. Typically, they are characterized as open-ended games and usually feature action-based combat in the style of a flight simulator, albeit with zero-G physics. Certainly, games such as Accolade's *SunDog: Frozen Legacy* (1984), Firebird's *Elite* (1985), and Origin's *Wing Commander: Privateer* (1993) spring to mind. However, we'll be discussing such games only if the CRPG element, such as a class/level system for the captain or crew members, is featured more prominently than the simulator-style action sequences.

*Universe II*, released in 1985, introduces precisely such role-playing elements. Now, the crew has individual names, grades, and skill types: astrogator, pilot, marine, miner, and gunner. The combat that takes place when a crew boards another ship is now more tactical and closer to combat in contemporary CRPGs. Unfortunately, the game seems to have been striving to be a jack of all trades; it incorporated a lengthy text adventure sequence with a very limited parser. This segment was panned in reviews, and that, in addition to the again-hefty price (this time \$69.95, or \$139.35 in 2008 dollars) may explain its almost total obscurity today. Nevertheless, Omnitrend published

yet another sequel, *Universe III*, in 1989, though this game is most decidedly an adventure rather than a CRPG. Omnitrend would gain more fame in the 1990s for its *Breach* line of futuristic, turn-based strategy games, some of which contain minor role-playing elements.

## Summing Up the Silver Age

Although there were certainly some ambitious and exemplary games produced between 1980 and 1983, everyone knew the best was yet to come as computer hardware advanced and programmers continued to refine their skills. On the other hand, we can also say that, by 1983, almost all of the conventions we'll see in later CRPGs had been established or at least demonstrated. From this point forward, we will be able to describe most CRPGs as combinations of elements from Silver Age games. What is *The Pool of Radiance* but *Tunnels of Doom* meets *Wizardry*? What is *Diablo* but *Telengard* with better audiovisuals? How far have we really come from *pedit5*, *dnd*, and *Moria*? It's impossible to truly appreciate or understand these later games without at least some knowledge of the groundbreaking CRPGs that came before them.

Nevertheless, there's a reason I chose to call this period the Silver and not the Golden Age of CRPGs. After all, some of the games we've discussed in this chapter (particularly *Ultima III*) remain fan favorites and, at least in fans' opinions, have never been surpassed or even equaled. While I certainly agree that these games were innovative and even formative, I still view them more as prototypes: experimental CRPGs designed at a time when developers were still struggling to find their way. The genre simply needed time to mature.

Hopefully, you'll agree when we begin our discussion of classics like *Phantasie*, *The Bard's Tale*, *Might and Magic*, *Dungeon Master*, and *Wasteland*, as well as SSI's celebrated "Gold Box" and "Black Box" games. What we'll see happening between 1985 and 1993 is an explosion of innovation and diversity, with hundreds of titles and a great deal of experimentation. Although many of the triumphs will be in the realm of graphics and sound, others have more to do with the art of storytelling, world building, and character development. We'll also see developers struggling to stay ahead of the latest advances in hardware, for we'll soon see how graphical considerations rise in prominence and, at least for some gamers, eventually trump all else.

# 6

## The Early Golden Age

If nothing else, the unparalleled success of *Wizardry* and especially of the *Ultima* series demonstrated that the CRPG was a lucrative genre with a long future ahead of it. Although Greenberg and Woodhead had been content to introduce only minor innovations to their *Wizardry* games, Richard Garriott was forging ahead, constantly reinventing *Ultima* and its underlying mechanics. No one doubted that his next game would be an even bolder experiment. Meanwhile, new developers were hard at work translating their own visions into code, and large publishers such as Electronic Arts wanted to get their work before the public. Avid CRPG fans bought up every CRPG they could find and clamored for more. Demand and budgets soared. Developers slaved away at their keyboards, fueled by Mountain Dew and extraordinary constitutions.

In 1985, the genre hit the fan.

## Transition to the Golden Age

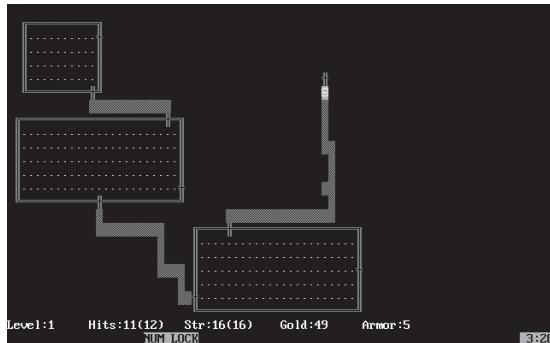
Although 1985 would be a boom year for the CRPG, the years immediately preceding it were quiet. No doubt part of the slowdown can be attributed to the famous Videogame Crash of 1983, when the bottom fell out of the console games market. Although this media-sensationalized crash affected game consoles much more than personal computers, it may have had a dampening

effect on computer game developers as well, particularly for those coding for Texas Instruments or Tandy's machines. Commodore, led by Jack Tramiel, was engaged in a fierce price war, and its vertical integration with a chip manufacturer (MOS Technology) gave it tremendous leverage against its rivals. Tramiel's strategy was specifically to question the logic of purchasing a game machine when a computer could be had for the same price; these tactics spared the computer games industry the worst of the crash—and probably helped cause it, as well. The Commodore 64 would soon reign supreme, though it would eventually lose its place to the rush of cheap "IBM compatibles" that rode behind the powerful but expensive IBM PC.

However, most of the CRPG developers we'll discuss in this chapter preferred the exceptionally long-lived Apple II platform, which featured a magnificently robust programming environment. Indeed, it wasn't until quite late into the early 1990s that most developers had switched to the by then dominant MS-DOS platform. The upshot of all this is that porting, or adapting games for other platforms, was often farmed out to third parties. These developers were expected to enhance (or scale down) the audiovisual elements to accommodate the new platform. It's quite common to find ports that differ quite markedly from their source material. This is especially true in cases where an Apple II game was ported to the Atari ST or Commodore Amiga (early DOS games were almost always inferior even to the Apple II in terms of graphics and sound). Many gamers prefer the enhanced ports, and many have never played the original versions. Nevertheless, I've chosen to focus on the developer's version wherever possible.

## Mainframe Games Revisited

Of the relatively few CRPGs released in 1984, perhaps the most interesting are ports of the old mainframe classics. Personal computers were slowly becoming more powerful, with more memory and faster processors, and it was easier now to make faithful (or in some cases even enhanced) conversions of "hack 'n slash" games like *Moria*. Perhaps the most famous of these is *Rogue: The Adventure Game*, published in all its ASCII glory in 1983 for the IBM PC. Michael Toy, one of the original developers, teamed up with Jon Lane to program the port and launch their own company, Artificial Intelligence Design. Later, Epyx (formerly known as Automated Simulations, publisher of the *Apshai* games) took over marketing, and enhanced ports were released in 1986 for most of the prominent computer platforms of the day, including the Commodore Amiga, Atari ST, and Tandy's CoCo. Finally, in 1988, the rights



Epyx brought the ever-popular mainframe classic *Rogue* to the personal computer, but the simple graphics and abstract gameplay didn't appeal to mainstream gamers.

passed to Mastertronic, a budget computer software publisher who ported the game to still more platforms, including the Commodore 64 and British computers.

Although *Rogue* had been a huge hit among mainframe gamers, it failed to generate much revenue in the commercial sector. In an undated interview with Glenn Wichman posted on the “Epyx Shrine” website, Wichman asserts that Epyx wanted the game to be too serious and thus avoided the “whimsical and a little off-the-wall” character of the original game. However, he seems to think massive illegal distribution was the main culprit.<sup>1</sup> While these might certainly have been factors, I’d also point out that perhaps most computer gamers simply weren’t drawn to the ASCII-style graphics, and the mainframe users who could have appreciated them were savvy enough to find public domain or cheap shareware versions of the game instead of doling out \$40 (\$76.70 in 2008 dollars). Some of these, such as *Hack*, were even more advanced than the commercial release! One contemporary reviewer wrote, “I found the Amiga versions of *Hack* and *Rogue* to be remarkably similar in appearance.”<sup>2</sup> Even these versions, with their enhanced graphics, weren’t particularly impressive when compared to other games of the era, and the lack of sound certainly didn’t help. In short, the commercial version of *Rogue* may simply have been a case of too little, too late.

*Rogue* wasn’t the only mainframe classic to be commercialized for personal computers. Jim Schwaiger, author of the original *Oubliette*, formed a

<sup>1</sup> See <http://home.arcor.de/cybergoth/gamesc/rogueinterview.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See Roy Wagner’s “Amiga Preferences” column in the August 1986 issue of *Computer Gaming World*.

company named Bear Systems to release it for the Commodore 64 and MS-DOS platforms in 1983. The DOS version has some nice innovations, such as the ability to switch between text and graphics modes while exploring dungeons. The graphical mode features a first-person, monochrome 3D wireframe display that is much larger than the type usually seen in PLATO CRPGs. The Commodore 64 version is actually quite different, with an odd gray and blue color scheme and crude graphics. *Oubliette* offers eight races, ten classes, and a guild-based advancement system. The player can select an appropriate guild for each character's apprenticeship, which range in quality and duration as well as danger to the student: "to short-lived races such as orcs and ogres, becoming a professional student can be a fatal mistake."<sup>3</sup> Players can also elect to spend some time as dungeon-wandering peasants before joining a guild, but older students don't tend to fare as well. *Oubliette* also has some unique combat options, such as seduce, which I've yet to see in any other CRPG.<sup>4</sup> It's also one of the most monster-rich games, with over 150 different types of monster.

Unlike the PLATO version, the port allows players to control up to six other characters (ten others can be created and left in the tavern between dungeon romps). Considering the complicated array of options for each character, it's easy to see how gameplay can quickly get complicated.

## *Expedition Amazon*

One of the most interesting CRPGs of 1983 is a little-known game named *Expedition Amazon*, authored by Williard Phillips and published by Penguin Software (a port for the Commodore 64 followed in 1984). Despite some design flaws, the game deserves note for being one of the few CRPGs set in modern times. The goal is to send a team of four explorers (medic, field assistant, radio operator, and guard) on an expedition into ancient Incan ruins. Instead of orcs and dragons, players struggle against recalcitrant natives, anacondas, and malaria-infected mosquitoes. Gameplay is similar to that in Epyx's *Sword of Fargoal*, though with fixed rather than randomized dungeons. A dose of irreverent humor also pleased critics. An image of Flint University is depicted as a run-down trailer in a trailer park, with a slow-moving armadillo scuttling past, and items recovered from battles with Amazons include Pac-Man lunch boxes. Sadly, this unusual, even unique game is rarely mentioned

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<sup>3</sup> From the game's manual.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about this option, see Chapter 3.



Willard Phillips' colorful *Expedition Amazon* puts players in charge of an expedition into ancient Incan Ruins.

today. Penguin Software (later renamed Polarware to avoid litigation from the book publisher) published Chris Cole's *Sword of Kadash* in 1984, an action CRPG very similar to SSI's Gemstone series, discussed later in this chapter.

## Zyll

Another interesting game from this period is Scott Edwards and Marshal Linder's *Zyll*, a 1984 game programmed for IBM's short-lived PCjr (though the game will run on any IBM PC compatible). *Zyll* is a two-player, text-based CRPG in which the players either compete or cooperate in a quest to find the Black Orb. The game is set in real time and features well-written descriptions of the scenery, and enough of the gameplay was randomly generated to make it fun to play over and over. In effect, it's a MUD playable on a single, nonnetworked computer, a novel concept then and now. According to Scott Edwards, both he and Linder were IBM employees who wrote the game during their office hours. They submitted it to IBM's employee submissions program and were one of only seven who were accepted.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this highly innovative game is virtually unknown today.

## Fighting Fantasy

The final pre-Golden Age series worth our attention is *Fighting Fantasy*, published by Puffin Books (an imprint of Penguin) for the Commodore 64 and ZX Spectrum. These games were based on a successful series of printed solo-player "gamebooks" by Steve Jackson (not to be confused with the founder of

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.mobygames.com/game/pc-booter/zyll/reviews/reviewerId,35909/>.

Steve Jackson Games) and Ian Livingstone. Some six games were published between 1984 and 1987, mostly by Puffin but later by Adventure Soft UK, Ltd. Some, like *The Citadel of Chaos* and *The Forest of Doom* (both 1984), are pretty straightforward adaptations; at critical moments, the player will select from a course of action from a small, numbered menu. Later games (*Seas of Blood*, *Rebel Planet*) offer an adventure game-style parser, though one supplemented with graphical illustrations. Ian Livingstone's *Deathtrap Dungeon*, published in 1998 by Eidos Interactive, is a *Tomb Raider*-style action game based on the gamebook by the same name. In May 2006, Jackson and Livingstone announced plans to launch a new series of games based on *Fighting Fantasy* for the Nintendo DS and Sony PSP portable game systems.

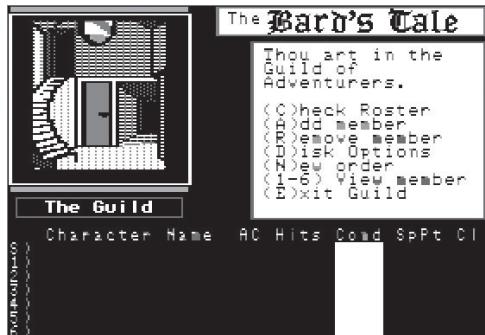
## The Dawn of the Golden Age

1985 is one of the most important years in the history of the CRPG. Never before had such a torrent of high-quality commercial titles appeared simultaneously on the shelf. Perhaps the most significant of these was Interplay's *Tales of the Unknown Vol. 1: The Bard's Tale*, which introduced gamers to the highly successful *Bard's Tale* trilogy. Although there were certainly excellent CRPGS before it, *The Bard's Tale* was intuitive and addictive enough to attract a mainstream audience, no doubt due in part to the marketing might of its publisher, Electronic Arts. 1985 also saw the debut of SSI's *Phantasie* series, as well as their game *Wizard's Crown*. Although SSI wouldn't reach its zenith until it acquired the priceless TSR license and began marketing official *AD&D* games, their early games are far from shabby.

Other significant releases of 1985 include Origin's *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*, as well their *Autoduel* and *Moebius: The Orb of Celestial Harmony*. Like *Autoduel*, DataSoft's *Alternate Reality: The City* offered gamers an alternative to the conventional swords and sorcery theme so prevalent in most CRPGs. In short, 1985 and 1986 were some of the most formative years for the CRPG, and there are many important and exciting developments to cover. Let's get started, then, with *The Bard's Tale* trilogy.

## Down and Out in Skara Brae

Although the *Ultima* and *Wizardry* series established the CRPG's conventions, it was Interplay that really refined the genre and demonstrated that it wasn't just for hardcore gamers raised on wargaming and tabletop *D&D*. *Tales of the Unknown Vol. 1: The Bard's Tale*, released in 1985 for the Com-



*The Bard's Tale* takes the *Wizardry* model to new heights, with a slick interface and highly polished graphics.

modore 64 and Apple II (ports for other platforms would follow until 1990), is probably the first CRPG that many readers will recognize from their youth (and no doubt a few still play it). Indeed, *The Bard's Tale*'s undeniable mass appeal was probably not matched by another game until Blizzard's *Diablo* in 1997. The game was so successful, in fact, that Baen Books launched a series of eight novels based on the games, some penned by such well-known fantasy authors as Mercedes Lackey! Although the final *Bard's Tale* game was released in 1991, in 2004 Brian Fargo and InXile Entertainment revived the franchise with a "spiritual sequel" for the PS2, Xbox, and Windows.

What made *The Bard's Tale* so extraordinarily successful? Why did it enjoy such broad appeal? After all, *The Bard's Tale* is certainly not an easy game and can be quite challenging even for experienced CRPG gamers. The difficulty is particularly felt during the crucial initial stage of the game, when the player's characters (up to six) are weak, poorly equipped, and inexperienced. I lost track of the times I created an entire party of adventurers, only to have them all perish in a random encounter before I could make it to Garth's weapon shop! The game's story elements are also quite Spartan—it's a humble dungeon crawler with an emphasis on fighting random encounters with monsters, building up character stats and inventories, and mapping out the many dungeons. In many ways, the game is merely an updated *Wizardry* with better graphics and sound (indeed, some versions of the game even let players import their *Wizardry* or *Ultima* characters!). The main quest—to find and depose an evil wizard named Mangar the Dark, who is threatening the town of Skara Brae—is hardly novel. Even the name of the town, Skara Brae, is also found in *Ultima* (both are named after a Neolithic settlement in Scotland).

Perhaps the game's most striking innovation is the addition of and emphasis on the bard class type, a sort of jack-of-all-trades character who could perform party-boosting songs during combat and dungeon exploration. The game took every opportunity to endear the class to players. Indeed, one of the best-known catchphrases of the game is "When the going gets tough, the bard goes drinking." The bard became a popular antihero, a jovial rogue who clashed with the stereotypical Conan-style warriors and Gandalf-inspired wizards that dominate the genre. Ironically, though, creator Michael Cranford admits that "the bard was just an afterthought."<sup>6</sup> What an afterthought!

Although most of the other character types were fairly standard, the classes available to magic users were richly nuanced: players started off as simple conjurers or magicians but could eventually upgrade to sorcerers and wizards. Truly ambitious magic-users could master all the schools of magic and become fearsome archmages. Although earlier games (*Wizardry*) offered prestige classes, this is the first game in which characters could combine four different classes to become a fifth and more powerful class (most games heavily penalize players for multiclassing.). It is still a great innovation that is seldom seen in later games.

Nevertheless, anyone who has played *The Bard's Tale* for any length of time discovers that it is much greater than the sum of its parts. Even the artwork on the cover of the box is significant. Instead of the usual illustration of an armored knight and a dragon, we see a group of men (some with pointy ears) in a darkened tavern, all clustered around a bard plucking a Medieval instrument and apparently singing songs of legendary adventures. Around this image we see a top-down view of a maze, cornered by arcane symbols. The rest of the series continued this tradition, always depicting a string-plucking bard somewhere on the cover. While it's easy enough to overlook such a detail, I think these cover designs show how Interplay was trying to generate a different, more light-hearted atmosphere than was typical of CRPGs. I heartily agree with what Cranford told me in my interview with him: the game simply had soul.

There are other subtle qualities that hold the game together. No doubt, the game's playability owes much to the clean interface and striking color graphics (many of which are animated). Even novice players can learn the game's rules in a few sessions, and if the characters can survive to reach the higher levels, the difficulty eases up considerably—and it's quite rewarding for players to go about slaughtering monsters that made a meal out of their

<sup>6</sup> These quotations from Cranford are from personal email correspondence with the author.

former parties. Furthermore, the ability to travel outdoors as well as indoors lends coherence to the game world. Unlike other CRPGs, in which cities and towns were little more than menus for buying equipment, *Skara Brae* felt like a real place. Again, this coherence is almost surely an effect of the game's rich graphics. Even if the graphics look primitive today, in 1985 they were stunning. Each building in *Skara Brae* looks like it belongs there. No doubt, much of the sleekness of the game is owed to Cranford, whose proficiency with assembly language gave him a decisive edge at a time when many CRPGs were still being programmed in BASIC and Pascal.

### *The Destiny Knight*

Interplay followed up its success with two sequels, *The Destiny Knight* (1986) and *The Thief of Fate* (1991). *The Destiny Knight* was essentially a rehash of the first game, using the same engine but expanding the game world to include five other cities (the first game occurred entirely in *Skara Brae*) and a wilderness area. It also added banks and casinos to the services available in the towns, special spells for archmages, timed puzzles, and ranged combat. Though players can import their characters from the first game, the difficulty level is better balanced for new parties (players have a much better chance of making it to Garth's store to buy equipment before dying, and a beginner's dungeon helps players level up their characters in a safer environment). The graphics were also improved, and now the important buildings each have a distinctive look.

Although the characters dispatched the evil Mangar the Dark in the first game, another evil mage named Lagoth Zanta decides to shatter the Destiny Wand into seven pieces, scattering them across the land. Since the wand has protected the world for some 700 years, things don't bode well unless the characters can restore the wand and use it to slay Lagoth Zanta (one wonders what the wand was doing during the first game, but so it goes).

Solving the game will require gaining insights from a Sage, a process that utilizes a rather crude and frustrating text parser. One contemporary reviewer quips that the parser is merely a "comparator," a routine that simply compares the player's input with the "correct" response. For instance, typing "TOMBS" to learn the party's whereabouts does nothing—the player must type "THE TOMBS." Yet the use of the definite article was not consistent, and compounding the issue was the problem that the Sage took the party's gold whether or not their inputs matched up. No doubt, many players scurried to purchase clue books to help them bypass such inanities. Critics also complained about the tedious death snare segments, some of which required quite a bit of backtracking across dungeons.



*The Thief of Fate* offers the best graphics of the series. Shown here is the popular Commodore 64 version.

### *The Thief of Fate*

*The Thief of Fate* is probably the overall best designed game of the series, since it incorporates helpful new features such as automapping and the ability to use items to solve puzzles, thus opening up many interesting opportunities for thoughtful gameplay. The third game is also the most ambitious in terms of the game world: now the players must explore entirely different universes, including Nazi Berlin! In all, there are 84 dungeon levels and 500 types of monsters, including several varieties of spell casters. Finally, now players can save anywhere (previously, they could only save in the adventurers' guilds).

### *The Bard's Tale Construction Set*

Electronic Arts also published Interplay's *The Bard's Tale Construction Set* for Commodore's Amiga and the MS-DOS platforms. This construction set included an updated version of the first game in the series (rechristened *Star Light Festival*). However, more importantly, the set allowed CRPG fans to construct their own games based on the enhanced *Thief of Fate* engine. The construction kit was popular on both platforms, but the most useful version available for MS-DOS, which had support for hard drives, VGA, mouse, and the usual slew of sound cards. Strangely, while music was played through the sound card, all sound effects were delegated to the PC's inadequate internal speaker. Probably the most well-known game created with the set is *The Bard's Lore: The Warrior and the Dragon*, by John H. Wigforss. Of course, there were undoubtedly many hundreds if not thousands of good homebrew titles created by other fans, but the Internet as we know it was not yet available. Since these hobbyist developers had no way to cheaply distribute their games, most are lost to history.

Interplay would continue to produce some of the finest CRPGs in the canon, such as *Wasteland* (1988), and *Fallout* (1997). *Wasteland* is another of the great Golden Age classics that we'll discuss later in this chapter. In 1996, Interplay created a special CRPG division named Black Isle Studios, which published the *Baldur's Gate* games and developed *Planescape: Torment* and the *Icewind Dale* series, about which we'll have more to say later. In short, Interplay ranks with Origin, Sir-Tech, and SSI as one of the greatest CRPG developers and publishers. Sadly, the company has lost much of its prestige, and many of its key people have moved on to other companies.

### *Centauri Alliance*

In passing, we should take a moment to look at Michael Cranford's *Centauri Alliance*, a sci-fi themed CRPG that's often described as "The Bard's Tale in space," a justified epithet. Published by Broderbund for the Apple II and Commodore 64 platforms in 1989, it has a great deal in common with *The Bard's Tale* and even allows players to import their characters from that series (or *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, and *Might and Magic* for that matter). One big difference is the combat mode, which takes place on an isometric hexagonal grid. Each group of monsters and the party are represented by single icons on the board. It's an interesting system that is reminiscent of miniatures wargaming. Indeed, even the box is in the shape of a hexagon.

As with most sci-fi CRPGs, the leveling system is based on skills. Which skills characters receive in *Centauri Alliance* depends on training as well as race; skills are organized into four disciplines: combat, tech, psionics, and metamorph. Only the alien Praktor race can learn metamorph, and humans can learn the tech and combat skills but not psionics, a discipline based



The creator of *Bard's Tale* went on to create this relatively obscure sci-fi game, which enhances the engine with a tactical combat mode, shown here.

on the manipulation of alien brainwaves. When a character has enough experience in the discipline, he or she must visit an academy for training. Skills are important not just for combat but also for solving the many puzzles sprinkled throughout the game.

The game is also noted for its plot, in which a group of adventurers searches for a renegade, who must be neutralized for the sake of the Centauri Alliance, a coalition of humans and other races hoping to bring peace to the galaxy. Needless to say, the plot soon thickens. Unfortunately, the game is not known today, even among *The Bard's Tale* fans. This obscurity is likely owed to its exclusivity to 8-bit platforms at a time when countless gamers had migrated to more powerful machines.

While Michael Cranford and Electronic Arts played a pivotal role in founding the Golden Age of CRPGs, they were certainly not alone. Another company that was beginning to flex its muscles was SSI, an old publisher of war games that had now set its sights on the budding CRPG market.

## The Infant Phantasies of Strategic Simulations, Inc.: Any Questrons?

Today, Strategic Simulations, Inc. (SSI) is best known for its fabulous “Gold Box” and “Black Box” games, series of CRPGs that bore the official seal of TSR, holder of the sacred *Dungeons & Dragons* copyrights and trademarks. This invaluable license was sought after by nearly every other CRPG developer, but SSI emerged victorious from the struggle. It’s likely that TSR’s decision was swayed by SSI’s legacy as an eminent developer and publisher of computer-based wargames (as you remember, *D&D* emerged from tabletop war games). SSI’s first game was *Computer Bismarck*, published in 1979 for the Apple II. SSI quickly became the market leader in this niche, even with the premier wargames publisher Avalon Hill competing against them. However, by the time SSI acquired the license, SSI had already established itself as a respectable CRPG publisher with games such as *Questron*, *Phantasie*, and *The Wizard’s Crown*. Although these early games aren’t as well known as SSI’s licensed titles, they are full of innovations and are more than worthy of our attention.

SSI’s first two CRPGs were published in 1984: *50 Mission Crush* and *Questron*. *50 Mission Crush* is more like a conventional wargame than most CRPGs and is probably better described as a turn-based strategy game. The game consists of fifty B-17 bomber missions flown during World War II. The player assigns each position in the plane to his characters (i.e., tail-gunner,

bomber). These characters receive experience points each time they survive a mission, eventually gaining competence and winning promotions. The magazine *Computer Gaming World* published a fascinating review of the game written by an actual B-24 bombardier named Leroy W. Newby, who found it realistic enough to evoke dozens of wartime memories, which he duly juxtaposes alongside his gameplay narrative.<sup>7</sup> Newby also served as SSI's consultant on the game, which may account for some of its depth and realism. In any case, *50 Mission Crush* is the only CRPG I am aware of that is set during World War II.

### The Dougherty Brothers: *Questron* and *Legacy of the Ancients*

Whereas *50 Mission Crush* is a highly innovative and even unique game, *Questron* is an unabashed clone of Garriott's *Ultima*. To their credit, SSI took the precaution of securing a license from Garriott for the game's "structure and style." Critics recommended the game as a "perfect warm-up" for *Ultima III*, arguing that the game's relative simplicity and low difficulty made it well suited for novices.<sup>8</sup> One good example of the game's relative ease is the lack of a character creation stage; all players begin with a default character with all stats set at 15. Instead of gaining levels and experience points, players complete specific quests to rise in the ranks. The goal of the game is standard fantasy fare. Beginning as a humble serf, the player must take the Book of



*Questron* is clearly a clone of *Ultima* yet offers a lower learning curve. Note the option to "kill self," a crass feature of several early CRPGs that somehow escaped the notice of concerned citizens.

<sup>7</sup> See "A 50 Mission Recall" in the March 1987 issue of *Computer Gaming World*.

<sup>8</sup> See "Adventure Trends" by Michael Ciraolo in the November 1984 issue of *Antic* magazine.

Evil Magic away from an evil wizard named Mantor, destroying his many minions (100 types) as he builds up his character's stats. The game's three dungeons are rendered in wireframe 3D but look more realistic than those in *Ultima*, with curvy rather than straight lines to make the walls look more like roughly-carved stone.

*Questron* did have some promising features, such as a series of action minigames that could boost the character's stats, for example, a skeet-shoot game to improve dexterity. There were also casinos where players could gamble for gold. Finally, *Questron* is one of the earliest games in which certain monsters can only be killed by special weapons. Hit points are purchased either from the occasional wanderer or from the priests stationed at cathedrals. Perhaps the most questionable feature of the game is the option to "kill self," displayed prominently on the menu—certainly not a good idea at a time when fantasy role-playing was already controversial. Fortunately for SSI, neither critics nor concerned parents seem to have paid it much notice. Indeed, contemporary reviews for the game were quite positive.

Charles "Chuck" Dougherty, *Questron*'s designer and programmer, would go on to write another popular CRPG named *Legacy of the Ancients* with his brother, John. After a falling out with SSI, the brothers submitted the game to Electronic Arts, which published it in 1987. Based largely on *Questron*'s core engine, *Legacy of the Ancients* is more epic in scope, with gameplay focused on a mysterious museum built long ago by a forgotten race of aliens (the Ancients). The player must explore each exhibit in this museum, which requires finding lots of special coins. The ultimate goal is to destroy an evil scroll that contains fearfully powerful magic. *Legacy of the Ancients* shares many of *Questron*'s features, such as the arcade-style minigames, premade characters, and a quest-based rank system.

Apparently, business arrangements didn't work out with Electronic Arts either; Chuck and John Dougherty submitted their next game, *The Legend of Blacksilver*, to Epyx for publication in 1988. The game recycled the *Questron* engine yet again, though updating the graphics and targeting the Commodore 64 platform. The player's mission this time is to rescue a king captured by an evil baron who is striving to create a weapon of mass destruction using the titular blacksilver artifact. Apparently, the game was not successful enough to keep Chuck and John in business: their company, Quest Software, closed its doors shortly afterward, and the brothers seem to have been relegated to the "Where are they now?" file.

Meanwhile, SSI had retained its rights to the *Questron* trademark but didn't develop its own sequel. Instead, they solicited Westwood Associates

for the task—the Dougherties were not involved. Westwood persevered, and *Questron II* was published in 1988. This game is based largely on the first, though set in an earlier time period. The mission is to depose six insane sorcerers and prevent the creation of the Book of Magic. It features an automap-per and 3D dungeons in color, but it's essentially the same game in a new costume. Still, it's certainly the better known of the two, and we'll hear more about Westwood later.

### The *Phantasies* of Winston Douglas Wood

Better known than *Questron* is SSI's 1985 classic, *Phantasie*, programmed by Winston Douglas Wood. *Phantasie* was a tremendously successful game that won over many gamers and critics. The games offer just the right balance of story, puzzle, and combat elements; and critics raved about the intuitive and addicting gameplay. The game employs a well-organized, split-screen interface and separate menus for purchasing equipment, exploring dungeons, roaming the world map, and engaging in combat. It features 80 monsters, 50 spells, 100 pieces of equipment, and plenty of areas to explore. Furthermore, the game tracks where the party has been, obviating the need for map-making. One particularly enthusiastic contemporary reviewer remarked that *Phantasie* "may be the best fantasy role-playing game to come down the silicon pike since Sir-Tech conjured up *Wizardry*" and, "at the risk of sounding blasphemous," even finds it superior in some aspects.<sup>9</sup> Building well on the success of this series, SSI would soon be a dominant player in the CRPG market.



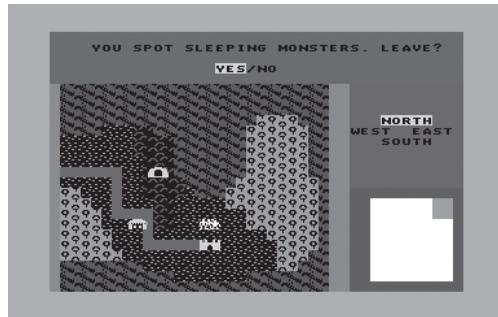
Pictured here is the *Phantasie* series' trademark combat screen (Apple II version). The player's party is represented by the animated characters on the bottom left.

<sup>9</sup> See James V. Trunzo's review of the game in the Dec. 1985 issue of *Compute!* magazine.

*Phantasie* allows players to control up to six adventurers from a pool of 37, the rest of which can be left in the various town guilds between missions. Character creation has an interesting twist. Besides the standard races (human, dwarf, elf, gnome, and halfling), players can also select “random,” which may result in a gnoll, goblin, kobold, lizard man, minotaur, ogre, orc, pixie, sprite, or troll—truly an impressive list, and each race has its advantages and disadvantages. In the first game, for instance, only a party with a minotaur can enter a certain dungeon. There is also some racism: certain races have charisma penalties and will find their training fees steeply raised on account of their poor reputations. A final racial consideration is that the characters age over the course of the game, and some of the more short-lived races may begin to suffer attribute penalties before the game is over.

In addition to the usual stats (dexterity, strength, and so on), each character also has points in the following skills: attack, parry, swim, listen, spot trap, disarm trap, pick lock, and find item. Points in these skills are distributed according to the character’s race and class. The classes include the usual fighters, priests, thieves, and wizards, but also monks (fighter/mage/thief) and rangers (fighter/priest). One unusual feature of character creation is that any class can use any weapon or armor; limitations are imposed only by low stats (especially low strength scores). Thus, many players prioritize strength and dexterity when creating characters of any type. The class and level system is based on the character’s current level of experience points (won after each battle) and possession of gold, since the trainers must be paid for their services. The amount they must have on hand rises with every new level, so there is always a need to raise money by finding treasure and selling off items.

*Phantasie* also features an innovative turn-based combat system that would be imitated in countless later games, particularly in console RPGs. The characters are shown in a line along the bottom of the screen, with their foes arranged in ranks above them. During a turn, the player selects attack options for each character, which are then initiated in a random sequence after the turn is completed. One nice innovation is that characters aren’t limited to a single type of attack but can select among several options: attack (two normal swings), thrust (one hard swing), slash (three or four quick swings), and lunge (one swing at the rear rank of monsters). The thief and wizard can target any row of monsters, but melee is usually limited to the frontline. Once battle ensues, the attacking character or monster is briefly animated, perhaps shown raising his sword or casting a spell. The characters even perform a brief victory dance if they win—a feature seen in countless Japanese console RPGs.



Shown here is the Commodore 64 version of *Phantasie*. The intuitive interface, colorful graphics, and geeky humor were well received by gamers.

*Phantasie's* story is standard fare and is derived rather blatantly from Tolkien. Besides obvious nods such as a character named "J. R. Trolkin," many elements seem straight from the pages of *Lord of the Rings*. The player must kill the Black Knights and their master, the evil sorcerer Nikademus, who supplies them with powerful but soul-stealing magic rings. To accomplish this task, the characters must round up twenty scrolls, each of which contains a vital clue. Furthermore, the story is woven more closely into the gameplay than was seen in other games, and players are given more opportunities to make decisions that had a direct effect on the gameplay. For instance, they could avoid set encounters by using secret passages or by attempting to bribe or plead with monsters rather than fight them.

SSI followed up the first game with *Phantasie II* in 1986. The plot this time is even less original than the first—Nikademus is back, and this time he's used a magical orb to enslave an island and its population. Naturally, the party must find and destroy the orb. Other than the new story, there is little difference between this game and its prequel, save the ability of characters to hurl rocks at enemies during combat. Players of the first game could also import their old characters, though doing so conferred only minor benefits (equipment and most of their gold and experience would not transfer).

The final *Phantasie* was released in 1987 for the Apple II and given the subtitle *The Wrath of Nikademus*. Wood coded the Apple II version; Westwood handled the enhanced ports for other systems. Nikademus has returned yet again, and after two defeats (and apparent deaths!) his ambition has only grown—this time he's out to control the world.

The third game offers better graphics and more sophisticated combat, such as the ability to target specific body regions, a wound system, and bet-

ter tactics. For instance, now the player can easily see which monsters and characters were hit in combat and how badly they were injured. Characters can also move forward to get a better shot, and it's possible to strategically place weaker characters in the rear. Another nice addition is the "fire bow" skill, which allows all characters to wield bows. Bows are perhaps the most powerful weapons in the game, since they are the best for achieving the head shot, an extremely damaging attack that can bring down almost any monster—and there are no penalties for firing a bow point-blank at monsters in the frontline. The skill system is refined, and now players are given a few skill points to distribute in the various skill areas each time the character levels up. Finally, the third game introduces social class, which is randomly assigned to each character (peasant, laborer, craftsman, noble). Characters with a higher social class start off with more money and receive more each time they level up, and of course characters of less reputable races are far less likely to come out on top.

*Phantasie III* is widely regarded as the best game in the series, even though it is noticeably shorter than the first two games. Indeed, one contemporary reviewer remarked that it "was so close to perfect, I have to dig really deep to find any fault."<sup>10</sup> In 1990, a company named WizardWorks released the first games in a retro-styled package called *Phantasie Bonus Edition* for the DOS and Commodore Amiga platforms. Unfortunately, despite its initial popularity and many innovations, the *Phantasie* series has not managed to attain the enduring legacy it deserves and has been long overshadowed by SSI's later "Gold Box" CRPGs.

### *The Wizard's Crown*

Another classic SSI game released in 1985 is Paul Murray and Keith Brors' *The Wizard's Crown*, a CRPG with an overtly complex tactical combat system. Probably the most hardcore CRPG of its time, *The Wizard's Crown* lets players control up to eight characters, multiclassing them however they see fit (e.g., a character could be a thief/fighter/sorcerer/priest, though such hybridization slows advancement). Instead of the conventional level and class system, characters improved their stats and skills, such as hunting, haggling, alchemy, and swimming (a system very similar to that seen in much later games such as *Fallout* and *Neverwinter Nights*). Experience points are won in battle and must be traded in to raise skill points. How many experience points translate

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<sup>10</sup> See Steve Panak's review in the Aug. 1988 issue of *ST-Log* magazine.



*The Wizard's Crown* is one of the most sophisticated tactical CRPGs ever designed. Its superb combat engine would later be simplified and refined for *Pool of Radiance*.

into skill points depends on the current score of that skill; inflation occurs at higher levels. Murray and Brors were big fans of the tabletop games *Runequest* and *Traveller*, which no doubt helped inspire this skill system.

Likewise, the combat system was more dynamic than anything offered up to that time. Brors and Murray had an extensive background in miniatures wargaming and wanted to create a CRPG that similarly emphasized tactical combat and military science. Their game contained more than 20 combat commands, including unusual ones like Fall Prone, which makes a character harder to hit with arrows but easier to hit with melee weapons. As in *Questron* and *Phantasie*, different situations call for different weapons. However, *The Wizard's Crown* goes a step beyond with added realism—shields work only if the character is facing the right direction, for instance; and characters are still vulnerable to axes and flails, which can destroy or circumvent, respectively, a shield. There are also ranged weapons, which of course can play an important role in tactical combat. This is also one of the only games I know of in which spears have extended range; they can attack monsters two “squares” away, whereas other melee weapons (swords) are limited to one square. Characters could even be wounded in two different ways—injuries, which result in temporary stat penalties, and bleeding, which continuously drains the character of life points. Both injuries and bleeding can be normal or serious, with results you can easily imagine. Perhaps the only glitch in an otherwise realistic combat system is that the monsters never flee or surrender but always fight to the death. To make matters even more complicated, there's a morale system that

takes fatigue and nervous strain into consideration. Morale is recovered either by resting or, ideally, by partying it up in a tavern.

The magic system is also fairly complex, based on a mathematical formula. Each spell costs a certain amount of spell points (the “power” of the spell), but just having enough points doesn’t guarantee success. Instead, the chance of casting the spell correctly depends on the difficulty level of the spell and the magic-user’s “cast spell” skill. For instance, the spell Life Blast costs four power points and has a difficulty level of 80. The difficulty level is subtracted from the caster’s “cast spell” stat, the remainder being the chance of a successful cast. Thus, a sorcerer with a “cast spell” score of 90 would have only a 10% chance of avoiding a miscast. Spell points are regained by resting in the inn. The maximum score for any skill is 250.

The only real flaw in the game concerns movement in the dungeons. Each of the characters is shown on screen while the party is in the dungeon, though only one character is active (the rest are programmed either to follow him or to stand still). Unfortunately, the artificial intelligence is rather lacking, and it’s all too easy for characters to get mired behind an obstacle, necessitating a tedious series of commands to get everyone lined up again.

Although a major battle can last up to 40 minutes, players can also choose quick combat, which automatically resolves the combat in seconds. The catch is that the results of a quick combat are seldom satisfactory, with party members taking more damage than they would under the direct control of an able tactician. Nevertheless, it’s a massive timesaver when the party is substantially more powerful than the enemy. This useful and desirable feature will show up in later SSI games but is sorely missing in many other turn-based CRPGs.

While the storyline is typical (find a wizard, kill him, and take back the titular crown), the extraordinary attention to character development and strategic combat make up for it. *The Wizard’s Crown* remains one of the most sophisticated tactical CRPGs ever designed: a rich blend of wargaming and fantasy role-playing. SSI released a sequel called *The Eternal Dagger* in 1987. Thanks to an evil Necromancer (is there any other kind?), demons from another dimension are invading the world, and the only item that can seal the portal is the titular dagger. Other than the new storyline, the sequel is virtually identical to the first game, though some elements, such as the Fall Prone option mentioned above, are omitted; and players can trade experience for skill bonuses anywhere (as opposed to only in the tavern). Players can import their old party from the previous game, though they’ll arrive without their equipment.

One welcome improvement was the revamping of the dungeon movement system, so that the entire party is represented by a single character, thus avoiding the aforementioned issues with artificial intelligence. The game also takes the seasons into account, distributing daylight hours accordingly (summer months have extra long days). Since the party cannot travel at night, players are advised to plan a year or so ahead for extended forays into the wilderness. To make matters worse, if the party is attacked at night, only the party members posted on guard will be wearing any armor! It's truly staggering to think of this level of detail in such an early game. However, not all critics were pleased. One contemporary reviewer remarked, "It may be realistic, but there is a point where realism begins to have negative effects on playability and game enjoyment" and recommended the game for "patient players only."<sup>11</sup> Fortunately, the developers were able to learn from their experience and chose carefully which elements to include and which to omit in their game *Pool of Radiance*, which we'll discuss at length in the next chapter.

### *The Shard of Spring and Demon's Winter*

*The Shard of Spring* is a 1986 game written for the Apple II by Craig Roth and David Stark, and ported to MS-DOS by D.R. Gilman, Leslie Hill, and Martin deCastongrene—who did the whole game in Microsoft QuickBasic! It's a bit crude compared to the other SSI games of the era and falls somewhere in between *The Wizard's Crown* and *Phantasie* in terms of complexity. The story is that an evil sorceress has stolen the Shard of Spring, a magical item that brings eternal springtime to the land. Now that it's gone, the world has fallen into chaos, and the solution is hardly unexpected.

The player is allowed to create a party of up to five characters of five races (human, troll, dwarf, elf, gnome) but gets a choice of only two classes (warrior and wizard). Unsurprisingly, some races are excluded from one race or another—no troll wizards allowed. This game also has a fairly interesting skill system based on a character's intellect—the higher that score, the more skills he or she can learn. Skills are divided between warrior (sword, axe, mace, karate, armored skin) and wizard skills, which are based on the five elements of nature: fire, metal, wind, ice, and spirit runes. Some of the more interesting and useful noncombat skills are monster lore, which gives crucial information in combat, and dark vision, which allows the party to see in dark dungeons.

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<sup>11</sup> See Scorpia's review of the game in the October 1987 issue of *Computer Gaming World*.



*The Shard of Spring* is an ambitious project inspired by Steve Jackson's *The Fantasy Trip* role-playing game.

Another notable aspect is the training system. To gain a level, a character must find a suitable guild (fighter or wizard), whose members are willing to perform the training for free, provided the character has sufficient experience points. Characters receive three random trait bonuses each time they reach a new level. Craig Roth cites Steve Jackson's pen-and-paper *The Fantasy Trip* role-playing game as his inspiration for this innovative system.<sup>12</sup>

Roth and Stark wrote a sequel called *Demon's Winter*, which was published by SSI in 1988. While very similar to the first game, *Demon's Winter* features an exponentially larger game world and a greatly expanded set of character classes: ranger, paladin, berserker, monk, cleric, thief, wizard, sorcerer, visionary, and scholar. Visionaries have some unusual abilities, mostly dealing with reconnaissance—for instance, they can view a room to check for monsters without being seen. Furthermore, any class can learn any skill, though there are point penalties for crossing the wizard/fighter boundary. For instance, a wizard trying to learn to wield an axe must spend nine points, whereas the skill is available to the barbarian for a single point. Since total points are limited by the character's Intellect, it is much more efficient to stick with traditional skills for each class. Furthermore, the concept of the training guild has been extended here to cover skills; now, characters must seek out special colleges to learn new skills, and the training isn't free.

<sup>12</sup> The quotations and references from Roth are from personal email correspondence with the author.

Two of the new skills are priesthood and shaman, which tie in to the game's religious system. A character with these skills can choose one of ten shaman or priest gods to worship, each of whom has some benefit to bestow upon those who call upon him—though too much calling can annoy the god, who must be appeased by a visit to one of his or her temples. The various towns may also have a patron deity. In general, the shaman gods are considered barbaric, more suited for barbarians than paladins (who favor the priestly gods). Roth felt that these additions added “an extra level of depth” and gave the character's alignment more concrete consequences. They also offer a nice last resort, since calling upon a god might have miraculous effects.

The game also has more puzzle elements than its predecessor, most of which hinge on a new ability to manipulate objects. For instance, at one point a character must use a mallet to break open a glass case and use two vials of serum to awaken a man from a trance—he manages to utter a vital clue before drifting off back to dreamland. Such puzzles were likely added in response to some of the criticism of the first game's over-emphasis on combat. Nevertheless, the story is still rather conventional—the land of Ymros is faced with eternal winter unless the characters can find and destroy the evil demon god Malifon.

Unfortunately, neither *The Shard of Spring* nor *Demon's Winter* had advanced graphics or quality sound (even on the Amiga platform), factors that no doubt led to lackluster reviews in most game magazines. Even Roth admits that they “were a tad behind the stage-of-the-art.” Still, their creators, Stark and Roth, were familiarizing gamers with the type of tactical-oriented gameplay that would play such a prominent role in SSI's “Gold Box” series. Roth feels that the game would have been more successful if SSI hadn't been so focused on promoting their officially licensed *AD&D* games.

### *Rings of Zilfin*

Ali Atabek's *Rings of Zilfin*, released in 1986, is a game intended for novices—and thus focuses more on story and atmosphere than tactics and stats. It features amusing cut scenes that establish and maintain the Tolkien-inspired storyline, which amounts to keeping an evil necromancer named Lord Dragos from finding both of the rings of power and using them to take over the world. *Rings of Zilfin* puts the player in the role of Reis (the name can be changed), a budding magic-user who must develop his abilities and take on Dragos and his minions. It's probably more accurate to describe the game as an adventure/CRPG hybrid, since there are many inventory-based puzzles. If you've ever wanted a CRPG that lets you feed a cookie to a water dragon, look no further.



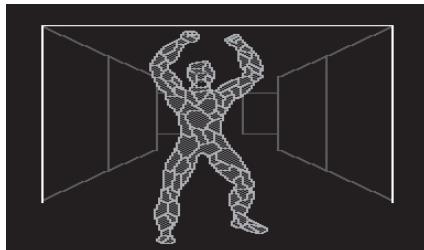
*Rings of Zilfin* is one of the early adventure/CRPG hybrids. Its designer would later create the cult classic *Magic Candle* series.

Players are spared the bother of creating a character and rolling for stats, and the combat sequences are more like mini-arcade games than the tactical affairs seen in *The Wizard's Crown* or *The Shard of Spring*. Most of the game is spent traveling between towns, and along the way the character can collect plants—such as mushrooms and herbs that boost stats or cure poison. There are also pools that have random effects. The world is composed of some 100 villages, and the player needs to talk to many villagers to gather clues. Naturally, the character gets fatigued from traveling and must rest to restore his vitality. The fatigue score decreases in proportion to the character's walking speed—and if it reaches zero, the game is over. Other actions, such as climbing, fighting, and casting spells, also deplete this all-important attribute.

Overall, it's an interesting game and quite different from most of SSI's other offerings. Although *Phantasie* has its share of humor, *Rings of Zilfin* almost seems to indulge in self-parody. For instance, passing monks have lines such as "SSI forever!" and "Have you eaten your Yurpin today?" In short, it's a far cry from the grim, no-nonsense *Wizard's Crown*. Contemporary reviewers seemed divided about its quality, though. One called the game "extraordinarily playable," while another bemoaned its "clumsy user interface" and "primitive graphics." Atabek would go on to create a trilogy of very popular *Ultima*-like games called *The Magic Candle*, a fan favorite we'll discuss in a moment.

### *Realms of Darkness* and *Tangled Tales*

One of SSI's more obscure games is Gary Scott Smith's *Realms of Darkness*, published in 1986 for the Apple II, with a C-64 port in 1987. Like *Rings of Zilfin*, *Realms of Darkness* emphasizes puzzles and storyline but goes



*Realms of Darkness* is another adventure/CRPG hybrid. Shown here is a typical dungeon encounter.

a step closer to adventure games by incorporating an actual text parser to simulate dialog with the various characters encountered by the party. It also strays from straight fantasy by incorporating anachronisms like lawnmowers, electric fans, and even a robot! Perhaps the best way to describe the game is as seven interconnected scenarios. Although the game world is quite large (30 dungeon levels!), the player is guided from one quest to the next.

The player is allowed to create up to eight different characters to join the party, choosing from four races (gnome, dwarf, elf, human) and eight classes. The four basic classes are fighter, sorcerer, priest, thief. The other four are hybrids: knight (fighter/priest), friar, barbarian (fighter/thief), and champion (fighter/mage). One interesting and potentially frustrating aspect of the character creation process is that spell-casters don't get to choose their spells; these are randomly assigned at the beginning of the game and when the character levels up.

Much was made of the text parser on the game's box, and it did seem like a great idea. One of the aspects of CRPGs that many find lacking is the rather "hack 'n slash" nature of the gameplay, which is much less social than in tabletop role-playing. Conceivably, a text parser could bridge the gap by letting players carry on conversations with the characters or the people they meet. While sound in theory, in practice the results are usually disappointing. Even today's supercomputers are inept at natural language processing. Developers typically fake it by having the computer pick up on certain keywords in the response (we'll see several games that take this approach). So, if a player types, "Say, hello there, I'm very pleased to meet you," the program will recognize "say" and "hello," ignore the rest, and display the preprogrammed response. At least, this seems to be what happens in *Realms of Darkness*. From what I can see, the characters exist for little reason other than to provide clues and information or to sell merchandise. Contemporary reviewers had mixed

reactions to the parser. One described it as “advancing the art” of the genre, whereas another said there was really no need to include this feature.”<sup>13</sup>

Another noteworthy innovation is the ability to split the party up into autonomous subgroups. This is especially useful when players need to cover more ground or perhaps send someone to scout ahead of the party. In practice, though, the difficulty of the encounters makes such actions inadvisable—players need the full strength of their party to survive most engagements. Nevertheless, it’s an interesting feature that will take a long time to show up in other CRPGs.

In other regards, *Realms of Darkness* is reminiscent of most CRPGs and adventure games of the era. The city and wilderness scenes are shown on the screen as illustrations, with the available exits listed on the bottom of the screen (N for north, W for west, and so on). However, the display changes to a first-person, wireframe monochrome 3D mode when the party enters the dungeon (similar to that seen in *Wizardry* and *Akalabeth*). When the party encounters a monster, one character is shown on screen in full color. Contemporary critics described the graphics as “not bad” at best and “disappointing” at worst, and I suppose the lack of animation does make the game seem dated for 1986. Nowadays, the game is rarely discussed by anyone but historians.

Smith would go on to make another game called *Tangled Tales*, published in 1988<sup>14</sup> by Origin. Smith describes this game as a “light RPG,” suitable for young people and those new to the CRPG. It features three adventures and some 50 “peculiar” characters and again inserts anachronisms into the standard fantasy fare, such as a rad California surfer dude. A gamer plays the game as an inept young apprentice whose spell book has been seized by Eldritch, his angry master. However, the player is given a chance to atone for her mistakes by completing three interconnected quests. It’s a much more humorous and lighthearted game than most CRPGs.

One nice touch in *Tangled Tales* is based on ranks of adjectives rather than numbers. For instance, the speed score can be lethargic, sluggish, brisk, energetic, or swift. The default character starts off with middling scores in each attribute, though players can opt to reduce some scores to enhance others. The system is further simplified by consisting of only four traits (strength, intelligence, speed, and charisma). These stats can be improved only after the

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<sup>13</sup> See James V. Trunzo’s review of the game in the Aug. 1987 issue of *Compute!*, and Scorpia’s review in the May 1987 issue of *Computer Gaming World*, respectively.

<sup>14</sup> The author’s date from a personal email to the author. Mobygames and other sites list 1989.

player completes a quest, at which time the player can select one trait to raise. Thus, killing monsters serves no purpose other than to acquire the gold needed to buy items and hire mercenaries.

The dialog system here is much different than the one seen in *Realms of Darkness*. Rather than interact with a text parser, players select options from a predefined menu, and the system keeps up with the character's "known question topics," or keywords. Most of the characters simply give information or sell items, but a few will actually team up with the character as hirelings. Besides helping out in combat, these companions can also provide additional clues. More important, certain companions can perform unique tasks needed at critical points in the game; winning necessitates quite a bit of party shuffling.

The game features a graphical interface (mouse-driven on some platforms) and full color, first-person, 3D perspective in the dungeons. The other mode is a split-screen view, with the player shown top-down on the right and a shot of the current location in a window on the left. A textual description sits on the bottom in the shape of a scroll. The graphics were adequate for the time, but contemporary reviewers found little to praise other than the intuitive interface and the focus on puzzle solving rather than repetitive "hack 'n slash" style gameplay.

### Gemstone Series

As you can see from the above, SSI was willing to support some rather experimental concepts in CRPGs. A few last games we should mention are *Gemstone Warrior* (1984) and *Gemstone Healer* (1986), both developed by a company named Paramount Creators. These highly unusual games are best



*Gemstone Warrior* is an early attempt to incorporate CRPG elements into an arcade-style shooter game.

described as “shoot ‘em ups,” that is, the type of gameplay seen in many arcade games of the time. The player controls an armor-clad figure who roams about dungeons firing crossbow bolts and fireballs at a variety of enemies bent on his destruction. The quest is to round up the five pieces of the gemstone, a powerful artifact that once brought peace and prosperity to the land, shooting plenty of enemies who get in the way. The sequel is much the same, though the quest is more complicated (this time, the player is searching for tools to heal the gemstone that was damaged before the first game).

A few references I’ve come across for these games (including *Wikipedia*) label them role-playing games and claim that they are precursors to much later action RPGs such as Blizzard’s *Diablo* (1997). There are certain interesting similarities to that game, such as the fantasy theme, real-time gameplay, and the ability (in *Gemstone Healer*) to generate random dungeons. However, the *Gemstone* games lack any sort of class, level, or skill system for advancement, which disqualifies them as CRPGs—at least in my book. Regardless, the *Gemstone* series at least demonstrates SSI’s willingness to indulge in quite a bit of diversity. Unfortunately, the game’s creators, Peter William Lount and Trouba Gossen, seem to have vanished from the industry shortly after their publication.

## Origin and *Ultima*: The Great Enlightenment

When last we spoke of *Ultima*, Garriott had just formed Origin and published *Ultima III: Exodus*, which was regarded at the time as the best CRPG ever



*Quest of the Avatar* is the first in the *Ultima* series to offer a character creation system based on a series of questions about moral dilemmas. The system was highly influential and widely copied.

made. However, Garriott was just getting started. In 1985, Origin published the next great installment in the series, *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*, an instant classic that is still played by thousands of fans all over the world. Indeed, as late as 1996, *Computer Gaming World* named it the #2 Best Game of All Time for the PC, and Garriott himself cites it as one of his favorite games of the series. It is also one of the most widely ported of the *Ultima* games, with ports available for almost every major platform of the era, including the NES and Sega Master System game consoles.

*Quest of the Avatar* marks an important turning point in the *Ultima* series. It's the first game set in what Garriott called the "Age of Enlightenment" trilogy, and it emphasizes social and cultural conflict over "hack 'n slash." The game is almost philosophical, encouraging gamers to think about the good life and ponder age-old questions of good and evil. The new shift was made visible even by the box art: *Quest of the Avatar* sported an image more reminiscent of Jesus than Gandalf. Garriott insisted that the game is "more philosophical than religious," but the many allusions to Christianity and other religions are hard to miss. Origin even included a small metal ankh (an Egyptian holy symbol) in every box!<sup>15</sup>

Just how different *Quest of the Avatar* is from other CRPGs is evident as soon as the player tries to create a character. Instead of rolling dice and generating stats, players answer a series of difficult questions about moral dilemmas. Each of the questions is designed to test the player's own moral center, or at least to determine which of the game's eight virtues he or she most holds most dear. Once this virtue is determined, the player's character (the Avatar) will be assigned one of the eight possible classes: shepherd (humility), tinker (sacrifice), bard (compassion), druid (justice), fighter (valor), ranger (spirituality), paladin (honor), or mage (honesty). Furthermore, the Avatar's initial power is greater if the player's answers strictly adhere to a single virtue (e.g., always choosing the honorable thing to do rather than what might be more compassionate or just). Instead of offering up the usual generic warrior and wizard types, Garriott's system lets players create characters that reflect their own personalities and interests.

Garriott thought his games might have a real-life impact on players, a fact the manual makes clear: "The Quest for the Avatar is the search for a new standard, a new vision of life for which our people may strive. We seek the person who can become a shining example for our nation and guide us from

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<sup>15</sup> Garriott claims his interest in this symbol comes from the cult classic science fiction film *Logan's Run*, in which it is prominently featured.

the Age of Darkness into the Age of Light." After forming his own company, Garriott had begun receiving mail from fans and critics, some of whom accused him of intentionally corrupting youth. Though unfounded, these accusations bothered Garriott deeply. He decided that if players were going to invest so much time playing his games, he might as well try to do some good by encouraging ethical behavior rather than the mindless pillaging and looting that dominated the genre. Extremist groups were preaching that RPGs were satanic and immoral; Garriott wanted to show how they could in fact teach moral virtue. Much was made of the new moral and philosophical element of the game, and contemporary reviewers praised Origin for bringing new vitality to the genre.

Another interesting innovation is the magic system, which requires that mages find reagents (ingredients like ginseng and garlic) to cast spells. This reagent business is an integral part of many tabletop *AD&D* campaigns but is omitted from most CRPGs, including SSI's "Gold Box" games. The system was inspired by Garriott's research into medieval alchemy, an esoteric protoscience that combined magical rites and mysticism with rigorous experimentation. For instance, ginseng has long been thought to have restorative effects. In the game, ginseng combined with the right incantation and a dash of spider silk can be used to heal wounds. The manual puts it well: "All magic is accomplished by use of means both human and of nature, for true magic is but the melding of human will and natural force." This quotation should also give some suggestion of its overall tone, which sounds more like a venerable medieval tome than a computer game manual!

*Quest of the Avatar* also depends heavily on conversations with non-player characters, some of whom can even join the Avatar on his quest (up to eight, or one of each character class). In some ways, the game reinforced the now infamous tradition of requiring players to talk to every single character in the game, exhausting every possible topic. Dialog is facilitated by a mini-parser, a simple text input that matches keywords (i.e., "job," "name") against a database. The player finds new keywords in the characters' responses. All of this dialog soon leads to a glut of information, and players must take copious notes if they hope to progress very far into the game—and it's a huge game, taking an estimated 150 to 200 hours to finish. Thankfully, players have many ways to get about in the world—horses, ships, and moon gates, to name just a few modes of transportation. I should also add that game included a cloth map and a small metal ankh in addition to two manuals.

I should note that the manuals for each of the *Enlightenment* games are quite lengthy and loaded with information that establishes the context for the

games. For instance, besides lengthy discussions of virtues, ethics, combat, and magic, *Ultima V*'s manual includes lyrics to a song called "Stones," penned by Gwenllian Gwalch'gaeaf, wife of the famous folk musician Iolo Fitzowen. In short, if you don't have the printed materials that were included with these games, you're missing out on a big chunk of the *Ultima* experience.

Modern gamers may want to check out *xu4*, a remake of the game engine that runs on Windows, GNU/Linux, OS X, and even the Sega Dreamcast game console.<sup>16</sup> There are also user-made modules for *Neverwinter Nights* based on the game.<sup>17</sup> However, the original has officially been relicensed as freeware and is available for download on many different websites.

## *Ultima Trilogy*

Before we move on to Origin's other publications during the early Golden Age, we should mention *Ultima Trilogy*, released in 1987. Although often thought of as merely a compilation of the first three games, we shouldn't overlook the substantial amount of revision that went into them. Nor should we overlook that it was published by Origin, after some negotiation with Sierra. The earlier games were rewritten in assembly language and offer enhanced graphics, compared to the originals. The collection was yet another financial windfall for Origin, and no doubt legions of *Ultima* fans were introduced to the first three games via this series. It was first released for MS-DOS, with ports for Commodore 64 and Apple II following in 1989. Already, we see Origin moving away from the Apple II platform and focusing on the IBM compatible base, which was already swelling in numbers far exceeding Apple's.

## *Ultima Meets Karateka: Moebius*

We've already seen a few CRPGs that attempted to web sweaty-palmed arcade action with the more contemplative gameplay of the CRPG. Greg Malone's *Moebius: The Orb of Celestial Harmony* was yet another attempt, this time combining *Ultima*-style role-playing with the side-by-side fighting action of games like Broderbund's *Karateka* and Konami's *Yie Ar Kung-Fu*, two smash hits of 1984, as well as Datasoft's *Swashbuckler* (1982) for the Apple II. These games pioneered a type of action game that was duplicated and refined in countless later games throughout the late 1980s and well into the 1990s,

<sup>16</sup> To learn more about *xu4*, visit <http://xu4.sourceforge.net/index.php>.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://nwvault.ign.com/View.php?view=Modules.Detail&id=2693>.

such as Capcom's *Street Fighter* (1987) and Acclaim's *Mortal Kombat* (1992). *Moebius* is also unusual because it is set in ancient China, rather than in the vaguely European fantasy worlds of so many other CRPGs. Nevertheless, though the game at first appears radically different from Garriott's *Ultima*, we can't mistake the emphasis on honor and good conduct that had become a trademark of Origin's lineup.

The combat system essentially boils down to six attack moves and one block, with the choice of two main weapons (sword or bare-handed) and the occasional shuriken. The role-playing element is based on four attributes: body (hit points), mind (spell points), dexterity, and karma. The spell system has major and minor disciplines: fireballs, prayers, and charms. One nice innovation is the use of Zen meditation to prepare the character's mind for magic; the developers really make an effort to integrate Asian mysticism into the game. Like the magic system of *Ultima IV*, the charms require spell reagents, again based loosely on alchemy. For instance, to use the ventriloquism charm, a player needs tiger teeth; paralysis requires the pincers from a water beetle.

The basic quest, however, is yet another fetch-the-orb type. The orb has been taken by a renegade disciple named Kaiman. Naturally, if the orb isn't recovered, the universe will be destroyed, and its absence already caused some pretty serious earthquakes and droughts. Before players can take off after Kaiman, however, they must liberate some imprisoned "Holy Ones," who will give them the knowledge and artifacts they need to succeed. Players are further assisted by a collection of magical maps; these handily fill out the map, eliminating the need for graph paper. Perhaps the biggest complaint from critics was the constant need for food and water, which posed a distraction rather than providing a bit of welcome realism.



Origin's *Moebius* and *Windwalker* (shown here) blend CRPG elements with "fighting" style arcade games.

Malone followed up in 1989 with a sequel, *Windwalker*. The most noticeable change is a shift away from the top-down *Ultima*-style exploration to a unique 3D system, which shows giant heads for characters. On the right of the screen is an abacus, the rows showing the character's current stats. The game shares *Moebius*'s emphasis on body, spirit, and karma, but replaces mind with honor, which is essentially the character's reputation. If the honor score sinks too low, villagers and priests will shun the character, and achieving enlightenment will be impossible. As one might expect from a game published by Origin, the honor score depends on the player's actions; mindless attacking or pillaging damages it. Players are driven to act in good conduct or die trying!

Critics praised the sequel, which offers graphics and sound superior to its predecessor, as well a few nods to playability. Now, players see the seasons change and animated oceans, skies, and lightning. Critics also appreciated the changes to the combat mode, which is now simplified (with options to make it even easier to win); there's even an option for instant replay ("reflection"). Nevertheless, these games have fallen into obscurity today and aren't nearly as well-known as one might expect. Perhaps this is a result of the oil-and-water mix of action and strategy; one contemporary reviewer called the games "schizophrenic."<sup>18</sup> Throughout this history, we'll see plenty of other games that tried similar combinations, but few have fared any better than *Moebius*.

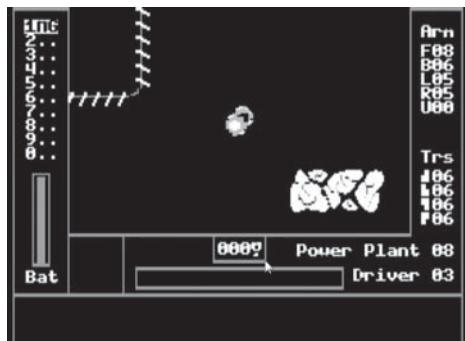
### *Ultima Meets Death Race: Autoduel*

Another of Origin's 1985 breakthroughs is the classic masterpiece *Autoduel*, one of the earliest examples of a CRPG set in a postapocalyptic wasteland. This genre had been popularized by several cult classic films of the era, including *Death Race 2000* (1975), *Damnation Alley* (1977) and *Mad Max* (1979), to name a few. The advantage of this setting for CRPGs is that it provides a plausible scenario for combat and random encounters with thugs and mutated beasts; it can soon become just as fantastic as any conventional swords and sorcery setting. *Autoduel* was programmed by Richard Garriott and his friend and long-time collaborator Chuck "Chuckles" Bueche and is still actively played today by hundreds if not thousands of dedicated fans.

*Autoduel* is based on Steve Jackson's influential tabletop role-playing game *Car Wars* (c. 1980), in which players strive not to slay dragons but to

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<sup>18</sup> See Charles Arada's "Titans of the Computer Gaming World" in the May 1987 issue of *Computer Gaming World*.



Origin's *Autoduel* offers a compelling mix of action and role-playing. Drive offensively—the life you save may be your own!

build the most deadly vehicles on the road. Accomplishing this goal requires forethought, luck, and quick reflexes; in some ways we might describe *Autoduel* as a combination of *Ultima* and racing/shooter hybrids such as Exidy's controversial *Death Race* (1976)<sup>19</sup> and Bally Midway's arcade hit *Spy Hunter* (1983), a popular top-down driving and shooting game. In short, it's a game requiring not only effective planning and sound strategy but also dexterity with the joystick. As in most CRPGs, the player's first priority is simply to stay alive in a dangerous and hostile world. The player's long-term goal is to make a name for himself as a successful autodueler, building his own custom-made hellion on wheels. However, the manual hints at yet another goal: to defeat "Mr. Big," the big boss of all the gangs—though the player's character must earn an outstanding reputation before learning more about this special mission.

The game is also noteworthy for being one of the earliest open-ended CRPGs. Instead of being railed into a linear plot or forced to "hack 'n slash" through wave after wave of enemies, players are given a choice of activities: fighting in the arena, hauling cargo between cities, or roaming the highways in search of renegades and gangs.

Each character starts off with 50 points to distribute among three skills: driving, marksmanship, and mechanic. Later on, these skills can be refined by paying for training or earning experience. The final stat is prestige, which

<sup>19</sup> The controversy concerned the violent nature of the game, which appeared to consist of running down pedestrians with a vehicle. Exidy claimed the figures were actually evil "gremlins," but few were convinced. The game made headlines and was soon widely banned, leading to some of the first protests over game censorship.

is slowly accumulated during the game. Instead of hit points, players have to worry first about the condition of their characters and then about the damage to their cars. Although most of the action takes place in a vehicle, the character can also jump out of the car (usually to make a run for it after a breakdown), but body armor can also protect the driver if his car explodes a mine. Players can even buy a clone to take over if they die!

Without a doubt, the most fun part of the game is building a custom car. Building a vehicle is a sophisticated process involving seven crucial decisions: body type, chassis, suspension, power plants, tires, weapons, and armor. The manual, fortunately, includes a “theory of car design,” with recommendations to build anything from a heavily armored and slow-moving “turtle” to the light and speedy “rabbit.” Obviously, the choice of car will depend strongly on the player’s strengths; those going the courier route will want the better armor, whereas those good at combat may want a sleeker, deadlier model. The degree to which players can customize the car is staggering; they can even select where they want their weapons placed (front, rear, and side), though only one weapon can be fired at the time. Players are allowed to own up to eight different cars, allowing them to explore the options at their leisure.

Critics raved about the game, and it soon became one of Origin’s most popular titles. Even its motto, “Drive offensively! The life you save may be your own,” became a familiar catchphrase. As usual, Origin loaded up the packaging with plenty of nicely printed manuals and a “feelie,” this time a set of miniature tools. SSI noted *Autoduel*’s success and developed *Roadwar 2000* in 1987 and the sequel *Roadwar Europa* in 1987, turn-based strategy games based on many of the same concepts. More recently, *Car Battler Joe*, a game published for the Game Boy Advance in 2003, almost certainly derives much of its gameplay from the Origin classic. Unfortunately, the original game is no longer published, and according to Wikipedia, Steve Jackson Games has forbidden that this wonderful and historically vital game be freely distributed on the web. When I asked the company to explain their decision, the response was that they do not want to be associated with “an old, buggy game.”<sup>20</sup> These are harsh words indeed for this beloved old classic.

### *Scavengers of the Mutant World*

Just in passing I’d like to mention Interstel’s nearly forgotten *Scavengers of the Mutant World*, a game published in 1988 for MS-DOS. It echoes *Autoduel*’s

<sup>20</sup> This quotation is from a personal email sent to me by Fadé Manley, webmaster for Steve Jackson Games.

postapocalyptic setting and build-a-vehicle concept. However, this time the only purpose in building the vehicle is to escape to a radiation-free zone, hacking and slashing anything or anyone that gets in the way. While the game had some good ideas (using old highway signs as shields, for instance), terrible graphics and repetitive gameplay prevented it from achieving much success. Furthermore, the monsters grew tougher as the party gained experience—and eventually became so strong that the player had no choice but to create a whole new party and repeat the cycle. In short, there's more disaster here than the one serving as the game's premise, and it's almost worth seeking the game out just to see how badly developers can bungle a promising concept.

## 2400 A.D.

In 1987, Origin published Chuck Bueche's *2400 A.D.*, another postapocalyptic game, but this time set in the more distant future. The story here is that alien robots called the Tzorg have overrun the world of Metropolis and must be stopped. The player assumes the role of a rebel who must find a way to take down the robots' central control, a theme vaguely reminiscent of the hit 1984 film *The Terminator*. Instead of long swords and chainmail, players get to play with a whole host of curious gadgets, such as a holoprojector which casts a hologram of the character to confuse the robots and a jetpack to make travel a breeze.

*2400 A.D.* is a very creative game that should have been a great deal more successful. Unfortunately, some legal issues prevented the game from ever being released for the C-64, and apparently the game flopped on the Apple II. On a side note, John Romero of *Doom* fame is often credited with



Chuckle's next game for Origin wasn't nearly the game that *Autoduel* had been, though it too ventured far from swords and sorcery.

the C-64 port, though some controversy exists about his involvement.<sup>21</sup> Some critics disapproved of the graphics, which they felt were too “cartoony” and clashed with the gritty tone established by the box cover and manual; and all the human characters looked male regardless of their actual sex. Critics were not kind to the game, and it doesn’t seem to have attracted the following of *Autoduel*.

### *The Magic Candle*

Atabek’s *The Magic Candle*, published in 1989 by Mindcraft, is one of the more popular and enduring games inspired by the early *Ultima* games. It’s noted for its excellent writing, colorful graphics, and sophisticated gameplay. Like *Ultima*, it offers top-down perspective and tile graphics. The game also borrows the *Ultima* convention of putting the player in the role of a single character who can later enlist up to five other pregenerated characters to aid in the quest. Although there are two clear sequels and one spin-off, most fans recognize this game as the best of them.

One interesting aspect of the game is the ability to split the six-character party into groups, which can then explore dungeons independently—a feature we’ve seen in very few earlier games. This ability is taken much further in this game, though, and the possibilities are really intriguing. For instance, some of the available companions practice professions such as carpentry and tailoring. The player can choose to temporarily leave these characters behind



Atabek’s *Magic Candle* game offers an intuitive interface, colorful graphics, and a worthwhile storyline.

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<sup>21</sup> See [http://gtw64.retro-net.de/Pages/0/Review\\_2400AD.php](http://gtw64.retro-net.de/Pages/0/Review_2400AD.php).

in a town, earning money for the party as the rest venture onward. The game tracks the location of the split parties, so it's easy enough to rejoin later.

There's also a rudimentary skill system based on four skills (sword, box, hunter, learn). The skills are improved when players using them or when they seek out special trainers (there are no experience points and levels per se). The magic system is interesting as well. Mages learn spells in camp, and then can ready (or recall) them for use in combat or exploration. The mages come equipped with some spells, but new ones are learned from spell books. Casting spells (as well as any other activity) requires energy, which must be replenished by sleeping. The spell system here seems to be an effort to blend the *AD&D* system with the more familiar point-based systems of games like *The Bard's Tale*.

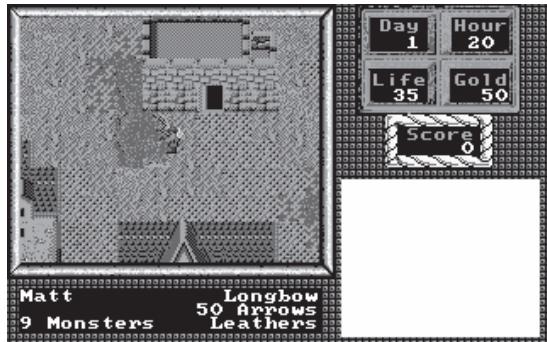
The game's story concerns a demon named Dreax, who will soon be released to wreck havoc upon the world if the Magic Candle in which he is trapped is allowed to burn itself out. The candle's custodians have inexplicably gone missing. It's up to the hero ("Lukas" by default) to restore the candle, a quest that will take him and his companions all over the game world, exploring and interacting with other characters.

All in all, *The Magic Candle* is an excellent game that received praise from critics and established Atabek's reputation as a master crafter of CRPGs. It won *Computer Gaming World's* prestigious *Fantasy Role-Playing Game of the Year* award in 1989 and remains the favorite of many veterans of the genre.

### *The Keys to Maramon*

Rather than make a straightforward sequel to *The Magic Candle*, Mindcraft developed *The Keys to Maramon*, a real-time action-CRPG published in 1990 by Mindscape (Atabek doesn't appear to have been involved). This time the player controls only one character, chosen from a set of four premade heroes (huntsman, courier, blacksmith, and scholar). While the CRPG elements have been boiled down to their essentials, the player will still need to plan the character's development carefully, particularly in building up the right skills and saving up for the best arms and armor—as well as for herbs and potions for healing and combat boosts.

Although not as popular as the other *Magic Candle* games, this one does offer an appealing plot. The hero accepts a commission to deal with a small island city's monster problem. Of course, the hero must do more than simply bash heads: he (or she, if the player chooses the courier) must discover where the monsters are coming from, as well as the purpose of the mysterious towers located in the town. Eventually the hero will descend into the dungeons beneath the town, where the real dangers await.



*The Keys to Maramon* is a simple real-time CRPG with an emphasis on action.

### *The Four and Forty*

Atabek did get involved for the first official *Magic Candle* sequel, *The Four and Forty*, published in 1991 by Electronic Arts for the DOS platform. It's based mostly on the original *Magic Candle*, though with some important changes. Besides featuring 256-color VGA graphics, the game also added a notebook feature to track quest information, a better automapper, and more comprehensive save system with eight slots.

The second game also tweaked the party formation and division capabilities that made the first game so noteworthy. Although the player can no longer divvy up the party into multiple units, it is still possible to assign characters to jobs in towns and substitute new members in their place (there are some 30 characters available to join the party). Players can also import characters from the original game or from *The Keys to Maramon*.



Fans of the series were divided over *The Keys to Maramon*, even though it offers some useful enhancements to the original engine.

The story has the party searching for the 44 guardians of the original candle, who, in an ironic twist, have become trapped in magic candles themselves. The quest will take the party all over the world of Gurtex, where, again, they'll need to interact with a great many characters in a well-contrived plot.

Though *Four and Forty* offers some major improvements to the original model, fans of the series are somewhat divided about its overall quality. Some were miffed about not being able to properly split the party, and others complained that the game lacked depth and overemphasized combat.

### *Magic Candle III*

The third game in the series likewise failed to surpass the brilliance of the original—at least for most long-term fans. Published by Electronic Arts for DOS in 1992, the third game still offers the familiar top-down perspective of the original. The party management system has been tweaked yet again. This time, the player selects and customizes three characters to join the hero but can recruit pregenerated “companions” (faithful followers) and “hirelings” (mercenaries) later on in the game. Party members can again be assigned to work at various jobs, but this time the player can also tell them to wait or go to a stronghold. The hero can communicate with distant members via magical items called mindstones. Characters assigned to work jobs won’t always stick with it, though—they may decide to move on if they feel they’re being abused, particularly if their loyalty attribute is low.

In the third game, the hero sets out to determine the source of a mysterious blight, which is ruining crops and spreading plague, and is probably linked to the appearance of monsters in the hills and forests. The hero and the party must travel to all sorts of interesting locations in the course of the game, including the respective homelands of the orcs, dwarves, elves, and goblins.

Critics didn’t respond well to the game. Many complained that it was simply more of the same, which perhaps wouldn’t have been a criticism had not *Four and Forty* made a better impression. While still mandatory playing for *Magic Candle* fans, the third game simply wasn’t strong enough to extend the life of the franchise, which has sadly worn down to a stub.

### *Bloodstone*

Mindcraft attempted to recycle the *Magic Candle III* engine with *Bloodstone: An Epic Dwarven Tale*, developed and published for DOS in 1993. It’s a very large game, with an extensive plot (with multiple endings) and myriad characters. Atabek described it thus: “[There are] no technological marvels, no



*Bloodstone* is a terrific game built on the *Magic Candle III* engine.

startling new features. It's the gameplay and intriguing story that make *Bloodstone*.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, interface-wise, there are few changes to the *Magic Candle III* engine. The graphics look quite primitive compared to other 1993 games, a fact that no doubt led many gamers to dismiss this rather excellent game.

As the subtitle implies, this is a game about dwarves—specifically those of the lands of Targ. The dwarves are divided into warring factions, and much of the game's plot depends on which side the player chooses to help out most. Meanwhile, a new enemy named the Taldor has been raiding the dwarves—soon becoming a grave threat—but the dwarves can't settle their differences long enough to fight them off. It's up to the player's character to unite the dwarves and defeat the Taldor. The game is indeed epic in scope, with plenty of intrigue and plot twists to keep players invested until the end.

Despite the similarities to the third *Magic Candle*, *Bloodstone* seems to have fared better. It's still highly playable, with a low learning curve and fun turn-based combat. In my opinion, it's a great game for novices as well as more advanced fans wanting to try something different.

## *Might and Magic: A Brave New World*

Although there have been many successful CRPG series over the decades, the most long-lived are *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, and New World Computing's *Might and Magic*. Indeed, each of these series received installments into the 2000s.

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<sup>22</sup> See Shay Addams' "Virtual Unreality" article in the Oct. 1993 issue of *Compute!* magazine.



The first *Might and Magic* game impressed critics with its immense size and quality graphics.

Of the three, however, *Might and Magic* seems at times to be hidden in the shadow of the other luminaries. Nevertheless, it's an interesting series that made several key developments to the genre. We'll introduce the series here and talk more about it in the next chapter.

The first *Might and Magic*, subtitled *Book I: The Secret of the Inner Sanctum*, debuted in 1986 for the Apple II and ported a year later to the Commodore 64, MS-DOS, and Macintosh. It is a labor of love by developer Jon Van Caneghem and his wife Michaela. Caneghem did the bulk of the coding and design himself and then cofounded New World Computing with Michaela and Mark Caldwell. Contemporary reviewers praised the game highly, comparing it very favorably with the competition at a time when *The Bard's Tale* was winning over huge audiences for the genre. The biggest draw seemed to be the immense size of Varn, the game world: there were over 4,000 locations and 55 areas to explore, with environments ranging from glaciers to deserts. Furthermore, the game was much more liberal than most in allowing players to explore the map however they wanted, in contrast to the more linear setups of many games of the era. It offered first-person perspective and colorful but static graphics (no animation).

*Might and Magic* refined several gameplay elements that would show up in later games, such as having the characters' race and gender exert a strong effect on the gameplay. As in *Phantasie*, there are some areas of the game's world that cannot be explored without the right party members, such as an antimale kingdom where an all-male party is unwelcome. Alignment (good, neutral, or evil) also plays a role in which locations the party can visit. Finally, the game's difficulty level was lower than most other games on the shelf and the game was thus quite popular with gamers not yet ready to tackle *The Wizard's Crown* or

*The Bard's Tale.* (I should note that the early releases of the game started the characters off with no money and no weapons but clubs; new versions were quickly released that offered a much better prepared starting party). Combat is a simple text-driven affair, with the strengths of the monsters balanced to avoid overwhelming the party. Even if the party dies, players can easily restore the game at the most recently visited inn.

The plot focuses on six adventurers in a quest to discover the secret of the Inner Sanctum, though little information is offered up front about this quest or its object. Indeed, the ultimate quest is kept intentionally vague and left for players to gradually piece together as they explore Varn. Like the early *Ultima* games, *Might and Magic* contains a mixture of fantasy and sci-fi elements. It also featured one of the best manuals of any of the early CRPGs, a spiral-bound affair with a fold-out map of Varn. In short, the first *Might and Magic* game made a great impression on critics and gamers, a considerable feat when one considers the stiff competition.

## Other CRPGs of the Early Golden Age

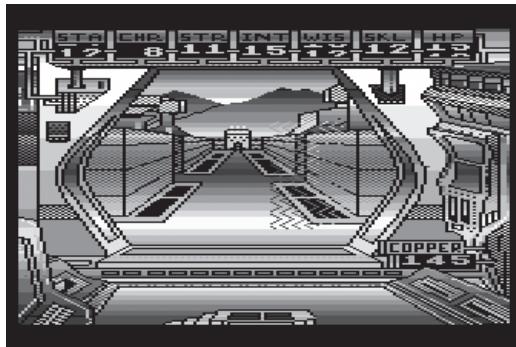
Needless to say, 1985 was a huge year for CRPGs, and fans of the genre were treated to a smorgasbord of new games and what would become some very long-lived series. However, we're not done yet. In particular, we need to discuss four more science fiction CRPGs: *Alternate Reality*, *Alien Fires: 2199 A.D.*, *Starflight*, and *Sentinel Worlds*.

### *Alternate Reality*

In 1985, Datasoft published Philip Price's *Alternate Reality: The City*, the first of a planned series of five games based on the same premise: aliens abducting the character and transporting him to different realities. Even though only two of the games were ever published (the second part, *The Dungeon*, appeared in 1987), the series maintains a cult status, particularly among fans of Atari 8-bit computers, where the games originated. *Atari Age* even hosts a competition for the game that is still going strong.<sup>23</sup> The games feature first-person perspective and smooth-scrolling 3D graphics that were nothing short of miraculous on the Atari 800. It also features four-channel sound and a song with synchronized on-screen lyrics (presumably to be sung by the player).

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<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.atariage.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=69487>.



*Alternate Reality* is a difficult but wonderfully innovative cult classic that originated on the Atari 8-bit computer.

Both *The City* and *The Dungeon* are located on medieval worlds, so most of the standard fantasy conventions still apply (mages, dwarves, and so on.) However, *Alternate Reality* looks more realistic than most CRPGs of its era. For instance, the sky visibly lightens and darkens with the hour, and a waterfall visibly flows in the mountains. Sound effects are also used well: wind picks up intensity as it whips around corners, and the blacksmith's hammer grows louder as players near the smithy. The game is also realistic in other ways. The avatar gets thirsty, hungry, and tired. The only way to address these problems (and get better equipment) is to raise capital. Thankfully, players can store their money and earn interest at banks, though the really profitable investment plans are risky.

The realism certainly makes the game difficult. Even the treasures aren't always a boon; many items are cursed and have dire consequences for unwary players. And, as if all this isn't enough—it often rains, which brings out the truly dangerous denizens of Xebec's Demise, including the player should they choose to prey upon the innocent. In any case, the high degree of realism and complexity makes *Alternate Reality* one of the most challenging of all CRPGs, and its 4,000 locations is a respectable number even today. Unfortunately, there is little to do beyond mapping the city and gaining experience—a fact many contemporary critics found highly objectionable. As one reviewer put it, “after a few hours of traipsing about, building up my character, it feels like I'm all dressed up with nowhere to go.”<sup>24</sup> Of course, other gamers found the freedom exhilarating—in short, it's the same debate we see over open-ended versus plot-driven CRPGs today.

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<sup>24</sup> See Ian Chadwick's “Ian's Quest” column in the Feb. 1989 issue of *ST-Log*.

Of course, the big question is why only two of the planned seven *Alternate Reality* games were ever produced. The detailed answer is somewhat complicated, but the gist of it is that Price wasn't adequately compensated for *The City* and left. Responsibility for the other games fell on the shoulders of Ken Jordan and Dan Pinal, who managed to cobble *The Dungeon* together from hand-written notes; they succeeded, but the process was a long one. By the time they were ready to begin the third game, the market had shifted decisively towards 16-bit graphics, and 8-bit games (which made up the bulk of Datasoft's products) were no longer viable. Jordan and Pinal were laid off after completing some 70% of a 16-bit conversion of *The Dungeon*. The copyrights have since reverted to Price, who has stated somewhat cryptically, "If you can't find a person to sell it to you or you need to run it on the transformer, then do what you have to do."<sup>25</sup>

Without doubt, these games were most popular on the Atari 800, much as a later game, *Dungeon Master*, will be one of the defining games on the Atari ST. Though it's easy enough to neglect these platforms and focus entirely on Apple and DOS games, doing so ignores a vital part of CRPG history.

### *Alien Fires*

Another game I want to mention in this chapter is Jagware's bizarre *Alien Fires: 2199 A.D.*, a game originating on the Commodore Amiga and later ported to the Atari ST and MS-DOS. Written by Jeff Simpson and Sky Matthews, *Alien Fires* is a first-person, 3D game that puts the player in control of a



*Alien Fires: 2199 A.D.* is a bizarre sci-fi CRPG with a surreal atmosphere and soundtrack. It originated on the Commodore Amiga.

<sup>25</sup> See <http://www.eobet.com/alternate-reality/> for the source of these quotations.

Time Lord out to stop the enigmatic Kurtz from traveling back in time to see the Big Bang (allusions to the popular BBC show *Doctor Who* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are plain to see). The game is fast and difficult, and involves a great deal of interaction with a rather odd and colorful cast of characters, many of whom are bizarre aliens. Furthermore, the Amiga version's digitized soundtrack is wonderfully surreal, and the Amiga's speech synthesizer adds a distinctly alien, psychedelic feel to the game (and if it fails to convey emotion and is hard to interpret at times, that only adds to the realism).

*Alien Fires* uses a point-based skill system based on seven skills: fighting, marksmanship, diplomacy, dexterity (nimbleness), understanding (ability to use unknown items), tracking (trap and secret door detection), and quickness (initiative and reflexes). Throughout the game, these stats will be raised or lowered depending on how the player's performance is judged by the Elder Council of Time Lords. However, what makes the game really unusual is the emphasis on dialog. Although the manual's claim that the characters players meet are "exactly like real people" is a trifle exaggerated, the parser is at least more sophisticated than the simple keyword systems of most CRPGs. The game understands questions such as "Where is the elevator?" and "What is Octo?" In general, though, the key is to write down keywords, especially of names and locations.

The combat system is a furious affair. Players only have seconds to press one of three options (fight, dodge, and panic). Unfortunately, the rather innocuous act of clicking on the characters with the mouse is the command to attack, so it's quite easy to accidentally assault someone. One nice effect here is a driving heartbeat that speeds up when the player is about to die; Jagware seems to have taken a note here from the much earlier game *Dungeons of Daggorath*, which we discussed. There are few sound effects more successful at heightening tension than a rapidly pulsating heart! The interface also makes use of color to show the degree of damage that each body part has received: the redder the body part, the more serious the wound. Gum machines can restore hit points, at the risk of being poisoned if the character lacks understanding.

*Alien Fires* is an extremely difficult game, and the lack of a good save option compounds the problem exponentially. I certainly wouldn't recommend it to everyone, but I've never played another game that had the same otherworldly ambiance. The game's publisher, Paragon Software, went on to publish several CRPGs based on tabletop role-playing games, including the *Mega Traveller* games we'll discuss in Chapter 8, as well as several action games based on Marvel comic book heroes. They are now defunct.

## *Starflight* and the Space Sim CRPG

So far, we've discussed three series that belong to what we might call the space sim CRPG: Edu-Ware's *Space*, *Empire*, and Omnitrend's *Universe*. These games evolved alongside more conventional CRPGs and offer an alternative to swords and sorcery, though the degree to which anything resembling role-playing varies from game to game. Now we come to what might be the most successful of such hybrids, Binary Systems' *Starflight*, published in 1986 by Electronic Arts. Although *Starflight* is primarily a space exploration game, it does feature CRPG elements, most notably a crew that can be trained as the gameplay progresses, as well as a ship that can be outfitted with better weapons and equipment.

I like to think of *Starflight* as a *Star Trek* CRPG, albeit without any official endorsement from Paramount. The gameplay is quite reminiscent of many episodes of the popular sci-fi series and seems to be structured around the concept of away missions. There's a captain, navigation officer, and so on, and the manual and in-game text are full of obvious allusions such as "Boldly go where no man has gone before!" Indeed, some reviewers have quipped that it was the best *Star Trek* game ever made.

The story behind *Starflight* is similar in some ways to the one found in the earlier *Universe*. The central theme is again that of a distant colony that has been cut off from the motherworld (or, to be more precise, mother galaxy) and must fend for itself. However, this time the period of isolation is much longer (1,000 years), and takes place after a devastating catastrophe that re-



*Starflight* took fifteen years to make. Twenty years later, it's still considered one of the best space sims ever designed.

duced the colony to a state of barbarism. Thankfully, enough time has passed for the colonists to reclaim civilization and rediscover science and technology. The game begins shortly after they rediscover spaceflight and start to realize that the old myths of originating as an Earth colony are, according to recent archaeological evidence, not myths at all. Furthermore, the people of Arth seem to be threatened by the same warlike race that wiped out their ancestors. The story is actually quite rich and full of interesting twists and turns, but these are only revealed as the player advances in the game.

Players begin by buying a ship, hiring a crew, and paying for whatever training they can afford. The crew members can be any of five races (human, Elowan, Thrynn, Velox, and android), each with its own affinities and limitations. They are also classed into six professions: captain, science officer, navigator, engineer, communications specialist, and doctor. The races also vary by how much damage they can take (durability) and how fast they learn (learning rate). Once the ship is outfitted and manned, it's time to start gathering information and generating revenue.

Like other games in this genre, *Starflight* offers different modes of gameplay, such as mining for minerals, selling artifacts, capturing and selling exotic alien species, finding a viable planet for colonization, and, for those lacking scruples, piracy (but only in self-defense, of course). In any case, the player will spend a great deal of time exploring space as well as roaming the surface of planets in the all-terrain vehicle. Successful players will eventually attain enough capital to buy better equipment, which passes through five stages of technological development as the game progresses.

The combat portions of the game are no doubt the weakest; it's a boring affair involving a small window with icons of the battling ships. Players essentially spend their time dodging enemy fire and hoping their lasers or lucky missiles will wear down their enemy's defenses. What ultimately matters is who has the best equipped ship. Indeed, many players strive to avoid combat wherever possible, preferring instead to communicate with aliens, learning enough about their culture and language to make meaningful contact possible.

*Starflight* allegedly took over 15 years to make, and, if you're to believe the box and other promotional materials, the delays were caused by the developers' extreme perfectionism. At any rate, the game was a success, winning critical acclaim and routinely showing up on lists of the best games ever made. It was first released for DOS and Tandy, with support for EGA graphics. Later it was ported to most available platforms, including the Sega Genesis.

### *Trade Routes of the Cloud Nebula*

Binary Systems followed up in 1989 with *Starflight 2: Trade Routes of the Cloud Nebula*. This game is very similar to the first, though with a new storyline, aliens, technologies, and the ability to trade with alien races as well as the home base. The graphics were touched up, but overall, it's more of the same—certainly not a bad thing given the quality of the first game.

Electronic Arts had forged a contract with Tsunami Media to develop a third game for the series, but because of “various business reasons,”<sup>26</sup> the agreement fell through and Tsunami was forced to publish the game themselves, removing all references to the original series. Nevertheless, their game, *Protostar: War on the Frontier*, released in 1993, was a modest success for the company—though not all *Starflight* fans are aware of its existence. A fan-made *Starflight III* is currently in production, and the fans working on it have received formal approval from Binary Systems to use the trademark title.<sup>27</sup>

*Starflight*'s influence is obvious in many later games, such as 1992's *Star Control 2: The Ur-Quan Masters*, as well as many sci-fi themed CRPGs we'll discuss in later chapters. Although the series shares much in common with Omnitrend's older *Universe* game, it still represents plenty of innovation and, if nothing else, a keen sense of audience and a masterful design.

### *Sentinel Worlds* and *Hard Nova*

One of the many notable games inspired by *Starflight* is Karl Buiter's *Sentinel Worlds I: Future Magic*, a game Electronic Arts published in 1989. Players begin by assembling a five-person crew, who are then assigned skill points in areas as diverse as gunnery, bribery, and ATV repair. Combat can take place either on the ground or in space, but there is more to this game than who had the bigger gun. Players also have to choose the right options from conversation menus, where a few bad choices could force restoring to an older saved game.

Like many early CRPGs, *Sentinel Worlds* included a book of numbered passages which the players were asked to consult at certain points in the game. These passages added literary texture to the game but were obviously much more of an interruption than the cut scenes we so often see in modern games.

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<sup>26</sup> See <http://www.mobygames.com/game/dos/protostar-war-on-the-frontier/trivia> for some excerpts of an interview with the game's designer. The interview was originally available on the CD version of *Protostar*.

<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.starflightcentral.com> for information about this project.



*Sentinel Worlds* is Karl Buiter's attempt to follow in *Starflight*'s footsteps. It's a highly sophisticated game with a steep learning curve.

Like SSI's *The Wizard's Crown*, *Sentinel Worlds* is a complicated game with a steep learning curve—factors that might explain why the game has not received the appreciation it deserves.

Buiter followed up with *Hard Nova*, released in 1990 and also published by Electronic Arts. This game has more of a cyberpunk theme and isn't an official sequel to *Sentinel Worlds* despite sharing most of its gameplay concepts. Perhaps the biggest change concerns the role of the main character, who is now a mercenary rather than a military officer. While both games still attract the occasional nostalgic gamer, *Hard Nova* is usually considered the better of the two.

## The End of the Early Golden Age

In this chapter, we've stuck mostly with 1985 and 1986. These were bountiful years indeed for CRPG fans, but much more was on the way. In the next chapter, we'll cover SSI's famous "Gold Box" games, the officially licensed *AD&D* titles that established a long and fruitful franchise. We'll also cover the rise of real-time, first-person 3D games such as FTL's *Dungeon Master* and SSI's *Eye of the Beholder*, and catch up with Sir-Tech as they begin their next big wave of *Wizardry* titles.

However, it's during the early Golden Age that the CRPG really establishes itself as a viable, permanent genre of computer game. Critics no longer had to explain what a CRPG was during every review or compare each new game to *Ultima*, hitherto practically the only touchstone with which they could trust gamers were familiar. Furthermore, CRPGs were diversify-

ing, moving away from the *Ultima* and *Wizardry* models and exploring new horizons. Finally, computer hardware was fast approaching the 16-bit standard, and the IBM PC was gradually replacing Commodore and Apple as the dominant computing platform. Developers finally had more memory, storage space, and graphics power to work with, and they never looked back. Let's turn, then, to the second half of the Golden Age.

## 7

## The Golden Age Part I

The years between 1987 and 1993 were a tremendously exciting but uneven time for CRPG fans. Groundbreaking games such as FTL's *Dungeon Master* (1987) for the Atari ST were so far ahead of their time that it's hard to imagine them competing for shelf space with Origin's *2400 A.D.* and SSI's *Rings of Zilfin* for the Apple II. The budding genre had become like the mythical hydra, sprouting new heads in every direction—and gobbling up legions of new gamers. The CRPG was fast expanding from the small niche of hardcore D&D fans to the mainstream gaming community. What dazzling new adventures lay just round the next corner of the dungeon?

One very noticeable trend during this time is a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots regarding graphics and sound technology. On one side of the chasm are venerable old platforms such as the Apple II and Commodore 64, which had penetrated deeply into America and represented an overwhelming base of loyal, dedicated users. The machines were showing their age, but it was foolhardy to ignore these markets. Furthermore, critics were quick to bash "afterthought" ports that failed to live up to the older machines' full potential. Many developers would simply continue to target these platforms and outsource the task of creating enhanced versions for newer machines. This practice would prove quite significant for companies such as Westwood, who earned a reputation for fine ports that were often far superior to the original games.

On the other side of the chasm were the newer, more powerful machines such as the Commodore Amiga, Atari ST, and Apple Macintosh, which brought with them not only improved graphics but, more important, intuitive user interfaces. We can't overlook something as seemingly trivial as the mouse, or the windowed graphical interfaces that made such efficient use of it. These advances represented an intriguing paradox for the personal computer revolution. On the one hand, they were much easier and less esoteric to operate than the older machines, thus appealing to a wider demographic. On the other hand, they were a great deal more expensive (particularly the Macintosh), a fact which kept them out of the hands of budget-minded computer enthusiasts for years.<sup>1</sup> After all, the price wars of the early 1980s had taught consumers to think of computers in terms of hundreds of dollars; now they were being asked to pay thousands. Needless to say, only committed enthusiasts or wealthy casual users were willing to leap across this digital divide.

All of this would begin to change in the 1990s, when, slowly but surely, the IBM PC and the massive army of cheap IBM Compatibles began to saturate the market. These machines were first stymied by a lack of graphics and sound capabilities, especially since they were still as expensive as the Macintosh. Nevertheless, the IBM PC had a few key advantages, particularly in terms of memory, processor speed, and storage media (especially the large hard drives). However, the decisive advantage was its modular, eminently expandable design. Unlike its rivals, the IBM PC was based on the concept of "open architecture," which made it easy for other companies to manufacture components, including enhanced graphics and sound cards. Furthermore, the IBM PC was built from off-the-shelf components, and Microsoft's non-exclusive license with IBM meant that they could sell the MS-DOS operating system to any other computer manufacturer, igniting the vicious "clone wars." In short, there was competition at every level, from the system itself to each and every peripheral and component. With these powerful economic forces at play, it was almost inevitable that the IBM PC would become the dominant computer platform.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2008 dollars, a new Macintosh bought in 1984 would have cost \$5,165.50, and the Commodore Amiga 1000, debuted in 1985, cost \$2,570. The IBM PC XT, introduced in 1983, was the most expensive, running a whopping \$10,672—no doubt a bargain for a machine running at 4.77 MHz with 128 KB of RAM and a 10 MB hard drive (a "cheap clone" was half that price). Meanwhile, a new Commodore 64 could be had for \$426, retail.

Unfortunately, game developers targeting the IBM PC were limited by late adopters, who were slow to upgrade to the latest CGA, EGA, and then VGA standards, to say nothing of the smorgasbord of sound cards. They were also mired in a morass of incompatible standards across the various cards, and it would take years for anything resembling an industry standard to emerge from the pandemonium. To the casual gamer, the typical off-the-shelf IBM PC, with its monochrome or four-color CGA graphics, inept internal speaker, and text-based operating system, seemed decades behind multimedia powerhouses such as the Amiga or Atari ST, whose users had long been wielding mice and clicking windows. The PC would win the war, but not without a long and bitter struggle.<sup>2</sup>

One last piece of the puzzle is the rebirth of game consoles, which had risen from the ashes after the great crash of 1984. As the major computer manufacturers shifted their attention to more expensive machines, an opening was left for cheap Japanese game machines. The Nintendo Entertainment System swept across America, followed distantly by its rival Sega. Until this time, CRPGs were overwhelmingly made exclusively for personal computers, but Japanese game developers were soon exporting *Ultima III*-inspired titles such as *Dragon Warrior* (1986), *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), *Final Fantasy* (1987), and *Phantasy Star* (1988). These more advanced games made the role-playing games of earlier consoles, such as Mattel Electronics' *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Cartridge* (1982) for the Intellivision, seem almost comically primitive. As game consoles became more powerful in subsequent generations, the quality gap between console and computer games would narrow, practically disappearing in the 2000s. Although this book is focused primarily on computer role-playing games, we'll discuss console role-playing games in the next chapter, paying special attention to the dynamic influence they have exerted on the genre.

We will begin, however, with SSI's celebrated "Gold Box" games, well-wrought products that benefited immensely from a lucrative and exclusive licensing agreement with TSR. We'll then catch up with Origin, Sir-Tech, and New World Computing, who were vigorously pumping out some of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, IBM itself would lose terribly. After the company realized that it was competing with an armada of clone-makers running Microsoft's operating system, it started from scratch and introduced the PS/2, which had an exclusive, proprietary operating system. Unfortunately for IBM, though their IBM PC had been an unprecedented success, the new platform failed miserably. There was simply no putting the genie back in the bottle.

best games of their career. We've got a lot of great CRPGs to cover in this chapter, so let's ready our trusty Longsword +3 (+4 vs. critics) and charge into the fray!

## Unforgettable Realms: SSI's "Gold Box" Games

*Pool of Radiance*. *Curse of the Azure Bonds*. For some—mere titles of obsolete games. For others, sacred words, hallowed words, words never spoken without that tell-tale sigh of longing brought by years of insatiable, incurable nostalgia. Of all the games we've discussed, the only ones that might rival their long-lasting fame and popularity are *Ultima IV* and, just possibly, *The Bard's Tale*. Indeed, it is hard to convey the sort of raw enthusiasm, nostalgia, and even ecstasy that SSI's "Gold Box" games still arouse in the hearts of many who played them in the late 1980s, but I will be so bold as to make the attempt.

These games kick ass.

### *Pool of Radiance* and the *Forgotten Realms* Series

I distinctly remember the day I first laid hands on *Pool of Radiance*. Although I had played *The Bard's Tale* and a few other CRPGs, it wasn't until I planted my foot on the corpse of the evil dragon Tyranthraxus that I knew what it meant to love a computer game. Never before had a game held me so deeply in its power. My humble Commodore 64 had become a portal to another world, one so compelling that I happily endured hunger and exhaustion rather than look away! After *Pool of Radiance*, I knew I would play computer role-playing games until the day I died.

But what makes *Pool of Radiance* so special? After all, it's probably an exaggeration to call it original, since it contains virtually no element that cannot be found in earlier games, such as a tactical combat system lifted straight from SSI's own *The Wizard's Crown*. The interface and windowed display are also seen in the earlier *Wizardry* and *Might and Magic* games. The graphics, though pleasant enough, are only marginally more impressive than those seen in *The Bard's Tale*, released three years earlier. Finally, no one would accuse this game of being easy to learn. Death came surely and swiftly to inexperienced players, and even wizened old CRPG veterans often found the fate of

their party resting on a single roll of the dice. As if all this weren't enough, a single battle could often last up to 45 minutes or even an hour, definitely not bite-sized entertainment.

Yet all masterpieces are greater than the sum of their parts, and *Pool of Radiance* is no exception. First, let's look at the box itself, which sports magnificent artwork by the celebrated fantasy illustrator Clyde Caldwell, one of TSR's regular artists (Caldwell would also create the cover for *Curse of the Azure Bonds*). Caldwell's cover spoke to the legions of tabletop *AD&D* gamers: this was the real thing. Of course, having the words "Official Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Computer Product" displayed prominently above the image no doubt helped as well. It is often easy to forget the impact that effective packaging had on gamers; Garriott had realized this early on and fought hard to ensure that his own products were attractive and eye-catching. A large part of the aesthetic experience was opening the box for the first time, examining the contents, and even smelling the faint, lingering scents of the factory where the floppy disks were magnetized.

*Pool of Radiance* was written for the Commodore 64 in 1988 and ported to MS-DOS and Atari ST. Other ports were soon available for most major platforms, including the NES. It was an instant best-seller, and not just because it was the first officially licensed *AD&D* computer game. Awash in strong competition, SSI took the sensible approach—take the very best elements of its own and rival CRPGs and pool them together. Indeed, the "Gold Box" engine is essentially a medley of *The Bard's Tale* and *The Wizard's Crown*, which can trace their own ancestry back to *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, and *Tunnels of Doom*. Rather than go back to the drawing board, the approach seemingly favored by Origin, SSI took a more pragmatic approach, building on



*Pool of Radiance* begins with a guided tour of the city, easing the player into the interface.

the strengths of past accomplishments. The result was one of the best (if not the very best) CRPG engines ever designed. Later “Gold Box” games would refine the engine and address some irritating flaws in the interface, but all of the qualities that made the “Gold Box” games so legendary are fully present in *Pool of Radiance*.

The game’s key strengths lie in its gameworld, story, combat system, and overall game structure. Since the gameworld and story are so closely related, let’s discuss those first. The player’s task is to help rebuild Phlan, a once-proud city that has long lain in ruins. The characters arrive at New Phlan, the part of the city that has already been restored, and accept commissions from the City Council to perform various quests, such as clearing the slums of monsters and recovering legendary artifacts. The characters are more than just hired thugs—they are also archaeologists, digging into Phlan’s ancient past to learn more about its history. The quests vary widely and all make sense in the context of the story. Eventually, the player learns that an evil dragon named Tyranthraxus is at the root of Phlan’s problems, but defeating him will take time, effort, and luck.

Like *The Bard’s Tale*, *Pool of Radiance* features a coherent game world that feels like a real place. No doubt much of this realism is generated by the 3D, first-person perspective players see in exploration mode. The interface has a generously sized window on the top left that shows the direction in which the characters are currently facing, and the rest of the screen is neatly divided to display pertinent information. Whereas most games were lucky to have 15 or so different type of walls to look at, *Pool of Radiance* has 80. This variety made it easier for the game’s artists to make each area look unique, rather than using the drab, lookalike corridors of so many other CRPGs. The city and dungeons are laid out on 15 by 15 square grids; the wilderness gets a rectangular 15 by 35. The areas were easy to map onto graph paper, but many players (including me) sprang for SSI’s official cluebooks, finely produced manuals with maps and tips. The engine’s built-in area function, which presented a portion of the overhead map, shows only the outline of walls and is certainly no substitute for a good map.

However, no interface can make a dull and repetitive game fun to play. SSI was luckily able to draw upon the rich body of literature TSR had created for its *Forgotten Realms* universe of tabletop AD&D games. The *Forgotten Realms* world was nearly as well-developed as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Middle Earth*, and possibilities for new stories were virtually unlimited—indeed, novels set in this fictional universe are still being published, most notably those by R. A. Salvatore. The *Forgotten Realms* world is an ideal environment for CRPGs

and adds great depth to *Pool of Radiance* and its sequels. Later games in the series would pay more attention to story elements and characters from the *Forgotten Realms* campaign setting.

*Pool of Radiance* places a great deal of emphasis on tactical combat. When the characters engage in battle, the screen changes to a top-down mode very similar to the one found in *The Wizard's Crown*. The battle is divided into rounds and turns. During each round, the player decides what action his characters will undertake, though these actions are taken immediately rather than after all the commands have been issued (as in *Phantasie* or *Wizardry*). When all characters and monsters have moved, the turn is over. A large and intense battle can easily last an hour, and even simple battles can quickly turn disastrous if the player rushes through them (or, worse, puts his characters in computer controlled "quick" mode).

The reason combat can be so prolonged is the difficulty of actually connecting with a weapon in melee combat. The likelihood of a successful strike is based on a score called the THAC0, or to-hit-armor-class-zero, and the armor class of the target. Each attempt is based on a random number between 1 and 20; if this random number is greater than the attacker's THAC0, he makes a successful strike. The end result is that misses are far more common than strikes, a fact that can significantly increase the duration of a battle. The manuals do not spell out how THAC0 is calculated, but it is likely based on a complex formula that factors in the character's strength, dexterity, and the stats associated with the readied weapon. Of course, logically it makes little sense that a figure decked out in full plate mail would be harder to hit than one wearing only leather, but the system did help maintain balance and prevent any attacker from becoming too powerful. After all, even a professional archer misses occasionally.



The turn-based combat is sophisticated, but the interface is easy to learn.

There are plenty of options available to each character depending on his or her class. For instance, fighters can wield melee or ranged weapons, and magic-users function like artillery or sharpshooters, depending on the spell (fireball versus magic missile, for instance). Thieves also have the option to back stab an opponent, a devastating move that requires very strategic positioning. Furthermore, retreating characters (or enemies) are penalized by giving all surrounding enemies a free swipe at their backsides. If a character's hit points fall below zero, he or she is wounded and must be bandaged by another character to avoid death. Thankfully, not every battle has to be to the death—monsters will often surrender if they are hopelessly overpowered.

Of course, it's always possible to try to talk monsters out of combat. Rather than present players with a dialog tree, the parley menu consists of five options: haughty, sly, nice, meek, and abusive. If the player selects the appropriate option, the monsters may flee or even provide tips and information rather than fight. It helps if players know enough about the *Forgotten Realms* world to know something of the cultures they encounter; a kobold, for instance, is not likely to respond well to the nice approach. Admittedly, the game doesn't do as much with the parley system as we might like, but at least it does make the attempt to reinforce the role-playing element without literally putting words in the player's mouth.

Players can level up when they reach a preset level of experience points, but they must journey to a training hall and pay a master for the service. This inconvenience is mitigated by the infrequency of the leveling process; the maximum level for each character is low, and it takes quite a few experience points to reach the next step. The highest level possible is for the thief, who can advance to level nine—fighters are capped at eight, and magic-users and clerics at six. The training hall is also a place to recruit mercenaries, who fight for the party in exchange for a share of the gold. Players will often be forced to decide the best way to spend their loot: should they pay for training, better equipment, or a mercenary? I should mention that the currency system is more complex than in most games. Instead of just gold coins, the characters find everything from copper to platinum. The cheap copper coins will soon weigh the party down; platinum is far preferable.

There are four classes available: fighter, cleric, magic-user, and thief. Humans can only be one class, but the other races (dwarf, elf, gnome, half-elf, halfling) can take on more than one, though they are penalized with even more restrictive caps on their maximum level. However, multiclassed characters have a huge advantage over humans: they can wear whatever armor and wield whatever weapons they want, provided that one of their classes allows

them. For example, an elven fighter/magic-user can cast spells while wearing armor. Both race and gender affect certain stats. For instance, female halflings are limited to 14 strength points, but male halflings can reach 17. The other stats aren't affected by gender, but racial restrictions and bonuses apply to most of them. For instance, even the dumbest elf has at least an eight intelligence score, whereas even the clumsiest halfling scores an eight in dexterity. The gender restrictions and some of the racial penalties would be quietly dropped in later "Gold Box" games, no doubt in response to pressure from angry gamers. Since the system is based on rolling three six-sided dice, the lowest any score can possibly be is three.

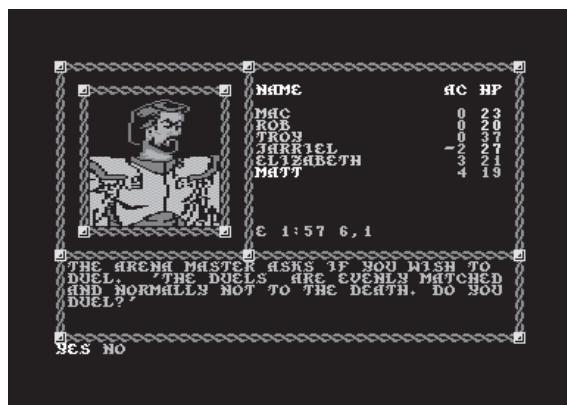
Critics made much of the fact that players could customize the portraits and icons of their characters. The system for the portraits reminds me of playing with paper dolls; it's basically a collection of heads and torsos that are interchangeable. The icons are a bit more dynamic, with lots of options for colors and parts, such as the weapon, head, cap, and so on (later "Gold Box" games facilitate this process with customizable templates.) These icons can be altered during the course of the game, such as when a character starts using a new weapon or acquires new armor. Though we might look at this system today and chuckle, it was nothing short of remarkable in an age when every other CRPG offered noncustomizable icons and, if they had them at all, standardized portraits. Of course, the *Pool of Radiance* system isn't perfect, and it's hilarious to mismatch female heads onto masculine bodies and vice versa. Whether by design or not, this is one of the few CRPGs I know where you can actively play as a transgendered individual.

Much of what makes *Pool of Radiance* special is its faithful adherence to official *AD&D* rules. For instance, instead of magic points, magic-users are given a set number of spells to memorize. How many spells they get per slot depends on their level of experience and intelligence (or wisdom, in the case of clerics). Although mages receive one new spell per level, they will learn most of them by scribing them from scrolls found in the unsettled areas. Once a spell is cast, it erases itself from the magic-user's memory and must be relearned. Memorizing spells (and restoring hit points) takes several hours of inactivity, which means setting up camp. Although there are many safe spots where the characters can rest unmolested, many of the more dangerous areas all but prevent camping. Thus, a player can't just focus on one battle at the time; she must always plan ahead. For instance, wasting all of a mage's fireball spells on a group of wimpy kobolds might leave the party totally vulnerable to a troll attack. This magic system helps balance the party—the problem in so many other CRPGs is that eventually the mages become so powerful as to

render the fighters superfluous. Some critics saw these rules as an annoyance, but others praised them. One contemporary reviewer wrote, "It seems to us like a logical extension of the kind of resource management which is necessary to any sophisticated strategy game."<sup>3</sup>

The city of Phlan has many intriguing areas to explore, such as a bizarre pyramid and a haunted library. But eventually players will get to go across country in wilderness mode, which anyone familiar with older SSI games like *Questron*, *Phantasie*, or *Ultima* will instantly recognize. Later SSI games experimented with different wilderness modes, such as showing the player a large map and having him click on different regions. In any case, the wilderness mode makes *Pool of Radiance* seem even larger, and gives gamers something to do after they've completed the game (e.g., slaughtering groups of wandering monsters).

Included with the game was a printed journal, which contains a numbered list of text passages that the player is to read at certain points of the game. We've seen the same setup in the much earlier *Apshai* games, but it's also seen in *Wasteland* and is taken to the extreme in *Star Saga*, which we'll discuss later in this chapter. The journal for *Pool of Radiance* contains maps and other illustrations, as well as a list of Tavern Tales. Of course, one of the problems with a printed journal is that players could cheat by reading all the passages at once, thereby prematurely learning many of the game's secrets. However, the journal warns players that some entries "contain false informa-



Players bored with fulfilling quests for the Council can duel in the arena.

<sup>3</sup> See Johnny L. Wilson's review of the game published in the July 1988 issue of *Computer Gaming World*.

tion that can lead them astray." Besides providing additional context for the game, the journal was intended as a means of thwarting illegal distribution. To that end, SSI also included a code wheel, without which the game could not be started. Today, these methods may seem crude, but they were at least less bothersome than the disk-based copy protection schemes then in existence, many of which were quite hard on the already delicate floppy drives of the era.

*Pool of Radiance* was a critically acclaimed, undisputed success. TSR even commissioned a novel based on the game, as well as a campaign for the tabletop version. However, it also marked an important change in the way CRPGs would be developed ever afterward. I had the pleasure of talking to Craig Roth, author of SSI's *The Shard of Spring*, about the matter. Roth visited SSI's offices in Sunnyvale, California, while programmers were working on *Pool of Radiance*. Roth's vivid description of the scene is worth quoting here:

There was a big room with no overhead lighting where what must have been a dozen artists were working full time just drawing the pictures in the game. Then I was shown a cube with two assembly language coders. There was a full-time writer for the manual, and more. And here I was—just me and a friend of mine doing everything! I saw that this was the direction the market was heading, and if I wanted to continue to play along it would take a big bet and becoming a big business. For me, creating CRPGs was a labor of love—I enjoyed it the whole time I was doing it. I'm sure I still would have enjoyed it in a big-business environment, but it just wasn't the same.

SSI's game had raised the bar on CRPG development, and other developers and publishers realized that the business was no longer a cottage industry of teenagers hacking away in their bedrooms. Now we were dealing with a modern industry, with a corporate hierarchy and a specialized division of labor. The ramifications of this shift were powerful and permanent, and soon the only refuge for a one-man band was the public domain and shareware market.

Gamers hoping to get their hands on *Pool of Radiance* today may want to check out Markus Sclegel's *Pool of Radiance Remastered*, a module he created for the *Neverwinter Nights 2* engine. The easiest option for those wanting to experience the real thing is to hunt down a used copy of *The Forgotten Realms Archives*, released in 1997 and published by Interplay for Windows and DOS. Of course, it's also possible to illegally download the game for use in an emulator, in which case the Commodore Amiga version is the most aesthetically pleasing, though the Commodore 64 version is probably the most

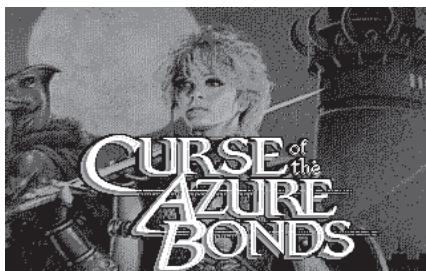
authentic. The NES version lacks some of the features of the others and is not recommended.

### *Curse of the Azure Bonds*

After achieving such success with *Pool of Radiance*, it is hardly surprising that SSI would want to get a sequel on the shelves as soon as possible. The next game, *Curse of the Azure Bonds*, appeared in 1989. While the game engine was virtually identical to the previous game, it did offer some very desirable enhancements, such as a fix command. One of the most repetitive and laborious aspects of *Pool of Radiance* is healing the party after a battle. It requires having the clerics cast all their healing spells, click through a menu to have them rememorize the spells, then sleep and repeat the tedious process. The fix command reduced the operation to a single click.

The game also removed the individual character portraits but kept the icons. No doubt this move was a concession to free up room for more data, but it also sped up the character creation process. Furthermore, the portraits took time to load, causing a noticeable delay each time the player viewed the character's status screen. *Pool of Radiance* offers an option to turn the portraits off, which I suspect many players did. *Curse of the Azure Bonds* simply removes the feature altogether. The new game also reduced some towns to a menu (store, inn, temple, and so on). Again, this enhancement seems to have been a concession both to memory and speed.

One undisputed improvement was the addition of two new character classes, the ranger and the paladin. Rangers are fighters with a few druid spells who receive bonuses when attacking giant creatures. Paladins, the quintessential good guys, get some clerical spells and a bonus against any evil combatants. However, they cannot travel in a party that includes any evil characters. Another big change is the ability for humans to "dual class," which amounts



Clyde Caldwell's fantastic artwork graced the cover of both the box and the splash screen.

to a permanent career change. The character does not gain any new hit points or abilities until reaching the level of proficiency in the new class that was acquired in the old class. Furthermore, no dual-classed characters can cast spells while wearing armor. As before, nonhumans could multiclass as they saw fit. Players can import previously made characters from either *Pool of Radiance* or *Hillsfar*, an early action CRPG we'll discuss later. However, characters lose their equipment in the transfer, though they are given enough platinum to buy new gear.

*Curse of the Azure Bonds* is perhaps best known for its storyline, which this time was based on a TSR's previously published novel *Azure Bonds*, by Kate Novak and Jeff Grubb. The player's characters awaken with five azure tattoos (or "sigils") on their arms, each one controlled by an evil force. The tattoos enslave the party, forcing them to perform certain deeds. Of course, it's up to the player to track down the various groups responsible for the sigils, eliminating them one by one. Tyranthraxus, the party's nemesis in the first game, is back, resurrected in the form of a storm giant. The storyline is integrated well into the game. For instance, the various towns will respond differently to characters depending on which sigils they still carry, charging higher prices and so on. Although some critics still complained about the focus on "hack 'n slash" gameplay, the story is at least set in a more intriguing context than was offered in most other CRPGs.

### *Secret of the Silver Blades*

The third game in the original *Forgotten Realms* series is *Secret of the Silver Blades*, released in 1990. By this time SSI had launched a few spin-offs, which we'll discuss later, but it's worth noting here that this game borrows some innovations from *Champions of Krynn*, released a few more months earlier. Perhaps the most important of these is a difficulty selector, which players can adjust at any time to reduce the power of their enemies. While certainly useful for getting through particularly nasty encounters, the trade off for this option is fewer experience points. The game was also touted for having the largest gameworld yet seen in a "Gold Box" game and for offering cut scenes to illustrate the story.

A few other nice features include a town vault where the party can store its unused equipment and surplus wealth and a teleportation network that shortens travel time. It also adds a series of riddles, though it's debatable to what extent these help move the game away from its "hack 'n slash" image. Indeed, *Secret of the Silver Blades* is one of the most combat-intensive of any of the "Gold Box" games and takes a great deal of time to complete.

The storyline is that a small mining village is being threatened by a horde of monsters, unleashed from their glacial prison. The monsters were placed there along with their master, Eldamar, but the miners are tricked by an evil group called the "Black Circle" that misleads them into releasing Eldamar and his minions. Long ago, Eldamar's brother Oswulf and his group of mighty "Silver Blades" defeated him, and now it's the player's turn to take him on.

Although I found the game to be one of the weaker of the "Gold Box" games, contemporary critics raved about it. One particularly ludicrous review in *Computel* magazine argued that players might want to make a video recording of the game to "show as background video for parties and gatherings." One wonders how many parties and gatherings this reviewer attended!<sup>4</sup>

### *Pools of Darkness*

The last game of the original series is *Pools of Darkness*, which was released for DOS in 1991 and for the Amiga and Macintosh a year later. Unfortunately, critics had mixed feelings over this last entry in the grand old series. It is an inordinately difficult game, and though parties can be imported from *Secret of the Silver Blades*, the only race that really has a chance is human. All other races suffer from stringent caps on their maximum levels, and since some of the best abilities (multiple attacks for fighters, awesome spells) are available only at the highest level, nonhumans just held the party back. A further irritant is a cumbersome equipment loss when traveling through portals; few



The famous wizard Elminster makes sporadic appearances in most *Forgotten Realms* games. He plays a prominent role in *Pools of Darkness*.

<sup>4</sup> See Russ Ceccola's review of the game in the Nov. 1990 issue of *Compute!* magazine.

players enjoy losing or doing without their hard-earned equipment when up against the most powerful foes in the game.

Nevertheless, this is the most extensive game in the series, with a huge world to explore (and even other dimensions), and the engine was updated to take advantage of VGA's 256 colors. It also features music by the famous Dave "The Fat Man" Govett. Unfortunately, the game was never released for the Commodore 64, so gamers who had played the series on that platform were forced to upgrade to one of the newer platforms and start over with new characters.

*Pools of Darkness* begins with a trip back to Phlan, which has grown quite large and prosperous since the first game. However, the party soon encounters trouble when the evil god Bane begins wreaking havoc all across the land, plunging it into darkness. It's up to the party to hunt down Bane's lieutenants, eliminate them, and finally gain enough power and artifacts to take on the balor Gothmenes. This mission is probably the longest and hardest of the entire series. However, many critics complained that the ending is rather anticlimactic. I won't spoil it here, but let's just say it would be forgettable if not so disappointing. Perhaps as restitution, victorious players are given the chance to play "Dave's Challenge," an incredibly difficult dungeon.

## *Champions of Krynn* and the *Dragonlance* Series

The first of SSI's "Gold Box" spin-offs is *Champions of Krynn*, released in 1990 for Amiga, Apple II, Commodore 64, and of course, DOS. Chronologically speaking, it was the third "Gold Box" game and employed some innovations that showed up in later games, especially the LEVEL difficulty selector we discussed earlier. These games were based on TSR's very popular *Dragonlance* universe, which included a set of fine novels authored by Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman. The stories were based mostly on the exploits of a group called the Heroes of the Lance, a group of eight adventurers whose racial and professional makeup is suspiciously close to the typical AD&D party (including a representative from each class). These characters would make guest appearances in SSI's *Dragonlance* games, though players would never control them directly as they did in SSI's action-game, *Heroes of the Lance* (we'll discuss these games shortly). The games are based more or less on the novels.

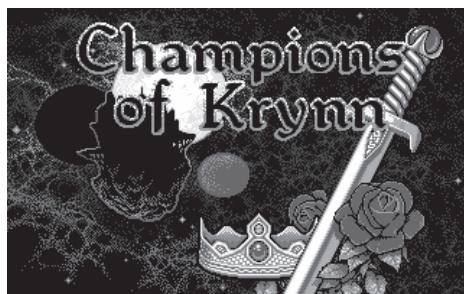
In *Champions of Krynn*, the players must work with the Knights of Solamnia to defeat the evil draconians, a collection of five dragon-like humanoid species who were thought to be extinct after the War of the Lance. SSI went

out all in promoting the new spin-off, going so far as to include a large poster of the cover art in every box. As with all the other “Gold Box” games, much of the game’s story and plot development is contained in the printed journal.

From a gameplay perspective, the most interesting differences introduced in this series are the new races, classes, and moon-based magic system. The race options now include two types of elves (Qualinesti and Silvanesti) and dwarves (hill and mountain), as well as the “kender,” a diminutive and highly playful race that resembles Tolkien’s hobbit. Kender are the only race that can taunt enemies, driving them into a rage, lowering their THAC0, and forcing them to focus their attacks on the kender.

The new class, Knight of Solamnia, replaces the paladin. Knights are organized into three orders (Crown, Sword, and Rose) and begin the game equipped with plate mail, a long sword, and a shield. However, they must take a vow of poverty, which means that they give up a portion of their gold each time they enter a city. In the case of the Knights of the Sword or Rose, this entails giving up everything but a mere 20 steel coins. A knight of one order can petition to join a higher one, but only if he has the requisite ability scores. The higher-order knights get some added powers, such as the ability to cast some clerical spells. Since some quests require that a knight be in the party, they are essential characters. Knights can be male or female, but only humans, half elves, and hill dwarves need apply. The manual suggests human.

The magic system is revised to include the four phases of three moons, each corresponding to a different order of mages (basically, good, evil, and neutral). It’s a somewhat complicated system, but the result is that some spells can only be cast by certain orders, and the phase of the order’s moon determines certain benefits or penalties. The current phase of the moons is shown on screen. Another change is that clerics now have their choice of deities, a



*Champions of Krynn* introduced computer gamers to TSR’s popular *Dragonlance* campaign setting.

system that brings to mind SSI's older game *Demon's Winter*. The gods are also organized into good, neutral, and evil, and confer bonuses. For instance, clerics who worship Majere get an extra spell (Silence 15' radius) and can turn undead as if they were two levels higher. No characters can be evil.

All in all, there are enough differences here to distinguish the game from the other series, but many contemporary critics seem to have overlooked these changes. To be fair, the games look virtually identical, and players have to be intimate with both series to really appreciate what makes each unique.

### *Death Knights of Krynn*

The next game in the series, *Death Knights of Krynn*, was released in 1991 for DOS, the Commodore 64, and the Amiga. It is set a year after the events in the first game and is virtually identical in terms of interface and gameplay, though this time the party spends more time fighting undead creatures than draconians. The game allows players to import characters from *Champions of Krynn*, with most of their gold and possessions intact. There is also a premade party available for those who do not wish to roll their own. It also features higher level caps and some additional spells. Thankfully, this time the player's previous spell choices are preselected, thus eliminating a lot of unnecessary pointing and clicking.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the game is the storyline, which pits the party against Sir Karl, reincarnated as a death knight, a powerful undead warrior who was formerly a Knight of Solamnia. Though certainly an enjoyable game for anyone who loved the first one, it is, as one contemporary reviewer put it, "pretty much standard "Gold Box" fare." However, as with *Pools of Darkness*, there are a few bonus areas to explore after completing the main quest, including a "Dave's Challenge."

### *The Dark Queen of Krynn*

The last of the Dragonlance-inspired "Gold Box" games is *The Dark Queen of Krynn*, published in 1992 for the DOS, Amiga, and Macintosh platforms. The most noticeable change here is an upgrade to the 256 color VGA, which allowed better animation and more detailed graphics. However, the underlying engine is left intact, albeit with a few new monsters and abilities. This game is set two years after the party's victory in *Death Knights of Krynn*. The party is summoned to the city of Caergoth to investigate rumors that monsters are gathering there. The player soon learns that the Dark Queen herself is prepar-

ing to send the accumulated forces of evil in a last bid to conquer Krynn.

*The Dark Queen of Krynn* was not developed internally but outsourced to MicroMagic, who had earlier gained recognition by porting Origin's *Moebius: The Orb of Celestial Harmony* from the Apple II to the other important computer platforms of the day. MicroMagic would later develop *Unlimited Adventures*, a construction kit based on the "Gold Box" engine. We'll talk more about this program later in this chapter.

All in all, the "Gold Box" games set in *Krynn* served their purpose. They expanded SSI's line and allowed it to exploit more of TSR's valuable campaign settings, all without having to substantially rewrite the engine. While they are perhaps not as well known as the original series, they were popular and are mandatory for anyone who enjoys the other games. However, SSI wasn't done milking the "Gold Box" engine or their TSR license.

## The Savage Frontier

The last of SSI's TSR-licensed fantasy series are the two *Savage Frontier* games: *Gateway to the Savage Frontier* (1991) and *Treasures of the Savage Frontier* (1992), both developed externally by Beyond Software, Don Daglow's company that later changed its name to Stormfront Studios in 1993. We'll have more to say about Beyond Software when we discuss *Neverwinter Nights*, the first graphical online role-playing game, which was based on the "Gold Box" engine.

The two games are set in the Savage Frontier, an area to the extreme west of the setting for the older games set in TSR's Forgotten Realms. The plot is concerned mostly with preventing the tyrannical Zhentarim from conquering the land. The armies of Zhentil Keep have hitherto been stopped by the sands of the impassable and monster-infested Great Desert of Anauroch, but the Zhentarim hopes to use four ancient magical statues to clear the desert and guarantee the success of their invasion. The player's party has celebrated the night before in a tavern in Yartar and wakes up to find all their equipment stolen. They're left with no choice but to search for work, and it doesn't take them long to learn of the Zhentarim's plot. The party must find a way to stop the advancing hordes and defeat their leader, Vaalgamon.

The only noticeable innovation to the engine was an emphasis on wilderness travel, which makes the world feel much larger. Overland travel is fraught with peril, of course, particularly for parties who wander off the beaten paths. A similar mode is present in *Pool of Radiance*, but this game makes much more use of it.

### *Treasures of the Savage Frontier*

The next game, *Treasures of the Savage Frontier*, was released only for the Commodore Amiga and DOS platforms. It takes place only a few weeks after the events in the first game. The players are now hailed as the Heroes of Ascore and are summoned by the wizard Aminitas to eliminate a few last bastions of Zhentarim troops from Llorkh, a dwarven city. After failing to properly protect some ambassadors, the party is accused of treachery. Naturally, they must clear their names and expose the Zhentarim's plot.

*Treasures of the Savage Frontier* introduced a few innovations to the admittedly aging engine, such as weather and romances between party members and other characters. The weather system incorporated the effects of rain and snow on movement, slowing down travel and making it harder to maneuver in combat. Of course, the longer the party stayed in the wilderness, the more likely they were to encounter roaming monsters, so the snow and rain meant more combat. The romance system is more interesting. Essentially, it boils down to two nonplayer characters, or characters that are controlled by the computer rather than the player. These characters are a female named Siulajia and a male named Jabarkas, one of whom may fall in love with the active character at a certain point in the game (the choice of Siulajia or Jabarkas depends on the active character's gender; only heterosexual relationships are possible). However, love is not assured—romance will only bloom if the lead character has conducted him or herself so as to attract a partner, helping out the weak and standing bravely in battle.



Gateway and *Treasures of the Savage Frontier* were outsourced to Beyond Software, but they're still great games.

Assuming that all goes well and love does flourish, the loved one can join the party, and the two lovers will receive combat bonuses. However, if the lover is injured, the partner will fly into a berserker rage, charging recklessly into the fray. If the lover dies or is dropped from the party, the partner will become depressed and suffer penalties. At some point the lovers will admit their feelings to the rest of the party, who will then be asked to approve or condemn it. If the other members disapprove, the nonplayer character leaves the party, and the forlorn lover will thereafter fight with much less zeal and effectiveness. It's an innovative system that opens up some interesting role-playing opportunities. There are relatively few CRPGs that incorporate any kind of romantic element, but we'll discuss a few more—including *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, a much later game that permits gay relationships and same-sex marriages.

Despite these innovations, the *Savage Frontier* series was never as popular as the previous two. Nevertheless, they are highly playable and a good introduction for modern gamers who aren't familiar with the "Gold Box" canon.

## Buck Rogers

The only nonfantasy based "Gold Box" games are two based on the pulp sci-fi hero Buck Rogers. The first of these, *Countdown to Doomsday*, appeared in 1990 and is set in the year 2456. The earth is in ruins after centuries of industrial exploitation, and a single megacorporation, RAM, runs the show. Your party, however, is working for NEO, an extremist group out to smash RAM and liberate the earth. They are led by Buck Rogers, a legendary hero who has been in cryogenic sleep since the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and thus remembers what Earth was like before the fall.

Both *Countdown to Doomsday* and its sequel, *Matrix Cubed*, are based on the TSR-owned *Buck Rogers XXVc* (*Buck Rogers in the 25<sup>th</sup> century*) franchise rolled out in 1988. The setting extended up to 1995, and, like TSR's other campaign settings, was supported with a variety of novels, comic books, role-playing games, and other materials. Unfortunately for TSR and sci-fi fans, *Buck Rogers XXVc* never performed as well as the fantasy settings; and, at least according to Keith Brors, former technical director of SSI, the company was pressured by TSR into developing their Buck Rogers computer game against their better judgment. In any case, these games are noteworthy for making the most sweeping changes to the "Gold Box" engine.

Naturally, since *Countdown to Doomsday* is based on pulp sci-fi magazines and serials instead of Tolkien-inspired fantasy, SSI was led to make sev-



Although the *Buck Rogers* games look similar to the "Gold Box" games, they offer a more sophisticated skills system.

eral important modifications to the "Gold Box" engine. One of the key problems that has always faced sci-fi role-playing games is that, realistically, the typical level zero character with no experience and skills would simply never make it in a technological world, where a great deal of formal education is assumed from the outset. The most common answer to this problem (as seen in games such as *Traveller*) is to introduce a technical skills system and allow players to select which skills their characters learned in school. *Countdown to Doomsday*'s skill system is divided into career skills, which are based on a character's class or career choice, and general skills, which can be learned by anyone. While it's possible for a character to learn any skills regardless of his career choice, doing so incurs a penalty and can be quite wasteful.

The game features six races (Terrans, Martians, Venusians, Mercurians, Desert Runners, and Tinkers) and five careers (warrior, medic, rogue, rocket-jock, and engineer). As you might expect, certain races are better fit for certain careers. For instance, Desert Runners, a genetically engineered species with retractable claws, make the best warriors. Likewise, each class has a small bevy of career skills that can be learned at reduced cost in skillpoints, which are distributed at character creation and each time the character levels up. Some skills have prerequisites and can only be learned once the character has enough points invested in certain other skills. Most skills are affected by one of the seven randomly-generated attributes (strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, charisma, and tech). The only unusual attribute here is tech, which affects the character's affinity with machinery and skills such as jury rig-

ging and repair electrical. All in all, it's an impressive system, and it's surprising that SSI didn't try to implement it in their fantasy "Gold Box" games.

Another big difference from the other "Gold Box" games concerns combat, where futuristic ray-guns and plasma grenades replace swords and bows. Of crucial importance here is a weapon's range, damage, and rate of fire, which determine how many attacks a character doles out per round. For instance, the needle gun can be fired six times per round but is quite limited in range and deals only up to three points of damage per hit. The powerful laser rifle, on the other hand, deals up to twelve points of damage at very long range but gets only two attacks per round. These types of considerations play a large role in the overall tactics and gameplay.

Other aspects of *Countdown to Doomsday* are less distinctive. There's still the reliance on a printed journal for context and copy protection, though it's called a log book. Overall, critics seem to have enjoyed the game, though some criticized the lackluster "ship-to-ship combat, which is quite dull compared to land combat.

The second and last entry in this series is *Matrix Cubed*, published in 1992 only for the DOS platform. It is set after the action in the first game, and players can import their old characters, weapons and all. The plot is concerned primarily with the Matrix Device, an invention that can transmute matter into energy. The party is recruited to track down the scientists capable of building the device and convince them to work for NEO. The fact that SSI failed to port the game to other platforms suggests that it was not a best seller. Overall, SSI's Buck Rogers games represent some desirable enhancements to the "Gold Box" engine, but their influence has been marginal.

## *Neverwinter Nights*: The "Gold Box" MMORPG

We've already mentioned Beyond Software, the development team responsible for SSI's *Savage Frontier* games. However, perhaps their most historically important game is *Neverwinter Nights*, a very early online role-playing game hosted by the commercial network AOL (America Online) from 1991 to 1997. Based on the "Gold Box" engine, *Neverwinter Nights* is likely the first MMORPG, or massively multiplayer online role-playing game, usually distinguished from the MUD by the incorporation of advanced, sprite-based graphics. *Neverwinter Nights* offered real-time multiplayer gameplay and soon became one of AOL's key attractions. Players long accustomed to solitary gameplay found themselves chatting, fighting, and collaborating with up to 500 simultaneous players from all over the country.



As we can see from this screenshot, the online multiplayer version of the "Gold Box" engine was home to much silliness.

As with the MUDs and other multiplayer online games we discussed previously, the main appeal of *Neverwinter Nights* was the social interaction with like-minded players. Most famously, *Neverwinter Nights* saw the rise of dozens of guilds, or loose affiliations of gamers who united for their common good. A few dozen of these guilds were officially sanctioned by AOL, which granted them their own private and public message boards on the commercial network. The most successful of these guilds held regular events to keep players coming back, such as the Guild of Heroes' joke and story-telling contests. Fans also made their own newsletters and distributed them on the network.

AOL originally charged an hourly rate to play *Neverwinter Nights*, which led many players to spend hundreds (if not thousands) of dollars every month on the game. In 1996, AOL changed to a flat-fee rate of \$20 per month, a move that eventually spelled doom for the popular game. The problem was that as long AOL was charging by the hour, programs like *Neverwinter Nights* and the aforementioned *Gemstone III* were highly lucrative, since they lured new subscribers and kept them online as long as possible. After the switch to a flat-fee, these highly addictive games became albatrosses for the company. AOL's ideal customer was now someone who logged in only intermittently but still paid the monthly fee. *Neverwinter Nights* was yanked from the network on July 1997, and the last "Gold Box" game was at last laid to rest. Many fans felt betrayed by the decision and circulated petitions and launched letter-writing campaigns. In the end, though, such resistance proved futile.

However, there are at least two efforts underway to bring back the game. One is a project called *Neverwinter Nights: Resurrection*, which uses BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights* editor and server to recreate the original setting in a 3D environment. Another option is *Neverwinter Nights Offline*, a somewhat buggy attempt to reproduce much of the game's features in a single-player, non-networked version. There are also several active fan and community sites dedicated to the game, such as the *Neverwinter Nights Archive*.<sup>5</sup>

## *The Dark Heart of Uukrul*

Digital Studio's *The Dark Heart of Uukrul*, released in 1989 by Broderbund Software, is a very enjoyable game for DOS and the Apple II with a great deal in common with the "Gold Box" games. For instance, travel occurs in a first-person 3D mode, and combat is a tactical affair with a top-down (but this time not isometric) vantage point and a quick combat option. There's also a telling influence from the *Ultima* series, particularly in character creation, which consists of answering several multiple-choice questions rather than rolling for stats. Furthermore, the four-member party must consist of a fighter, paladin, priest, and magician, each of whom will play a vital role in the adventure. Gameplay emphasizes puzzle-solving, but there are still plenty of monsters to bash.



*The Dark Heart of Uukrul* is a brilliantly designed game, with an intuitive interface, fun gameplay, and an appealing aesthetic. Its gameplay is loosely modeled on the "Gold Box" games.

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.bladekeep.com/nwn/main.shtml>.

The story concerns one evil Uukrul, merciless tyrant of the otherwise lovely city of Eriosthe. To destroy him, the party must first find his heart, which is located somewhere in a deep dungeon. Thankfully, a helpful automapper is included to help players navigate the labyrinth.

The magic system is unique, based on rings of various materials (iron, copper, and so on); the more precious the material, the more powerful the spell that can be cast with it. Spells are broken up into groups called Arkanas: Healing, Protection, Knowledge, Fire, and Frost, each with its own set of rings. For instance, a mage with only an iron ring of Fire is limited to basic fire spells. The cleric system is similar, though based on gods rather than Arkanas. Casting spells also costs Psychic Points (mages) or Virtue Points (clerics).

Although *The Dark Heart of Uukrul* is not as well known as the “Gold Box” or *Ultima* games, it’s still well worth the trouble of hunting it down. It’s one of only a handful of games from this era with a clean, intuitive interface and a graceful learning curve. I strongly recommend it as an easy and compelling introduction to the “Gold Box” style of gameplay.

## Concluding Thoughts on the “Gold Box” Games

There is no question that SSI’s “Gold Box” games were influential and played a vital role in shaping the future of the genre. For the most part, SSI seems to have been content to follow Sir-Tech’s example with the early *Wizardry* games, offering essentially the same game engine with only minor improvements. Although some critics deride the practice as “engine recycling,” we must also see it as an essential strategy for driving down costs and ensuring that fans of the previous games will be comfortable with the new ones. Of course, even under ideal conditions, such a tactic can only sustain interest for so long—eventually gamers begin demanding a game that isn’t merely the old one in new clothing. What’s surprising about the “Gold Box” engine is just how versatile and long-lived it turned out to be, even serving as the basis for one of the most successful of the early MMORPGs. For many CRPG fans, it still represents the perfect blend of story and strategy.

## SSI’s Action CRPGs: *Heroes of the Lance* and *Hillsfar*

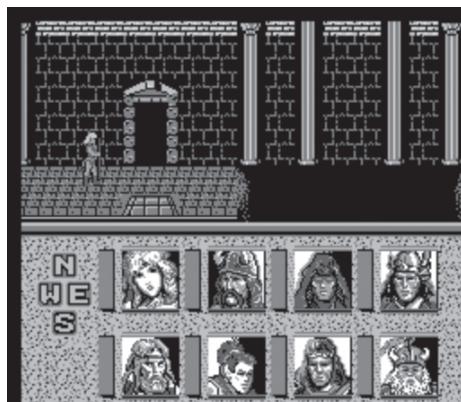
From virtually the beginning of CRPG history, there have been efforts to wed what some see as a placid, contemplative genre to the more tactile and frenetic world of arcade and console gaming. We’ve already discussed SSI’s

previous CRPG/shooter hybrids, *Gemstone Warrior* and *Gemstone Healer*. Such games are usually referred to as action CRPGs, a rather unwieldy but useful conglomeration. Unfortunately for aspiring developers, action CRPGs have not tended to fare well alongside pure CRPGs during the Golden Age, though Blizzard's Platinum Age hit *Diablo* demonstrated conclusively that this subgenre could have far more massive appeal than the conventional CRPG. It's enlightening to see why earlier action CRPGs fell short, repeatedly disappointing gamers and convincing many CRPG fans that action and role-playing mixed like oil and water.

### *Heroes of the Lance*

Let's turn our attention, then, to SSI's TSR-licensed *Dragonlance* action CRPGs. The earliest of these is *Heroes of the Lance*, released in 1988 for a large number of computing platforms, including the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST as well as the British Amstrad and ZX Spectrum machines. Two years later it was ported to the NES, where it soon acquired a reputation for its wretchedly bad gameplay. The game was developed not by SSI but by U.S. Gold, a British developer and publisher later acquired by Eidos Interactive. As their name suggests, they specialized in importing popular American titles and porting (or having them ported) for the European computer market.

*Heroes of the Lance* is based on TSR's first *Dragonlance* campaign module, called *Dragons of Despair*, as well as the tie-in novel *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* by Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman. The goal of the game is to guide



Considering the wretched gameplay of *Heroes of the Lance*, it's little wonder that console gamers preferred Japanese games.

the eight Heroes of the Lance into the ruins of Kak Tsaroth, a deadly place crawling with monsters, mercenaries, and a black dragon named Khisanth. The party's quest is a desperate attempt to recover the Disks of Mishakal, upon which are inscribed the teaching of the True Gods. The game seems to assume intimate familiarity with the novels, which are excellent works highly regarded by many *AD&D* and fantasy fans. U.S. Gold's game hasn't fared as well—particularly the NES version, which some critics consider one of the worst games ever released for the platform. Indeed, a quick search on *YouTube* reveals some hilarious video reviews demonstrating the poor controls and incoherent gameplay. Contemporary reviewers of the computer versions were more forgiving.

The basic setup of the game is the horizontal fighting style of arcade games like *Street Fighter* or the older *Karateka*. In many ways, it seems to be an attempt to update Origin's *Moebius: The Orb of Celestial Harmony* (1985), an older but more successful fighter/CRPG hybrid that we discussed in the previous chapter. In *Heroes of the Lance*, the player can switch among the eight heroes, though only one can be on-screen and active (the first four can use magic but also take some of the damage during combat). Although a large part of the gameplay calls for agility with the joystick or gamepad, there are also tactical considerations—particularly concerning magic. Raistlin and Goldmoon, the party's mage and cleric, respectively, have powerful magic but are extremely vulnerable in physical combat.

I should point out that while the game awards experience points for overcoming monsters, there is no leveling up system—a surprising omission that for many critics, including this one, challenges its identity as an CRPG, action or otherwise. In effect, the eight party members serve more as extra lives for the player than a well-balanced party. Although most of the negative criticism leveled against the game concerns its slow speed and bad collision detection, a well-thought out leveling system may have atoned for its other sins.

### *Dragons of Flame*

Although *Heroes of the Lance* now serves more often as the butt of jokes than as a source for nostalgia, SSI and U.S. Gold apparently found it successful enough to warrant a sequel. The next game, *Dragons of Flame*, followed in 1989, again for whole host of computer and console platforms. This game is quite similar to the first, though now with a special top-down overland travel mode and a new story. This time, the Heroes' mission is to charge into a fortress called Pax Tharkas, recover the sword Wyrmslayer, and free the captives

held in the dungeon. Again, the game seemed to fare better on computers than consoles.

### *Shadow Sorcerer*

A modern gamer struggling through *Heroes of the Lance* and *Dragons of Flame* would likely be nothing short of astounded that yet a *third* game would appear in this lamentable series. Yet SSI published U.S. Gold's *Shadow Sorcerer* in 1991, though only for the Commodore Amiga, Atari ST, and DOS platforms. *Shadow Sorcerer* is a much different game than the previous two, and begs the question of whether it's accurately described as a sequel, though it does continue the storyline. In short, the characters have successfully rescued 500 refugees from the city of Pax Tharkas and must now relocate them to a safer haven. This task entails not only battling packs of monsters but also keeping the refugees fed and moving in the right direction.

The most obvious changes concern the graphics and the interface. The perspective is now a combination of overhead view and 3D isometric, and now the player can see and control four characters simultaneously. The interface is icon-driven and well suited for mouse control. Critics were pleased with the graphics and especially the sound of the DOS version, which takes advantage of the AdLib soundcard. However, feeble AI routines (the characters have a hard time dealing with obstacles in tactical mode) and a very stiff time limit to complete the game marred the fun. Like the other games in this series, the gameplay is set in real-time, though saving is allowed at any point. However, I should note that the manual discourages saving the game, instructing players to "take your losses like a man." I've yet to find such candid prose in other SSI manuals.



The goal of *Shadow Sorcerer* is to deliver refugees to safety, but their aggravating and irrational behavior will soon have players wondering if they're worth the trouble.

One of the more interesting aspects of the game is that refugees won't always comply with the party's requests. Their leaders might every well decide to head back to Pax Tharkas, where certain death awaits at the hands of the evil Verminaard. While I suppose it might be possible that the refugees entertain a serious death wish, some critics derided the developers for creating this implausibility. The manual insists that "no matter how irritating [the refugees] become, it is your job to keep them healthy," but no doubt some players would prefer to see them slaughtered.

Unlike the previous games, *Shadow Sorcerer* at last incorporates a simple level system. As characters gain levels, they receive a larger maximum hit point score and refine their class skills. The levels are also important for magic-users, who receive more powerful spells as they progress. Although this class and level system is relatively crude compared to some of the later action CRPGs we'll discuss, at least it fully qualifies *Shadow Sorcerer* as a true CRPG and one of the true precursors of Blizzard's *Diablo*.

One final note about *Shadow Sorcerer* is that it adopts the "Gold Box" convention of putting important material into a printed journal. The printed journal is no doubt a move to retard illegal distribution, since portable storage media had by this time become more than capable of storing large amounts of text. Nevertheless, the entries are well-written and add some much needed entertainment value to the game.

### *The Summoning*

While we're on the subject of *Shadow Sorcerer*, it is only fair to mention *The Summoning*, another real-time isometric CRPG published by SSI. This 1992 game was developed by Event Horizon Software, the company that would



*The Summoning* features an innovative spell-casting system based on hand gestures.

later be renamed DreamForge. We'll take a moment here to explore Event Horizon's early impact on the genre, specifically looking at *The Summoning*, *Darkspyre*, *Dusk of the Gods*, and *Veil of Darkness*.

*The Summoning* is a woefully obscure game today, but it contained at least one fascinating innovation: a magic system based on hand gestures. The system requires the character to memorize spells, just as in the "Gold Box" games, but now this process is instantaneous and requires no period of rest. In fact, the character can even memorize spells in the din of battle! However, the spells are memorized only after the player is able to enter the correct sequence of hand gestures, which are found on scrolls or learned from other characters encountered in the game (actually casting a spell requires a quantity of spell points as well). *Dragonlance* and other fantasy novels often describe bizarre hand gestures as part of the spell-casting process, but *The Summoning* actually incorporates them into the gameplay. It makes a great deal of sense to have the magic process be a highly complex and arcane affair, since if it were really as easy as most games make it out to be, everyone would be doing it! Unfortunately, previous attempts to complicate the magic system have resulted in less-than-stellar gameplay, and developers are still searching for ways to make magic both realistic and fun.

*The Summoning*'s combat system is fairly detailed, involving proficiencies for each type of weapon. Weapons wear out and eventually shatter, so there's a strong incentive to get experience with all of them. However, most of the emphasis is on solving puzzles, which mainly involve pressure plates and traps. Still, the game's awkward controls and simplistic storyline seem to have banished it to obscurity.

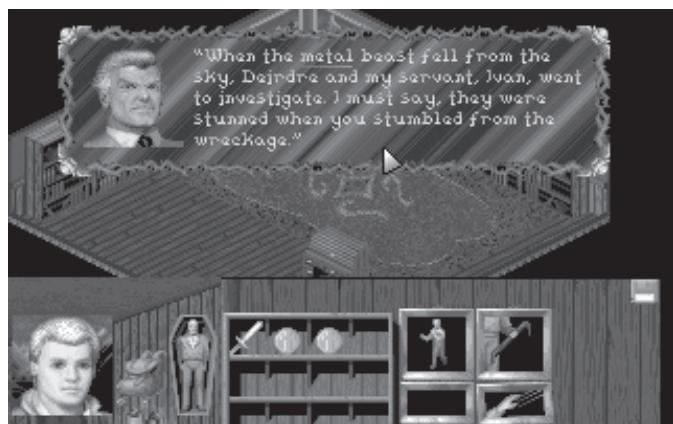
### *Darkspyre*

*The Summoning* is actually a sequel to an earlier Event Horizons game called *Darkspyre*, which was published by Electronic Zoo in 1990 for DOS and a year later for the Commodore Amiga. This real-time game features a top-down view reminiscent of Atari's 1985 arcade classic *Gauntlet*. *Darkspyre* is perhaps most notable for its innovative character creation system. The player reads a story, making critical decisions at key junctures (think about the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books). The answers determine the character's abilities as well as his or her strengths and weaknesses. The game even takes into consideration whether the character is left- or right-handed! The magic system is a tiered system in which basic spells evolve into more powerful versions as the mage gains experience. The advantage of such a system is that it

eliminates the problem of spell inflation, that is, the mage's early spells becoming useless later in the game. For instance, hardly anyone bothers with the first-level clerical spell "cure light wounds" in the later stages of a "Gold Box" game; by that point, "cure serious" or "cure critical" is more useful.

### *Dusk of the Gods*

The game engine of *The Summoning* is based on Event Horizon's 1991 game *Dusk of the Gods*, published by Interstel. *Dusk of the Gods* is a real-time, isometric CRPG based on Norse legend. It's sometimes casually referred to as an educational game because of emphasis on Norse mythology, though the manual warns that it is not intended to be a "historically accurate depiction of the Viking era." The manual goes on to say, "If we remained absolutely true to everything in the mythological lays, there would be no reason to play the game. You could, simply put, 'read the book.'" Indeed, according to the game's bibliography (a rather rare section to find in any game manual!), players find no fewer than 11 scholarly sources that were consulted during the game's design stages. The designer's note section of the manual goes to complain about the over-emphasis on graphics in most games and reviews, and correctly states that "it is the design that makes a game fun." Chris Straka, Event Horizon's Creative Designer, would return to this theme in the designer's notes to *The Summoning*, where he also bemoans the fact that not many manuals are bothering with designer's note sections. The graphics vs. gameplay debate will crop up again and again, though perhaps more strikingly later on, as game development further migrates from the teenager's bedroom to the corporate cubicle.



*Veil of Darkness* is probably the best known of Event Horizon's games for SSI.

### *Veil of Darkness*

The last of Event Horizon's games based on *The Summoning* game engine is *Veil of Darkness*, published by SSI in 1993. This game is set in a vampire-infested valley in Romania, where an isolated village is threatened by a vampire lord named Kairn. The character arrives in the valley by crashing his cargo plane there, coinciding nicely with a local prophecy. Naturally, the player can't escape the valley until he's tracked down Kairn and put a stop to the menace.

Although the game is not terribly well known today, it was noted at the time for the nice twists in the plotline and a cast of intriguing characters. The atmosphere is quite dark and appropriate for the Gothic vampire theme and provides wonderful tension. There's even a splash of romance. However, it's really more of an adventure game than a CRPG (there are plenty of fights but no class or level system).

### *Hillsfar*

SSI's *Hillsfar*, developed by Westwood Associates and published in 1989, represents a much different approach to action CRPGs than we see in *Heroes of the Lance*. It's a much closer cousin to the "Gold Box" games, and it's even possible to import characters from *Pool of Radiance* or *Curse of the Azure Bonds*, though only the latter accepts an exported *Hillsfar* character. The game is also set in the *Forgotten Realms* campaign setting and shares most of its rules and conventions.

However, *Hillsfar* departs from the "Gold Box" formula in major ways. For one thing, the player is allowed to create and control only one character, but the differences don't stop there. The most striking alteration is a number of minigames, such as a side-scrolling horse riding game in which the player must buck the joystick to jump over obstacles (or lower it to duck). The gameplay here is reminiscent of the 1983 arcade classic *Moon Patrol*. Other minigames include an archery range, a lock tumbler puzzle, timed mazes, and, of course, an arena. Each of these minigames has its own screen mode and control scheme.

The screen changes when the character is traveling in *Hillsfar*. At the top left is the familiar 3D view of the "Gold Box" games, but on the right is a large, top-down view of the town. The status window lists character's stats and condition, as well as his supply of "knock rings," which are used to open locks. At the lower left is the current time, which is important to know since the various shops and other buildings are available only during certain hours. There are also plenty of quests for players who join one of the town's various guilds.



Hillsfar is a hodgepodge of minigames, but this town exploration screen is well done. The arrow on the map corresponds directly to the first-person view on the left, making navigation remarkably easy.

Critical reactions to the game were rather mixed, with some critics praising the same elements that others condemned. For instance, some reviewers felt that the minigames are fun and offer much-needed variety, whereas others found them distracting and repetitive. Regardless, there is little question that some areas needed improvement, such as the arena combat sequence that does not let mage or clerics cast spells during the fight. Many felt that the horse riding sequence was overdone—fun once or twice, perhaps, but certainly not called for each time the character needed to travel overland. Some critics complained about the lack of story arcs or even an ultimate quest. Instead, the player merely performs a few quests for the chosen guild (fighter, cleric, thief, and mage). Nevertheless, the game certainly fared better than *Heroes of the Lance*. It was ported to the NES in 1991 by Pony Canyon. Unfortunately, the port is lackluster and toned down compared to the original. For instance, players entering the tavern are offered pink lemonade and root beer instead of the ale or wine.

### *Unlimited Adventures: The “Gold Box” Construction Set*

The final SSI product I want to mention in this chapter is *Unlimited Adventures*, developed by MicroMagic and published in 1993 for Macintosh and DOS. For the first time, “Gold Box” fans were able to easily construct their own CRPGs, using SSI’s celebrated if somewhat dated engine. *Unlimited Adventures* also included a miniadventure called *The Heirs to Skull Crag*, which

users were also encouraged to modify (and its poor design practically begged for it). Along with *The Heirs to Skull Crag*, SSI tossed in many of its “Gold Box” assets; the box mentions 112 monsters and 200 “classic art images” from the Gold Box series. However, *Unlimited Adventures* is limited to a certain extent—users cannot, for instance, modify the walls, combat backdrops, and title screens of their games. Nevertheless, the program became quite popular; and later on, fan communities took it upon themselves to hack the code, removing these limitations and introducing many new features.

You might be surprised to learn that a strong community still thrives around this product, and dozens of new modules are released each year on the web.<sup>6</sup> There is also *Dungeon Craft*, a GNU-licensed version that emulates *Unlimited Adventures* but adds many innovations. The program is freely available for download from the Sourceforge website.<sup>7</sup> As of this writing, this project is actively maintained with regular updates.

It’s easy to compare SSI’s *Unlimited Adventures* with Electronic Arts’ *The Bard’s Tale Construction Set* and *Age of Adventure*, which we discussed in previous chapters. These programs are focused on user-generated content, the idea being that some gamers enjoy designing games as much (if not more) than playing them. We can compare these construction kits to the Dungeon Master’s role in tabletop role-playing games. Although some Dungeon Masters simply purchase official campaign modules and stick closely to them during gameplay, others take a more creative approach, creating their own scenarios, settings, and sometimes even their own role-playing systems. Of course, the quality of these do-it-yourself games varies widely, but the point I want to make here is that at least some players of both tabletop RPGs and CRPGs share a desire not only to play, but also to design their own scenarios. As the CRPG evolves, we’ll see an increasing trend toward such user-generated content, particularly when we discuss BioWare’s *Neverwinter Nights*, which, unlike *Unlimited Adventures* and *The Bard’s Tale Construction Set*, could at last take full advantage of the Internet to help distribute modules and assets.

We’ll return to SSI in the next chapter, when we discuss the *Eye of the Beholder* games. For now, though, let’s turn to some of the other big games of the late 1980s and see what Origin and New World were up to during the Golden Age.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://frua.rosedragon.org/index.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://uaf.sourceforge.net/index.html>.

## Origin and *Ultima* in the Golden Age

When last we spoke of Origin's *Ultima* series, we saw how Richard Garriott was sailing the flagship CRPG series into uncharted waters—most notably into the turbulent waters of morality and ethics. Critics praised these efforts as a move towards more substantial role-playing, that is, moving the genre past its simplistic "hack 'n slash" origins. *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* introduced a bold new dynamic: a quest for spiritual fulfillment rather than yet another dungeon romp.

*Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny*, published in 1988, takes this theme in a new direction. What happens when morality and correct living are not personal choices, but requirements enforced by law? The storyline is set after the action in *Quest of the Avatar*. Lord British, benevolent protector of the land, has disappeared into the Underworld, and a fundamentalist despot named Blackthorn has taken the throne. Blackthorn is terrorizing the people by enforcing a draconian moral code based on the eight virtues of the previous game (e.g., "Thou shalt donate half of thy income to charity, or thou shalt have no income.") Although most of the core elements are identical to the earlier game, the writing is more polished and professional, and while there are fewer nonplayer characters, interaction with them is more substantial. Players need to be very careful to write down any potential keywords that might trigger a crucial response from a nonplayer character. Making matters even more diffi-



*Warriors of Destiny* was the final *Ultima* game to be developed on the venerable old Apple II platform. It was the end of an era.

cult is a running clock that determines whether it's night or day on Britannia. Many events can only take place if the Avatar is in the right place at the right time, a fact that makes a hint book nearly indispensable.

There are some other important differences between the two games. The number of classes has been reduced from eight to three (fighter, bard, and mage). This limitation is particularly felt when importing characters from the previous game; the specialized classes lose their magical abilities. The magic system has also been revamped a bit; now reagents can be purchased in stores, and the spell system is now structured around eight circles, and strings of Latinate syllables. Like FTL's *Dungeon Master* (1987), players can now fine-tune their spells by combining different sequences of magical incantations. The combat system is also more realistic and complex and takes the possibility of friendly fire into consideration. All of the classes can now wear whatever armor and wield whatever weapon they wish, provided they have the requisite strength score.

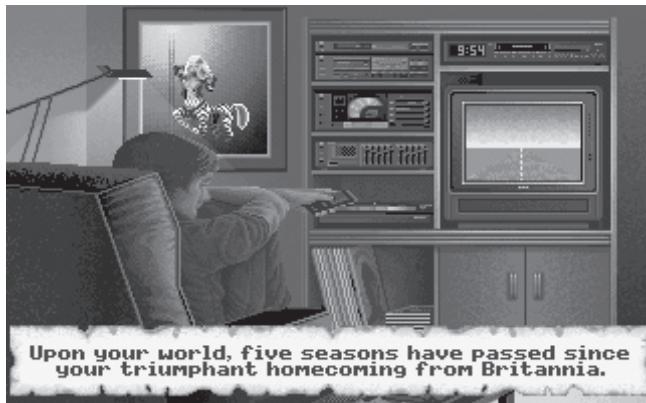
*Warriors of Destiny* also marks a few important turning points—it's the last of the series to originate on the Apple II and the last game for which Garriott did most of the coding. It was also during this time that the series began thriving in Japan. *Ultima II* had been available in Japan since the early 1980s, but in an English-only form. Nevertheless, it had inspired several clones, including the famous *Dragon Quest*. One particularly brazen clone-maker approached Origin for the rights to translate *Ultima IV* into Japanese, but their earlier unauthorized clone, *Xanadu*, was such a blatant copyright infringer that Garriott refused, receiving a large settlement instead.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, the *Ultima Trilogy* and *Ultima IV* finally made it to Japan, where they sold exceedingly well and won major awards. More importantly, these games exerted an incalculable influence on the Japanese console RPG, an influence that is still easily perceived in modern games. We'll have more to say on this topic when we discuss Japanese console RPGs.

## *The False Prophet*

*Ultima VI: The False Prophet* was released in 1990 for MS-DOS and marked the end of the "Age of Enlightenment" trilogy begun with *Quest of the Avatar*. By 1990, the Apple II was really showing its age, and Origin was convinced that the Apple IIgs didn't have enough users to warrant their attention. *The False Prophet* took advantage of the PC's new VGA cards, which Origin cor-

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<sup>8</sup> See Shay Addam's *The Official Book of Ultima* (ISBN 0-87455-228-1).



*The False Prophet* begins with a lengthy and well-executed animated introductory sequence.

rectly determined would mark the beginning of the end for competing platforms. The new game would have 2,048 different tiles in 256 colors. Garriott even went a step further and added support for the new Roland and AdLib sound cards, one of the first major developers to do so.

However, though the game features enhanced graphics compared to its predecessors, in some ways it's actually more limited—the dungeons, for instance, are rendered entirely in 2D, a step back from the 2D/3D switching that occurs in earlier games. The lack of 3D dungeons is primarily a concession forced by the dramatically stepped-up physics of the gameworld. Chairs and other objects have weight and size and can be moved around, and walls and doors have hit points and can be destroyed. A player so inclined can even grind wheat into flour and bake bread! However, the inclusion of 3D dungeons would have meant implementing two routines for functional objects such as torches, which would of course behave differently depending on the perspective. In any case, dropping the 3D mode did make the world feel more coherent. Contemporary players were impressed with the immense size of the world, which is always displayed on the screen along with the characters. The interface was also cleaned up, and the old alphabetical list of 26 commands is replaced by a streamlined menu of only ten icons. The reduction is due mostly to conflation; *jimmy*, *ignite*, and similar verbs are now *use*.

Interaction is enhanced with small portraits of the interlocutors, and keywords are marked in red for easy recognition. An abundance of cinematics also adds to the ambiance. The towns and villages are also better populated

and seem more realistic—in addition to the usual assortment of taverns and blacksmiths, there are also weavers and bakers plying their trades. Finally, random monsters are now mostly extinct, and there are sensible limits concerning when and where the party can be attacked. The most dangerous and exotic beasts are tucked away in the dungeons, not roaming the town a few feet from the pub.

The moral imperative in this game is based on racism and xenophobia—the player must learn about an alien culture and explore issues of cultural relativism. At first, the player only knows that a race of gargoyles has attacked Britannia, and it's up to the Avatar to stop them. However, eventually it's learned that the gargoyles aren't simply evil; they have their own problems and justifications. Instead of the brute force approach, the Avatar must learn about their culture, including their language. To my mind, it's a brilliant setup, and certainly stands out against the all-too-common black and white CRPGs in which the enemy is always clearly defined and unambiguously in need of a mace to the skull. However, some critics felt the story was unfocused and criticized the gameplay for being too heavily invested in menial side-quests, which one critic referred to as busywork.

Still, the game was a hit cherished by many fans, although the next *Ultima* game—the first in the “Age of Armageddon” games—tends to make the accomplishments of *The False Prophet* pale in comparison.



Here we see Lord British himself, noble ruler of Britannia. Note the row of intelligible icons and the straightforward “paper doll” inventory. Other aspects of the game are much more ambiguous.

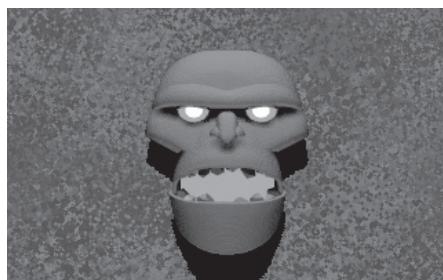
## *The Black Gate*

*Ultima VII: The Black Gate*, released in 1992, is, for many critics and gamers, the crowning achievement of the *Ultima* series. When we consider the many achievements and innovations represented by the earlier games, though, we might wonder what it would take to justify such a bold claim. After all, every *Ultima* we've discussed so far was touted as revolutionary by at least some critics, and even the worst of the lot is better than countless other CRPGs, then or now. Richard Garriott himself hails it as "the most masterfully executed of the *Ultima* series."<sup>9</sup>

But what could possibly make *The Black Gate* stand out so boldly against so many previous triumphs?

Many readers might assume that it must be the graphics, since they are what tend to get the most attention from modern critics and gamers. However, although *The Black Gate* features much more advanced graphics and interface than *The False Prophet*, it still relies on the familiar top-down perspective of its predecessors. This fact is even more surprising, perhaps, when we consider that Origin released the revolutionary *The Stygian Abyss* the same year, a first-person 3D game that inspired the makers of *Doom*.

Indeed, the most significant change to the interface is a switch to real-time gameplay, which drastically alters the way combat and exploration are handled. Attacking an enemy is as simple as entering combat mode and clicking with the mouse—or the player can opt to have the computer control everything. The Avatar's companions aren't under the player's direct control, but they can be assigned one of nine attack modes, such as "attack weakest" or "flank." The game can be controlled entirely by the mouse, which the manual



*The Black Gate* opens with this talking head mocking and taunting the player. The goal is to get the player personally invested in the outcome of the game.

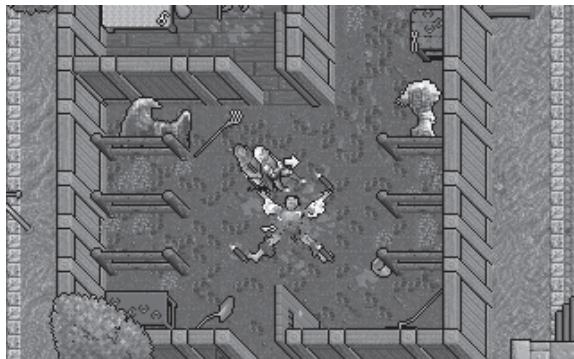
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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.gamespot.com/pc/rpg/tabularasa/news.html?sid=6143760>.

claims is “highly recommended by Lord British.” We might not think much of this issue today, but this was at a time when many PC owners didn’t even own mice, much less see them as a game device. Most players find it advisable, however, to have their finger near the “c” key, which instantly enters combat mode.

Still, the innovations to the interface and combat aren’t enough to explain the game’s enduring appeal. Far more important are the gripping plot, well-developed characters, and painstakingly-detailed environments. Critics still gush about the game’s unprecedented level of interactivity of the game-world. How many CRPGs do you know that will let you milk cows and change a baby’s diapers just for the heck of it? *The Black Gate* is an unforgettable experience to those who have taken 60+ hours required to complete it, and it will probably always enjoy a loyal and dedicated fan base.

*The Black Gate*’s plot is also quite sophisticated compared to most games of the era. As the game opens, the Avatar is taunted by a mysterious and infuriating being called the Guardian. Afterwards, the Avatar is whisked away to the land of Britannia, some 200 years after his previous visit. Enough time has gone by that he’s been mostly forgotten, his valiant deeds chalked up to myth. He arrives just after a gory, ritualistic murder that serves to introduce the plot and the new but certainly not improved Britannia, which has withered in his absence. A new Fellowship cult has arisen to give people something more concrete to believe in. The Fellowship claim to be a force for good, yet they hold that the Avatar’s eight virtues are irrelevant and standing in the way of progress. It’s obvious that something sinister is going on.



Here’s a shot of the opening scenes of the game, which are rife with blood and gore. Note the full screen view, free of obstructing menus or icons.

Perhaps more endearing than the plot are the characters, who are far better developed here than in almost any other CRPG. Instead of merely standing in one place for all eternity just to offer a thinly disguised hint or geographical tidbit, the characters are shown walking about, engaging in their daily activities—they even go to bed at night. Furthermore, the Avatar's nemesis, the Guardian, is always watching the player's progress and even occasionally mocks the player, especially when he does something less than virtuous. Most CRPGs pit the player against an evil nemesis, but that nemesis is generally merely a shallow pretext for hack'n slash gameplay. When the player finally confronts him, it's just another boss fight with little emotional investment. This is certainly not the case with the Guardian, who is with players every step of the way, antagonizing them in a thoroughly despicable way. It's hard not to take his affronts personally.

The game is often praised for its open-ended gameplay. There are very few guard rails in *The Black Gate*, a fact that can either thrill or intimidate inexperienced players. It's easy for players to end up wandering about the game without the faintest clue of what they're supposed to do. Obviously, this lack of clear direction wouldn't bother players raised on *Rogue* and other sandbox style games, but players more accustomed to linear "connect the dots" type games may find themselves quite disoriented. Though the Avatar certainly has an important role to play in the plot, *The Black Gate* takes a decidedly hands-off approach, letting the player make decisions that are typically reserved for developers.

Just to give you some idea of how intriguing the world of *The Black Gate* can be, I'll quote a bit from Oleg Roschin's detailed review of the game at *Mobygames*. At one point in the game, Roschin's party met up with a unicorn, who, as legend has it, communicates only with virgins. The first time around, Roschin's Avatar was, in fact, a virgin and admitted as much to the unicorn, who then spoke to him. On a later visit, however, Roschin's Avatar had slept with a harlot at Buccaneer's Den, and the Unicorn refused to utter a syllable. As usual, we see Garriott's subtlety: sure, you *can* do sinful things, but you won't always get away with it. Later on, Bethesda would capitalize on this high level of interactivity in its celebrated *Elder Scrolls* series.

No doubt, many modern gamers playing *The Black Gate* for the first time will be unimpressed with the jerky animation and glitches in the AI (particularly with path-finding). Nevertheless, a patient player will be rewarded with a rich and meaningful experience. Unfortunately, the original games exploited some memory routines that render them incompatible on modern Windows-based systems. Modern gamers can play *Ultima VII* using

Exult, a GPL-licensed program that attempts to recreate the game on modern operating systems, or emulate a legacy DOS environment with *DOSBox*<sup>10</sup>.

### *Serpent Isle*

Origin released an expansion for *The Black Gate* entitled *The Forge of Virtue* later in 1992, but it wasn't until 1993 that *Serpent Isle* appeared. Instead of calling this game *Ultima VIII*, Origin chose to label it as *Ultima VII: Part Two*. This odd naming convention is owed to Garriott's principle that no two *Ultima* games should share the same game engine.

*Serpent Isle* may have shared *The Black Gate*'s game engine, but it's much more linear and story-based than *The Black Gate*. The story begins 18 months after the first part and involves traveling to Serpent Isle to restore the balance destroyed there by the Guardian.

Apparently, the game was rushed through production by Origin's new owner, Electronic Arts, a popular claim lent weight by the game's many dead ends (players who find themselves in one had to restore to earlier saved games). Origin's struggle with Electronic Arts bears an uncanny resemblance to Garriott's earlier conflict with Sierra On-Line. That conflict also led to a lackluster entry in the series, *Ultima II*. In any case, Origin did release an expansion to the game called *Silver Seed* later that year.

In 1997 Electronic Arts released the *Ultima Collection* for DOS and Windows, which includes the first nine games (including a PC port of *Akallabeth*) and both expansions. Unfortunately, not all of the games run properly in Windows, but a helpful little tool named *DOSBox* can run them via emulation.

### *Worlds of Ultima*

Origin released two games based on the *Ultima VI* engine as part of a spin-off series named *Worlds of Ultima*, mostly as an effort to capitalize further on the engine. While these games have a suggested connection to the rest of the series and star the Avatar, they take place far from Britannia.

The first of these, *The Savage Empire* (1990), is set in Eodon, a time-lost land where dinosaurs roam—a place reminiscent of many a jungle adventure B-movie and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, complete with safari hats and hunting rifles. It's also more focused on dialog and puzzle solving than the main *Ultima* line and offers a much simpler spell system. Like Origin's other titles,

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<sup>10</sup> For more information about *Exult*, visit <http://exult.sourceforge.net/download.php>.



The *Worlds of Ultima* series recycles the *Ultima VI* engine but is much more story- and character-focused.

the documentation is extensive—with a full novelette to provide context for the action. The story has the Avatar saving the land from insectoid creatures named Myrmidex, a task that necessitates getting Eodon's 13 tribes to work together.

The next and final *Worlds of Ultima* game is *Martian Dreams*, released in 1991. This game is based on Jules Verne's classic "From the Earth to the Moon," an 1865 story in which members of a gun club blast off to the moon in a hollow shell shot from a giant cannon. In Origin's game, the shell was accidentally launched to Mars with several celebrities trapped inside; the player is part of a rescue operation. Like Paragon's *Space 1889* (a 1990 game we'll discuss in the next chapter), the physics are based on a "what if" scenario—what if the Victorian science writers had been correct about things such as the Martian canals and radium-powered mechanical men? Several famous historical personalities are among the cast of characters, including Mark Twain and Sigmund Freud—who psychoanalyzes players in the character creation process. As with the previous game, the emphasis here is on interaction and puzzle solving rather than combat.

Though the *Worlds of Ultima* series was touted by critics, Origin never completed *Arthurian Legends*, a planned third installment based on the tales of King Arthur.

### *Times of Lore*

In 1988, Origin published Chris Robert's *Times of Lore*, an action CRPG set in real-time with top-down perspective. The game was eventually ported to



*Times of Lore* is one of several action CRPGs that emerged in the late 1980s. Martin Galway's soundtrack is superb.

almost every capable platform, including the NES and the British ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC computers. In an interview published in the February 1990 issue of *Computer Gaming World*, Roberts admitted that the game was "affected by the video game market," particularly Nintendo's extremely popular NES game console and best-selling *The Legend of Zelda*. It's no doubt that the unparalleled success of the NES and *The Legend of Zelda* is partially, if not mostly, responsible for the surge of action-oriented CRPGs we find in the late 1980s. We'll return to this point in later on.

*Times of Lore* is a fantasy game in which the player controls one of three archetypal characters: a muscle-bound barbarian, a svelte valkyrie, or an armor-clad knight. High King Valwyn has gone missing, and the kingdom of Albareth has fallen into disorder. It's up to the player to seek out the king, find some artifacts, and restore the kingdom to peace and harmony.

Unfortunately, *Times of Lore* does not offer a leveling system, and with a single exception, the player's character is stuck with the same arms and armor. This is most decidedly an action adventure game, with more emphasis on hand-eye coordination than stats or character development. Indeed, the system even eschews hit points in favor of an image system: a candle at the bottom right of the screen burns high or low depending on the character's condition. The candle is restored either by resting, waiting, or quaffing potions. The game seems to have pleased most critics, who considered it a fine game for introducing newcomers to the CRPG. A brief but superb musical score by Martin Galway certainly didn't hurt.

## *Bad Blood*

Robert's next CRPG for Origin was *Bad Blood*, a game set in a postapocalyptic wasteland. It is based on the same game engine employed in *Times of Lore*, with mostly cosmetic changes. For instance, instead of a burning candle to show the character's condition, we see a green bottle with varying amounts of soda. The player's task is to prevent Lord Dominix from launching a genocidal war against mutants, which he believes are polluted with bad blood. The game has obvious parallels to the 1988 game *Wasteland*, a more famous postapocalyptic game we'll discuss later in this chapter.

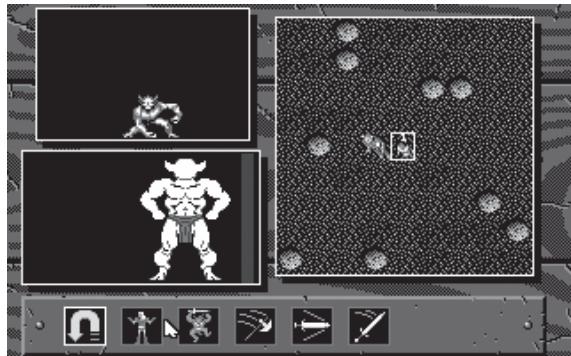
Critics complained about the game's repetitive gameplay but also about its violence and lack of ethics. One contemporary reviewer wrote, "*Bad Blood* encourages players to act in reprehensible ways," citing the abundance of murder, theft, and general mayhem required to win the game.<sup>11</sup> For instance, one effective way to restore lost hit points is to chow down on fresh hearts ripped still beating from "turkels," tenuous mutant turtles that really just want to be left alone. I find this criticism quite significant, especially since we are talking about Origin, a company apparently built on the principle that games should take ethics seriously. In any case, *Bad Blood* was certainly less successful than *Ultima* or some of Origin's other titles and seems all but forgotten today.

## *Knights of Legend*

One of Origin's lesser known masterpieces is Todd Mitchell Porter's *Knights of Legend* (1989), a turn-based CRPG with an extraordinarily detailed combat and character creation system. It seems to be an attempt to combine *Pool of Radiance* with the earlier *Ultima* games. This is particularly noticeable in the top-down perspective familiar to *Ultima* fans, but the turn-based tactical combat seen in *Pool of Radiance* and the earlier *The Wizard's Crown*. This game goes a step further than either, though, introducing stats for fatigue and foresight, which allows the character to anticipate the next attack. It also features a customizable icon for the characters, a convention we saw in *Pool of Radiance* but which extends the concept to allow players to actually draw their own icons if they so choose. There is a total of 33 character classes to choose from, far more than in the most CRPGs then and now. If you've ever wanted to play a Little Plainswoman or a winged Rock Ranger, this game will accommodate you.

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<sup>11</sup> See Charles Arda's review of the game in the Sep. 1990 issue of *Computer Gaming World*.



*Knights of Legend* offers extraordinarily detailed turn-based tactical combat.

Combat requires making far more tactical decisions than are required in most CRPGs. Like the *Phantasia* series, attacking characters can choose between different maneuvers—hack, thrust, and slash. However, again *Knights of Legend* extends the concept, offering special attacks for unarmed styles and ranged attacks. There is also a body part-specific wound system that allows players to target the most vulnerable regions of their enemies. If a character's foresight score is high enough, he or she may be able to select a suitable defensive strategy as well, such as ducking or jumping to avoid the blow. Foresight is also necessary for ranged attacks, since the archer will need to predict how the target will move during the round. Every action brings the character closer to fatigue, and it may become necessary to rest up between strikes, though how effective the respite will be depends on the character's condition. If characters can earn enough gold and adventure points to hire a weapons master, they can train and hone their skills with a particular weapon. Overall, it's a remarkably sophisticated and realistic system.

The magic system is no less complex, involving five or six syllables strung together to form a “word of power.” These syllables are organized into the categories race, stat, severity, range (+ duration), and subclass. Each time the magic-user casts a spell, he must consider the race he is targeting and the stat he wants to affect (strength, intelligence, and so on). This system enables the player to do some minute fine-tuning of each spell. One such spell is “VORY-ORWYRAMI,” which will “greatly decrease the intelligence of a skeleton at long range for minimal duration.” Such precision is simply staggering!

Critics also marveled at the game’s 24 quests, which are long and intensive. In short, there’s hardly anything about *Knights of Legend* that is done

halfway. Even the manual is over 145 pages long, with the bulk of it in small print. This is definitely a hardcore game on the opposite pole from Origin's *Times of Lore* game. Unfortunately, despite the game's overwhelming ambition and attention to detail, it was never followed up with the expansions promised in the promotional material.

## Golden-Age *Wizardry*

Let's turn back now to Sir-Tech's *Wizardry* series, which had been *Ultima*'s only serious rival during the Silver Age. Unfortunately for Sir-Tech, *Wizardry* had gotten rather stale since the glorious *Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord*, and the fifth game, *Heart of the Maelstrom* (1988), seemed like just another attempt to squeeze a few more drops of blood from a well-worn engine. Although the box boasted of new mazes, abilities, spells, monster encounters, and combat system, the screenshots certainly didn't look new. The dungeon corridors were still depicted in monochrome wireframe. Furthermore, the larger and more realistic mazes were even more difficult to map than before; no longer did they fit neatly on 20 by 20 grids. "Such a significant change in *Wizardry*'s mapping design is especially curious at a time when many maze games are trying to de-emphasize paper and pencil mapping," wrote one contemporary.<sup>12</sup> Although many critics were forgiving and still recommended the game, it is rarely discussed today beyond hardcore fans of the series. It's notable for being the first game in the series designed by D. W. Bradley; Robert Woodhead and Andrew Greenberg had since moved on to other projects.

## *Bane of the Cosmic Forge*

The *Wizardry* series finally got an overhaul in 1990 with the publication of the sixth game, *Bane of the Cosmic Forge*. The game set off a great new trilogy by David W. Bradley and introduced an enigmatic character called the Dark Savant. The new engine sported much better graphics and a sleek, mouse-driven interface designed for the EGA era. Furthermore, it was some four times larger than any previous *Wizardry* game and was meant as a decisive break from the previous games. For instance, it's one of the few games in the series that doesn't allow players to import characters from a prequel.

Both the combat and character development systems have been en-

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<sup>12</sup> See Dennis Owens' review of the game in the Feb. 1989 issue of *Computer Gaming World*.



*Bane of the Cosmic Forge* finally revamped the game engine, with animated graphics and a wealth of new combat and character options.

hanced. The characters can now be one of 11 different races and 14 professions, each with options for prestige classes. Characters also learn dozens of skills, divided into three main categories (Weaponry, Physical, Academic) and subdivided into Sword, Oratory, Mythology, and many others. Characters also gradually accrue bonuses for using the same weapon type. Combat is similarly complex; there are now eight different styles of attack, each with pros and cons. The manual is 130 pages, and it's well advised for anyone serious about the game to read it cover to cover.

*Bane of the Cosmic Forge's* storyline concerns a magical pen whose scribbled words become reality—a conceit similar to the Cyan's famous *Myst* adventure game. Bradley's game also contains more puzzles than most CRPGs and is decidedly more focused on story and plot than the previous *Wizardry* games. The manual emphasizes the role-playing aspect of the game: "just like professional actors and actresses, you pretend to be a character, acting and reacting to situations as he or she would." Although the box's claim that the game would "make all other attempts obsolete" was not borne out by the gameplay, it's still an excellent game worthy of the Golden Age.

### *Crusaders of the Dark Savant*

The seventh *Wizardry* game, *Crusaders of the Dark Savant*, debuted in 1992 for DOS. It finally brought the series up to 256-color VGA graphics and is generally considered one of the best entries in the classic series.



The seventh *Wizardry* game finally made the leap to 256-color VGA.

Taking a page from the *Ultima* and *Might and Magic* series, *Crusaders of the Dark Savant* is a blend of fantasy and sci-fi. The powerful pen introduced in the last game has been captured by a cyborg named Aletheides. The disappearance of the pen has revealed the secret it was guarding—the lost planet of Guardia. Somewhere on Guardia is the secret to incredible power, and several groups (including the player's party and the Dark Savant) set out to find it. This idea of competing with other groups for the same prize is quite innovative and opens up several new gameplay possibilities—should players join one of these other groups or slaughter them? Another nice development was four multiple beginnings, a twist on the multiple endings introduced in the prequel.

Like its predecessors, *Crusaders of the Dark Savant* is a difficult, complicated game that is quite intimidating to beginners, even if it does feature automapping and a mouse-driven interface. The combat engine even factors in the characters' mental and physical fatigue, which steadily grows during the many protracted battles. Picking locks is likewise no easy task but requires quick reflexes (players must hit the button at just the right moment as the tumblers roll). Nevertheless, *Crusaders of the Dark Savant* was praised by critics and was not eclipsed until the release of *Wizardry 8* in 2001.

## New World Computing in the Golden Age

When last we spoke of New World Computing's *Might and Magic* series, Jon Van Caneghem had just released his 1986 *Book I: The Secret of the Inner Sanctum*, an ambitious labor of love and a very promising debut for the new series.

Several high-quality games indeed followed, each with technical and creative innovations to the interface and game engine.

## *Gates to Another World*

In 1988, New World followed up with *Gates to Another World*. Although the engine was left mostly intact, the graphics were updated for the PC's EGA standard, and the already vast gameworld was expanded. The biggest changes were the addition of automapping, two new character classes, more spells, and the ability to add two nonplayer characters called hirelings to the party. Again, we see Van Caneghem's humor: the party can add such distinguished figures as "Mr. Wizard" to its ranks. Furthermore, most of these mercenaries could only be added after the party rescues them or completes a quest.

Another change is the introduction of a skills system. In addition to the usual sorts of skills associated with the various professions (e.g., thieves can pick locks, fighters can wield swords), characters can learn two of fifteen secondary skills. Most of these boost a statistic; for instance, Gambler increases luck, and Gladiator boosts might. Other skills are more interesting. For instance, Cartographer enables the game's automapping tool, and Pathfinder allows the party to pass through a forested area as long as two different members have it as part of their skill set.

Perhaps the most unusual feature of the game is an algorithmic process for leveling up and enchanting weapons. Most games have a cap on how many levels the characters can reach, but *Gates to Another World* let the inflation run rampant, countering high-level characters with increasingly difficult random encounters. The result was stat inflation. For instance, later in the game players might find themselves in a battle with 255 Time Lords—though hopefully the character's Flaming Sword +57 would be enough to dispatch them. This inflation problem has plagued many CRPGs as well as tabletop RPGs; eventually, the designers simply run out of names and resort to tacking on numbers to distinguish items.

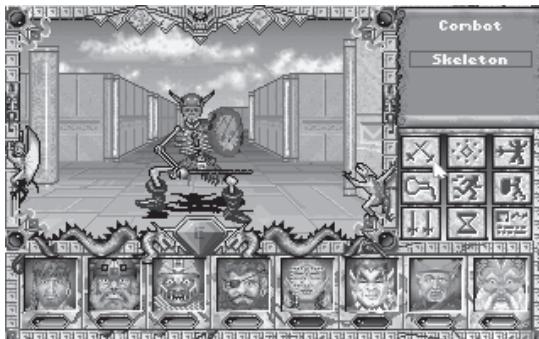
Like its predecessor, *Gates to Another World* is a flexible game that offers players considerable freedom to move about the game world (this time, CRON). Eventually, though, players learn that Sheltem, the villain from the first game, is set to destroy CRON by forcing it into the sun. Beating the game requires not only thoroughly traversing CRON, but also traveling through four elemental planes and even through time. There are plenty of surprises in store for the player, including devices that change the characters' genders! Like SSI's earlier *Phantasie* games, the characters age and die soon after reach-

ing 75, though there are places in the game to restore their youth. The game was ported to all major platforms of the day, including the Sega Genesis and SNES game consoles.

An interesting bit of history about this game occurs in the pages of *Computer Gaming World*. Scorpia, the magazine's chief contributor of adventure and CRPG reviews, had written a rather lukewarm review of the game, bemoaning the lack of innovation and emphasis on combat. Van Caneghem was outraged by the review and wrote a lengthy response, which the magazine published in its letters column. There, Caneghem took the critic to task for a number of reasons, but perhaps the most humorous is a squabble over the game's surprise ending. Unlike most CRPGs then and now, the endgame did not consist of a difficult battle with an overpowering foe (or boss), but rather involved a cryptogram. Players had precisely fifteen minutes to complete the puzzle. Scorpia found the whole affair rather pointless and disappointing, whereas Caneghem held it up as a prime example of originality. In any event, Caneghem had his revenge in the next game, where he introduced the "Scorpia monster" as one of the many vile foes to be vanquished by the heroes.

### *Isles of Terra*

*Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra* was released in 1991 and was the first game in the series to utilize the PC's new VGA graphic card and soundcards. It's also the first *Might and Magic* to support the mouse. These were significant improvements, of course, but they're not what makes *Isles of Terra* stand out in a sea of other high-quality releases.



*Isles of Terra* compensates for the first-person perspective by showing the characters' portraits along the bottom of the screen. This feature reminds players that they're in charge of a large party, not just a lone hero.

Perhaps the most substantial innovations are the on-screen character portraits that change to reflect the status and mood of each character. One of the biggest problems with first-person perspective is that players cannot see their characters' facial expressions—which, as anyone who has ever watched a film knows, play a very important role in helping audiences identify emotionally with the characters. Now the player could look down to see if his characters were happy, sad, asleep, crazed, or stoned (that is, turned to stone). However, some gamers feel that first-person is inherently more immersive than third, even with this limitation. The beauty of New World's system is that players can have it both ways: first-person on top, and third-person on bottom. New World would use this system throughout the rest of the series.

Another visual cue is the characters' "life stones." The life stones simplify the traditional hit point system with a color code—green for good, yellow for not so good, and red for critical. Monster labels used the same system. Other visual cues include little gargoyles on the border of the first-person window. One of them will signal with his arm when the party passes by a secret door, provided that one of the party members has the skill Detect Secret Passages. The game also makes excellent use of sound effects, with different sounds for each type of weapon.

Other enhancements include two new classes (druid and ranger), a high-quality automapper, ranged combat, a more liberal save-game scheme, and a checklist of incomplete quests. A last nod to novices is a button that, when pressed, instantly transports the party back to an inn. However, this panic button has a cost—each character loses a level of experience. In short, *Isles of Terra* is an impressive and substantial sequel that secured the *Might and Magic* franchise a place in a rather crowded market.

## *World of Xeen*

With the fourth game, *Clouds of Xeen* (1992), New World quietly dropped support for other platforms and focused solely on MS-DOS (though a special 1994 combo called *World of Xeen* was ported to Macintosh). *Clouds of Xeen* and *Darkside of Xeen* (1993) are really one large quest broken into two chunks—the ultimate goal is the destruction of Sheltem. Indeed, both games can be combined into a single game called *World of Xeen*, which grants access to areas unavailable in either standalone game (adding up to about one fourth the size of the game). Both games offer only slight enhancements to the core engine used in *Isles of Terra*, but New World made good use of the new CD-ROM storage medium by adding quality soundtracks.



*World of Xeen* took the gameplay pioneered in the previous game and expanded it to colossal proportions. It's still highly enjoyable today.

*Clouds of Xeen*'s story has the party venturing into the netherworld to put down the tyrannical Lord Xeen, a demon who has been impersonating King Burlock's long-lost brother. The demon is wrecking havoc, and the party is summoned by Crodo, the king's advisor, to set matters aright. Doing so entails quite a bit of slaughter over a gargantuan world, or, to be more precise, multiple worlds. Like the previous *Might and Magic* games, *Clouds of Xeen* features dozens of optional side-quests in addition to the big mission; indeed, New World was a pioneer in this area. Of course, the significance of miniquests is that players feel they have more freedom and flexibility, but it also increases a game's replay value, since players may opt to complete different miniquests on the second play. *Clouds of Xeen* also features two initial play modes, Adventurer and Warrior. This choice will affect the intensity of the combat and is a nice concession to novice gamers.

The next game, *Darkside of Xeen*, again features the same gameplay and mechanics. This time, the story has the characters traveling to another planet to revive the mysterious Corak and defeat the tyrannical Sheltem, an intergalactic despot.

While *Clouds of Xeen* and *Darkside of Xeen* are worthwhile games, it's when the two are combined to form *World of Xeen* that they really seem impressive. This giant adventure was certainly one of the most epic in scope yet seen in the genre, even in modern games. Unfortunately, developers have seemed reluctant to follow the example, preferring instead to release full-blown sequels or expansion packs.

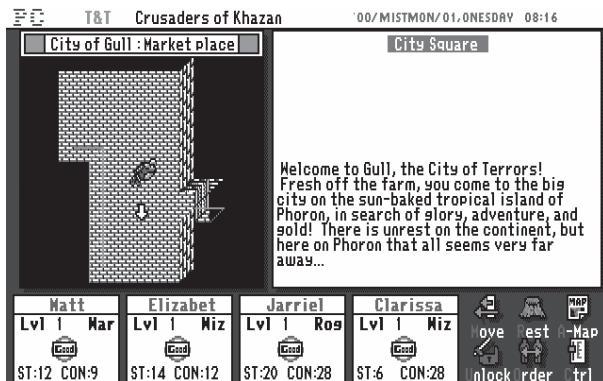
Perhaps the rarest *Might and Magic* game is *Swords of Xeen*, a fan-made game that was included as part of *Might and Magic Trilogy*, a 1995 compilation of *Isles of Terra*, *Clouds of Xeen*, and *Darkside of Xeen*. *Swords of Xeen* is based on the same game engine as the latter two *Xeen* games and picks up after the party has defeated Lord Xeen. The party must enter the new world of Havec and fight hordes of new creatures. The company that designed the game, Catware, went on in 1999 to create *Shattered Light*, an isometric Windows CRPG that includes a construction kit. It was published by Simon & Schuster Interactive.

In 1996, New World Computing was bought by 3DO and continued to publish new *Might and Magic* CRPGs (of steeply varying quality) as late as 2002. However, in 2003 the rights passed to Ubisoft. We'll discuss these games in Chapter 10.

## *Tunnels & Trolls*

New World Computing is better known for its *Might and Magic* and *Heroes of Might and Magic* turn-based strategy games than any of its other products, though it did experiment with other franchises during the Golden Age. One of the more interesting of these side projects is Neal Hallford's *Tunnels & Trolls: Crusaders of Khazan*, a 1990 publication based on Ken St. Andre's popular tabletop fantasy RPG, which presented respectable competition to TSR's role-playing games during the early 1980s. Although few people seem to remember the computer version, it is still being published by Flying Buffalo, makers of the tabletop game.

*Crusaders of Khazan* allows players to control up to four characters in a party. Players can either roll their own or use pregenerated characters; the party can be modified later, substituting pregenerated for personalized characters and vice versa. Character creation is a fairly conventional affair, with four races—human, elf, dwarf, and “hobb,” a diminutive and dexterous race that sounds suspiciously like Tolkien's hobbit. The stats are intelligence, luck, constitution, dexterity, charisma, speed, and strength, though here strength serves as a prime requisite for warriors and wizards. In the case of wizards, strength determines the potency of spells, whereas with warriors it determines the amount of physical damage they cause with weapons. The three classes are warrior, wizard, and rogue. Of the three, the rogue is the most flexible, having the ability to wield all weapons, learn spells, and, of course, pick locks and disarm traps. The final stage in character creation is selecting a portrait; there are two for each class and sex.



*Crusaders of Khazan* has some nice features but suffers from poor graphics and a utilitarian interface.

The combat system is similar to the “Gold Box” engine. It’s turn-based and presented in top-down perspective. Initiative (who strikes first) is determined by the speed score. One nice innovation here is the push command, which allows a warrior of great strength to attempt to hurl an opponent into water or other hostile squares, causing damage. The magic system also bears mention, if for no other reason than the hilarious names for spells offered in the manual, such as “Oh Go Away!”, “Take That You Fiend!”, and “Poor Baby.” This is the kind of humor and directness that runs through this unpretentious game. The magic system is also boosted by the option to pump more power into basic spells, strengthening them or making them last longer. Gameplay occurs mostly in top-down perspective, with two different screens for exploration and combat.

*Crusaders of Khazan* also has other desirable features, such as the ability to purchase mounts to reduce travel time, a good automapper, loads of side-quests, and rather polished prose in the manual and in-game texts. All in all, it’s a quality game for both novices and advanced CRPG fans, and one wonders why it has failed to attract much attention. Some critics complain about the cumbersome interface and lackluster graphics, but other games with similar problems have been more successful. My guess is that it simply got lost in the shuffle; there were many outstanding games on the shelf in 1990, and perhaps New World wanted to focus on their *Might and Magic* franchise. Anyone wanting to play the game should purchase the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of *Tunnels & Trolls* from Flying Buffalo, which includes the game and documentation on a CD-ROM.

## *Planet's Edge*

In 1991, New World Computing published another game designed by Neal Hallford, this time a sci-fi CRPG named *Planet's Edge*, a hybrid game similar to the *Starflight* and *Sentinel Worlds* games. The game is usually described as a “space opera,” and, given its larger-than-life characters and an epic-sized plot, the epithet seems warranted. Although mostly overlooked by modern CRPG fans, the game is noteworthy in several respects and, like *Crusaders of Khazan*, deserves more attention than it has received.

The plot is essentially a find-the-object type, though instead of a sword or orb, the planet Earth itself has gone missing—or, to be more precise, its mass has disappeared, leaving behind little more than the orbiting moon (one wonders how the moon could sustain an orbit). The player controls a group of four pregenerated characters who must figure out how to restore the planet and save humanity.

The game boasts over 500 planets to explore, with plenty of cryptograms, logic games, and inventory-based puzzles in place to challenge all but the most resourceful players. Combat is in real-time and shown in top-down perspective, reminiscent of the combat mode seen in *Star Control*. As with most other New World games, there are many optional side-quests, though this time they are more reminiscent of *Star Trek* episodes than of *Conan* or *Camelot* stories.

Perhaps the most intriguing innovation in the game is that players must build their own space ships, weapons, armor, and hand weapons using raw materials, which are acquired either by mining or trading with aliens. There are dozens of these elements, which range from humble organics and inert gases to hybrid solids and alien isotopes. The elements are ranked according to their rarity; naturally, the rarer elements are more valuable and useful.

Another innovation is the ability to clone fallen crewmen. Although the game's four characters are pregenerated with their own stats and skills, players can modify them during the cloning process, reshuffling them as they see fit. In any case, characters have four attributes (body, intelligence, agility, and luck) and three basic skills (the number of secondary skills they can learn depends on their intelligence score). The sixteen skills are what one might expect from a game of this type, such as astrogation, which allows one to pilot a ship, and first aid.

Unfortunately, the game is lacking a coherent leveling system, though the strength of the party does increase as it harvests raw materials and builds more powerful weapons and equipment. Some critics complained that the

game's role-playing elements were too meager and objected to the inability to create new characters from scratch. Others saw these limitations as necessary in order to create a more coherent plot and dramatic structure. Critics also complained about some rather infuriating bugs and the abundance of typographical and grammatical errors in the game text. In short, this game had great promise, but its lack of polish and a good leveling system may account for its obscurity today.

## Interplay in the Golden Age: *Wasteland* and *Lord of the Rings*

By this point, it should be obvious that during 1988 some of the industry's boldest and brightest developers wooed gamers with truly impressive and ambitious CRPGs. SSI was certainly at its peak, and Origin was rolling out classic after classic. New World Computing wasn't resting on its laurels, either. Interplay was up against some pretty serious competition, but their 1988 release of *The Bard's Tale III* had no problem finding buyers. In this chapter, however, we should discuss two other important Interplay games of 1988: *Wasteland* and *J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Vol. I*.

### *Wasteland*

*Fallout*, probably the most famous of all postapocalyptic CRPGs, can trace its roots back to Interplay's *Wasteland*, released for the C-64, MS-DOS, and Apple II, and published by Electronic Arts. *Wasteland* is set in the devastating aftermath of World War III. Players start out with a party of four Desert Rangers, though up to three more characters can be recruited later on. However, these additional members cannot be controlled directly and have their own goals that play an influential role in how the game unfolds. Two of the developers, Ken St. Andre and Michael Stackpole, had designed their own tabletop role-playing games (*Tunnels & Trolls* and *Mercenaries, Spies, and Private Eyes*, respectively), and many of their sharply innovative ideas are found in *Wasteland*.

As in SSI's *The Wizard's Crown*, character development was based not only on stats but also on skills—27 of them, to be precise. These abilities range from combat skills to sleight-of-hand and metallurgy. Obviously, sensible players will want to ensure that their party has a diverse array of talents, since there's no telling what they'll be up against—though the game is flexible



*Wasteland* is a true masterpiece of the golden age. It inspired the later *Fallout* series.

enough to let players overcome obstacles in a variety of ways, such as picking a lock versus climbing a gate. Likewise, the game has several situations in which an individual character must go it alone, thus further helping players form coherent identities for their party. This terrific role-playing system compliments the game's story and ambiance.

*Wasteland*'s game engine can be described as a blend of *The Bard's Tale* (for combat and character info screens) and top-down games like *Ultima* (for travel and exploration). It's a nice setup that works well, even if it doesn't allow players quite the tactical combat possibilities of *Pool of Radiance* or *The Wizard's Crown*. At any rate, the appeal of *Wasteland* stems more from its fascinating gameworld and intricate character development than from combat stratagems.

Like *Pool of Radiance* and several other games of the era, much of the context for the action is provided in a printed manual with numbered paragraphs. The game refers the player to these passages at pivotal moments. The manual warns against reading ahead, but notes that once the game is finished "you can kick back in your best lounge chair under a shady cactus and read the rest of the fictional vignettes." Indeed, players who did either found some funny paragraphs designed to catch cheaters, including the first one. After several torrid descriptions of an impending sex scene, a would-be seductress proclaims, "Stop reading paragraphs you're not supposed to read, creeps. Next time I'm going to demand they put me in a Bard's Tale game, this Wasteland duty is dangerous." This is a good example of the wit and charm that characterize the manual and the game itself. Needless to say, the manual also serves

as a form of copy protection, since making photocopies would add greatly to the costs of illegal distribution.

*Wasteland* remains the favorite CRPG of many gamers who played in back in the late 1980s, and for good reason—it's a captivating and highly innovative game that deserves its place beside *The Bard's Tale*. It's a testament to the game's enduring legacy that the best-selling *Fallout*, released in 1997, is in many ways little more than a graphical revamp of the older engine.

Electronic Arts released an alleged sequel to the game called *Fountain of Dreams* in 1990, but none of *Wasteland*'s developers were involved. The publisher made an uncharacteristic decision to downplay the sequel aspect as much as possible, and the game (which, by all accounts, is a lemon) made very little impression on the market and warrants no more than passing mention here. There's also a game named *Escape from Hell* based on the engine, also released in 1990 by Electronic Arts. This satirical game was designed by Richard Seaborne and Alan Murphy and is one of the few attempts at parody in what is often a highly pretentious genre.

## Dragon Wars

While Interplay was making the third *Bard's Tale* game, one of the developers, Bill Heineman,<sup>13</sup> began thinking of some improvements he'd like to see made to the engine. However, since Interplay felt that their relationship with publisher Electronic Arts was wearing thin, they elected to keep these innovations for a new game that they would publish themselves. That project became *Dragon Wars*, released by Interplay in 1989.

*Dragon Wars* bears a close resemblance to *Bard's Tale*, but there are some important differences. From a gameplay perspective, the most significant changes are in character creation and development. Instead of generating characters based on random numbers, *Dragon Wars* allots the player 50 character points to distribute among stats and skills. Many of the skills are combat-related, such as fist-fighting and weapon skills, which allow characters to specialize with a weapon type. Others are useful for thieving, such as pickpocket and lockpick. There are also several lore skills that provide the party with relevant information in each of these subjects: caves, forests, the arcane, mountains, and towns. Finally, there are movement-based skills such as swimming and climbing. Thankfully, not every character needs every skill; a large part of the game's challenge is constructing a well-balanced party. Per-

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<sup>13</sup> In 2003, Bill Heineman became Rebecca Ann Heineman, a transgendered woman.



Although *Dragon Wars* resembles *The Bard's Tale*, it's actually far more complex.

haps to make things easier, the player can only create four party members, though three others can be recruited later on. "Character creation is an art," states the manual. "You'll have to experiment if you want to arrive at the 'perfect' design."

Another big change in *Dragon Wars* concerns leveling up. Although characters gain new levels, doing so grants no automatic benefit to stats or skills. Instead, players receive two character points to distribute as they see fit. This system forces players to think long-term and to make frequent decisions about how to best benefit their party. Although most skills only require one character point to be effective, others require more. Combat is also more complicated here than in *The Bard's Tale*. In addition to hit points, each character has a measure of stun points. Each time the character is hit in battle, he or she loses a number of hit points but also twice that number in stun points. When characters run out of stun points, they lose consciousness, though they will recover eventually—hopefully well after their enemies have moved on to tougher marks. Another nice touch here is a quick fighting mode that expedites less pressing encounters, though the regular fight mode gives more options and finer control over the battle.

The setting of *Dragon Wars* is eerily familiar to those with good memories of the Cold War era. The young world of Oceana is a collection of large islands, each with its own city-state and captive dragon. These dragons help maintain the balance of power by threatening mutually assured destruction. The characters are recent, and, as it turns out, quite naïve immigrants to the fabled island of Dilmun, the world's oldest empire and finest culture. Unfortunately for the party, Dilmun isn't quite the land of opportunity they hoped it'd be. Indeed, they are stripped naked and tossed into the slum city of Pur-

gatory. Apparently, Dilmun's power-mad ruler, Namtar (alias "Beat from the Pit"), is bent on uniting the city-states of Oceana into a new world order under his rule. To that end, Namtar has declared all magic illegal and is confiscating everything in sight that might assist him in his quest to conquer the world. Naturally, it's up to the party to escape Purgatory and knock Namtar from his throne—preferably before he's unloosed his dragon and put doomsday on the calendar.

Like *Wasteland*, *Dragon Wars* relies on a printed manual with numbered paragraphs to provide context and notes during gameplay. As usual in these cases, the manual warns against reading the entries out of order, though with a bit of humor: "Ultimately, you put down your hard earned cash for this game, and you can of course do what you damn well please with the paragraphs. However, should you use the paragraphs as a free 'cheat book,' beware the wrath of Namtar." It also warns that some paragraphs are "pure ya-ya" and that "acting on ill-gotten information can prove hazardous to your health." At any rate, a quick glance through the paragraphs reveals quite a few allusions to the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a rich bit of ancient mythology seldom explored in CRPGs.

All in all, *Dragon Wars* is a rich game with plenty to offer fans of *The Bard's Tale*, but Interplay wasn't able to market the game as effectively as Electronic Arts did with the older series. A telling characteristic is the box art, which sports two scantily clad barbarians (one male and one female) poised to hack at a demonic-looking monster, a rather generic image that suggests little more than a by-the-numbers "hack 'n slash" game.

### *Legend of Faerghail*

*Legend of Faerghail* is a German game that was translated into English and made available for the Amiga, Atari ST, and DOS platforms in 1990. Designed by Electronic Design Hannover, it's based on the type of gameplay seen in *The Bard's Tale* and even allows players to import their characters from that series as well as from SSI's *Phantasie* games. Like many German CRPGs, it is quite complex and best suited for expert gamers—the 95-page manual is essential reading for anyone hoping to master the game.

*Legend of Faerghail* offers massive dungeons composed of many levels and thousands of rooms. The developers also integrate more direct effects of gender on character roles—females, for instance, have better wisdom and constitution scores, whereas males get added strength. There are eight different languages spoken in Faerghail, and characters can learn them as they level



*Legend of Faerghail* is another attempt to build on the Bard's Tale model. It offers a much more sophisticated combat system.

up to boost their concentration score and help gather information from those who speak them. It's also possible in this game to damage weapons and armor in combat, a possibility that gets overlooked in most CRPGs. The combat system offers a small overhead schematic of the battlefield, and players can opt to move characters forward to do more damage at the cost of being more vulnerable.

The goal of the game is to learn why the normally peaceful elves have suddenly turned violent. Naturally, this simple quest soon spirals into a much thicker plot that'll have the party traipsing all across (and underneath) Faerghail. All in all, it's a well-crafted game that met with praise from critics but is not very well known today.

### *Neuromancer*

Perhaps the most unusual of Interplay's 1988 games is *Neuromancer*, based on William Gibson's famous cyberpunk novel. Although usually described as a graphical adventure rather than a CRPG, the game has a strong enough CRPG component to blur the boundaries. Specifically, it features a skills system and, in a unique fashion, randomized combat.

The storyline here resists summary and would take considerable prose to do justice. The gist, however, is that computer hackers have begun disappearing from cyberspace, which the game represents as an abstract, virtual environment in three dimensions. The player is a cowboy, someone with the technical expertise to bypass security measures and tap into government, military, and corporate bases. The bigger story here is that a race of artificial intel-

ligences (AIs) are kept under strict control, but there is always a danger that they may find a way to pool their resources and take over the government, though, given the sorry state of things in Chiba City, Japan, one wonders if that fate might truly be so terrible.

The player doesn't create a character, but the one provided gains new skills as the game moves on, along with better software and hardware, items here roughly analogous to the skills, arms, and armor players find in fantasy-based CRPGs. The chief enemy is ICE, or Intrusion Countermeasure Electronics, which must be brought down with software viruses. The character can also sell body parts for instant cash, though the plastic replacements are cheaply built and will make survival less likely in the more dangerous regions of cyberspace. The bulk of the gameplay consists of interacting with other characters and building up a collection of facts, notes, and clues needed to win. Skills are purchased as chips that are inserted in a slot on the character's skull. They range from coptalk, which allows the characters to effect an Irish brogue associated with police officers, to musicianship, which grants proficiency with musical instruments. Of course, there is also ice hacking, which helps get the character past ICE, and plenty of other skill that the character must discover later in the game.

*Neuromancer* also features a soundtrack by DEVO, the rather zany group of electronic music pioneers responsible for "Whip It." DEVO's involvement might strike fans of the novel as rather out of place, yet the game is actually quite humorous and satirical throughout. For instance, the electron-



Interplay's *Neuromancer* is an effort to bring William Gibson's cyberpunk novel to the computer screen.

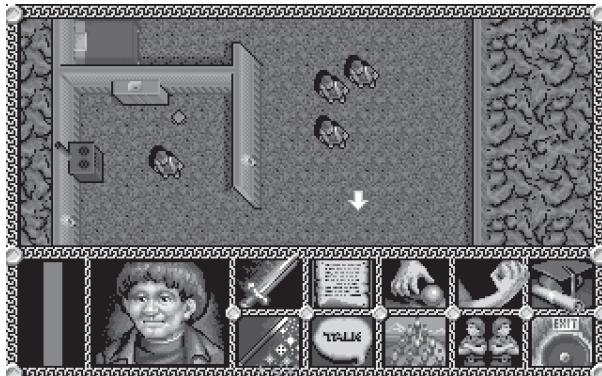
ics ship is named “Crazy Edo’s,” a not-so-subtle reference to the Crazy Eddie line of electronics stores that were successful when the game was released. The game begins with the character waking up after a “night sleeping face-down in a plate of synth-spaghetti,” and the *Night City News* is full of headlines such as “Farm Animals Kidnap UFO” and “Man Eats His Own Head.” In short, there is little effort here to capture the rather grim and unsettling world of Gibson’s book; instead, we get a tongue-in-cheek game full of geeky jokes and puns rather reminiscent of a LucasArts adventure game.

Interplay’s *Neuromancer*, then, is a highly innovative game that blurs the boundaries between CRPGs and graphical adventure games, much as Sierra’s *Quest for Glory* series, which we’ll discuss later, does. Although it is not as well known today as *The Bard’s Tale* and the much later *Deus Ex*, it remains a favorite of many gamers who remember it. *Gamespot* recognizes it as one of their “Greatest Games of All Time,” and it’s quite likely to have influenced later games in the genre. It certainly demonstrates Interplay’s willingness to venture beyond the sword and spell.

## *The Lord of the Rings*

To say that the works of J. R. R. Tolkien have influenced the CRPG is akin to saying that the Big Bang influenced the universe. The influence is deep, profound, and fundamental. It’s easy enough to find allusions to (if not downright plagiarism of) Tolkien throughout CRPG history, especially when games deal with magic and races. Indeed, many early CRPGs feature a race type blatantly named “hobbit,” though more conscientious authors tried to mask the borrowing by using the terms like “Halfling” or “Kender” instead. Likewise, I’ve lost track of the games based on the idea of a superpowerful being searching for magical artifacts that will cement his power.

Indeed, it would seem almost inevitable that a major developer would secure the rights to create an official *Lord of the Rings* CRPG, but it took much longer than we might have expected. Indeed, it wasn’t until 1990 that Interplay finally rolled out *JRR. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings, Vol. I*, a game many critics consider the best Tolkien-inspired game ever made. As the title suggests, the game is based on the first of Tolkien’s novels, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Of course, it’s hard to miss that Interplay’s long and unwieldy title carefully avoids the word *fellowship*. Interplay was trying hard to avoid association with an earlier illustrated text adventure game with that title, published by two book publishers in 1986. They wanted to ensure that gamers knew their game was a fresh approach to the subject matter.



To Interplay, all hobbits look the same.

The primary goal of Interplay’s game is for Frodo to take the One Ring to Don Guldur and kill the Witch King, all without being slaughtered by the Nine Riders, or, for Tolkien buffs, the Nazgûl. However, the game is well-known for its nonlinear gameplay and many side-quests; this is no slavish adaptation, and plenty of things can happen that Tolkien never penned. This is particularly felt in the player’s choice of companions. Although Sam, Gandalf, Aragorn, and other characters are labeled “permanent player characters,” the player can dismiss them—and, if they die, the game goes on. However, the manual assures us that they will never abandon the quest. Temporary characters, on the other hand, will only join the party (or the “Fellowship”) as long as it serves their own ends. Likewise, only permanent characters can be exported to the sequel. Players can recruit and dismiss characters as they see fit, though the developers have ensured that getting through the game without the original crew (e.g., Gimli) is especially challenging, if not impossible.

Character creation and development are based on stats and skills. The skill system is quite elaborate and is broken into three categories: active, combat, and lore. Combat and lore skills are always on and need not be activated by the player; active skills must be selected. They include skills such as boats, which allows the character to navigate watercraft, and jump, which permits leaping chasms. Perhaps more unusual are the active skills charisma and bravado, which are used to sway the opinions of others (the manual warns that bravado is useless in the first game). Combat skills are focused on particular weapons, such as axes or bows. Lore skills provide the player with extra information at relevant points in the game. For instance, studying Numenorean lore can come in handy should the party explore Numenorean ruins. Skills

are either learned by paying an expert for training or are added automatically after certain events in the game.

The magic system is quite interesting and unusual, possibly even unique. It is divided into two main types, white and black, though of course only white need concern us here. To cast a spell, a player must either be a Valar-approved wizard or an elf; ordinary people are denied such power. That's probably for the best, since each spell drains the caster's life points (hit points). The manual warns that "magic is weak, unreliable, and dangerous" and should only be employed in emergencies. If the player is willing to risk it, there are plenty of useful spells available, such as animalspeak, which allows communion with birds and other animals, and counter-magic, which can dispel enchantments.

The interface is icon and mouse-driven, though conversing with characters requires input from the keyboard. Dialog is again based on a simple keyword system, though most important words are capitalized to make identifying them easier. Much of the game hinges on talking with characters, giving them items, and responding to their requests for assistance. The game features top-down perspective throughout. Combat is turn-based, though not nearly as complex as that seen in the "Gold Box" games. One of the less desirable features is that many objects aren't shown on the screen; instead, they are identified by name in a pop-up window shaped like a scroll. It's a rather clumsy system at times. The colorful graphics are lacking in certain key regards; for instance, all the hobbits tend to look the same, and it's impossible to distinguish Frodo from Sam or Pippin without clicking on them.

Interplay again resorted to printing valuable material in the manual, to which players were referred at various points in the game. This method was by this time quite well established, though critics were beginning to call negative attention to it in their reviews, seeing it quite rightly as a nuisance. It's impossible to tell whether this scheme thwarted illegal distribution more than it irritated rightful owners. We can say with reasonable certainty, however, that no player ever requested the feature.

## *The Two Towers*

As promised, Interplay followed up with J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings, Vol. II: The Two Towers* in 1991, carrying the storyline into the second Rings novel. This game features some significant enhancements over the previous game, such as an automapper and more efficient access to the characters' skills, spells, and inventories. The graphics and animation are also more detailed, and combat is extended with new commands (aim, block, swing, and

dodge). There is also 45 minutes of original medieval-style music, a respectable achievement for the time.

Another gameplay device allows switching among the characters at certain points of the narrative. This ability was also present to a lesser extent in the previous game, where the player briefly played as Aragorn, but in this game it's much more central. To make the transitions more exciting, Interplay was sure to end each segment with a cliffhanger, though some critics found this practice disorienting. Overall, though, Interplay's second game seems the more promising of the two, or at least the most playable by modern gamers.

Unfortunately for Interplay, sales for the second installment were not substantial enough to warrant completing the trilogy. We must remember, however, that Tolkien's epic work had not yet received the powerful boost from Peter Jackson's critically acclaimed film adaptations, and most gamers no doubt had the juvenile, cartoony images of the two rather disappointing animated adaptations fresh in their minds. The contemporary reviewers seem most concerned that true Tolkien fans would reject the games because of the minor variations from the printed works, but more likely, these games were simply overshadowed by the powerful competition. Nonetheless, Interplay released a special CD-ROM version of the games in 1993, which, among other things, featured several snippets of Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated film.

## In the Next Chapter

In the past few chapters we've covered some of the finest CRPGs ever created. We saw an explosion of creativity and innovation between 1986 and 1988, and anyone remotely serious about the genre will recognize the landmark titles and famous series that succeeded during this period. However, as any student of history knows well, progress is neither linear nor orderly. Indeed, as we'll see in the next chapter, CRPGs with real-time 3D graphics were available as early as 1987, though they would remain on the cutting edge for several more years before reaching the masses. We'll also discuss some intriguing but nevertheless failed experiments, such as *Star Saga*, a unique attempt to merge tabletop with computer role-playing. And we'll discuss the rise of the Japanese RPG, made possible by Nintendo and Sega's new game consoles, which were far more powerful than the humble units of the previous generation.

# 8

## The Golden Age Part II

### The Golden Age, Continued

In the last chapter we covered most of the major CRPG developers of the Golden Age, but there's more to the story than what was happening at SSI, Origin, Interplay, and New World Computing. Although these companies were willing to experiment with new types of games and gameplay, others were indulging in more radical projects. Some of these, such as FTL's acclaimed *Dungeon Master*, are clearly ahead of their time and introduced gamers to revolutionary concepts that would become commonplace in the modern era. We'll also discuss Sierra's *Quest for Glory* series, a very successful blend of adventure and CRPG gameplay that, for many gamers, represents the best of both genres. The Golden Age also produced unique games such as *Star Saga* and *Hired Guns*, which, despite their innovative gameplay and initial promise, are now painfully obscure, as well as forgotten triumphs such as *Faery Tale Adventure*, an early but clear progenitor of *Diablo*.

We'll start, however, with Nintendo and Sega, whose new game machines would introduce millions of American gamers to the best-selling RPGs of all time.

## Nintendo and the Rise of JRPGs

Although this book is focused on the computer RPG, we'd be foolish to ignore its console cousin. Console RPGs first appeared in primitive form in the early 1980s but really came into their own in the latter half of the decade. These games are usually referred to as Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), since the vast majority were developed overseas for Japanese audiences and only later translated and exported to America. Nevertheless, millions more gamers have played *The Legend of Zelda* and *Final Fantasy* than any of the American-made games we've discussed (or will discuss) in this book. I'll leave it for other historians to explore how these games affected the Japanese industry; what we're concerned with here is how the JRPG has influenced the American CRPG.

How do JRPGs compare to CRPGs? This is perhaps one of the most controversial questions you'll encounter in this book. As we might expect, gamers who were exposed exclusively to JRPGs growing up tend to have a myopic view of the genre, possessing an almost religious zeal for *Final Fantasy* or *Zelda*. Meanwhile, it's quite easy to hear a CRPG fan dismissing all JRPGs as simplistic and juvenile, with none of the depth or mental challenge of the real thing. The most common complaint is that JRPGs are too linear, prodding the player from plot point to plot point; the player's ability to affect the narrative is tightly constrained compared to most CRPGs. JRPG fans often counter by claiming that such constraints are necessary for proper character development and narrative structure, and the best JRPGs are celebrated for precisely these reasons. Of course, we can find plenty of counterexamples for each of these claims, but these assumptions still frame most discussions of the two genres.

Another often noted characteristic of JRPGs is the cartoonish style of the art and humor. Although JRPGs often contain mature and even explicit themes, these elements are often inexplicably juxtaposed with cute, comic-relief characters. Although common in Japanese popular culture, such eruptions of silliness often strike Americans as downright bizarre. Others glance at the childish graphics and dismiss JRPGs as games for children, though this is in many cases a grave misconception—Nintendo enforced a strict censorship policy that sanitized many adult elements present in the Japanese versions. In any case, it's safe to say that JRPGs have seldom striven for the graphical realism of *AD&D*, preferring instead a heavily stylized look and feel.

A true analysis of the difference between CRPGs and JRPGs would require an in-depth analysis of Japanese culture and language. We'd also need

to familiarize ourselves with Japan's complex economic and political relationship with the U.S. Needless to say, such a sophisticated study is well beyond the scope of this book and the wherewithal of its writer. What we will do is discuss the most well known of the JRPGs that were translated into English and exported to North America.

## *The Legend of Zelda*

There are few videogame characters as internationally famous as Link, the boyish avatar of Nintendo's best-selling *The Legend of Zelda*. Designed by the celebrated developer Shigeru Miyamoto, *The Legend of Zelda* has sold tens of millions of copies and remains one of Nintendo's most lucrative and enduring franchises. This game and its sequels routinely show up in respected lists of the best games ever made, and it's common for fans to buy Nintendo's latest console just to play the next *Zelda* installment. Link's image has been licensed for use on everything from sheet sets to breakfast cereal, and he's even starred in his own Saturday morning cartoon. *Zelda* is not just a game but a cultural phenomenon.

But is *The Legend of Zelda* actually an RPG? After all, Link doesn't gain experience points or level up, and success in combat depends more on the player's manual dexterity with the controller than tactics or strategy. Finally, although Link can find various items and weapons with magical properties, these function more like the power-up items in arcade games than like the magical items in conventional CRPGs. For instance, when Link finds a boo-



Although its status as an RPG is often contested, there's no denying that *Zelda* shares many of the genre's conventions. Here, Link is given a sword.

merang, he can instantly use it as well as he ever will; success depends on the player's own skill with a gamepad, not Link's mastery of ranged weapons. These facts have led many critics to describe the game as an action adventure rather than an RPG.

On the other hand, *Zelda* shares several elements with CRPGs. The most obvious is the graphical layout, which is reminiscent of the top-down tile-based graphics of the early *Ultima* titles. There are also plenty of monster-infested dungeons for Link to explore—a defining characteristic of most CRPGs. Finally, the game's narrative is based on a classic fantasy quest to rescue the titular princess. As in most CRPGs (as well as adventure games), the player must complete a series of smaller, interconnected quests before the game can be won. However, as with SSI's *Heroes of the Lance* game, the lack of a class/level system really does beg the question of the game's status as a true RPG.

One very important innovation introduced in *The Legend of Zelda* is an internal battery for saving the player's progress. Formerly, console gamers either had to start from scratch each time they played a game or keep up with a cumbersome algorithmic password system. Since the typical RPG needs to track quite a few variables, these passwords (often numerical, but occasionally alphanumeric) could become quite long and difficult to manage, particularly when the codes had to be entered using a two-button gamepad rather than a keyboard. The battery system eliminated the need for such codes and smoothed the way for longer and more complicated console games that could rival CRPGs.

The story behind *The Legend of Zelda* is perhaps the most clichéd aspect of the game. As with Miyamoto's other classic, *Super Mario Bros.*, the mission is to rescue a helpless princess. Link must accomplish this task by finding the eight missing pieces of the Triforce of Wisdom, which he needs to enter the evil Ganon's headquarters in Death Mountain.

### *The Adventure of Link*

The second *Zelda* game was released in the U.S. in 1987 and also earned Nintendo a fortune in sales. The JRPG status of this game is less disputed; here, Link does gain experience points, which the player can use to enhance Link's attack, magic, or life levels. The game features two graphical modes: a top-down perspective for overland travel and a side-scrolling perspective during combat and other scenes. The game also added roaming nonplayer characters and random encounters, another borrowing from popular CRPGs of the time. Later *Zelda* games abandoned much of the RPG and side-scrolling



The second *Zelda* game is usually considered the black sheep of the series. It's also the only one that offers a conventional point-based leveling system.

elements, earning *The Adventure of Link* a reputation as the bastard stepchild of the series. Again, the quest is to rescue the hapless Princess Zelda, who has been cursed with a sleeping spell.

### *A Link to the Past*

The last *Zelda* game we'll discuss in this chapter is *A Link to the Past*, the third installment, released in 1991 for the SNES. Of course, the SNES features significantly enhanced graphics and memory capabilities compared to the NES, and *A Link to the Past* was one of the first games that really demonstrated the potential of the new console. Nevertheless, the gameplay is more reminiscent of the first *Zelda* game than the second, abandoning the side-scrolling segments and class/level system. The third game offers a far more sophisticated plot and storyline than the previous games, though Link is saddled yet again with the onerous task of getting Zelda out of trouble. Though still lacking in dramatic intensity, the quest is less straightforward than before, with plenty of twists and turns to keep things interesting.

Most of the gameplay here focuses on acquiring the quest items necessary to enter new areas, such as a hammer that can demolish otherwise impassable boulders. Although the game doesn't allow Link to gain levels, he can find special heart-shaped icons that boost his maximum hit points (also represented as hearts). There is also a basic magic system. If Link has the requisite magical item and enough magical energy (amassed by collecting green magic pots), he can cast spells. Like items, magic is primarily used to bypass



The third *Zelda* game ditched the side-scrolling and level system of the second game.

obstacles. For instance, Link can use magical ether to stop the rain falling in the Swamp of Evil, thereby revealing the entrance to a dungeon.

Even if *The Legend of Zelda* series is often disqualified as a true JRPG because of its focus on action and puzzle solving rather than traditional role-playing elements, it has certainly influenced the genre. Indeed, as we'll see in later chapters, many modern developers and fans played the games extensively, and their views of what an RPG should be were in large part determined by the adrenaline-soaked gameplay of *Zelda*. As I'll argue in later chapters, the rise of action CRPGs seems to represent a mostly successful effort to bring this style of gaming to the PC. However, unlike the *Final Fantasy* series, *Zelda* has remained exclusive to Nintendo's consoles; none of the games has ever been legally ported to American computer platforms.

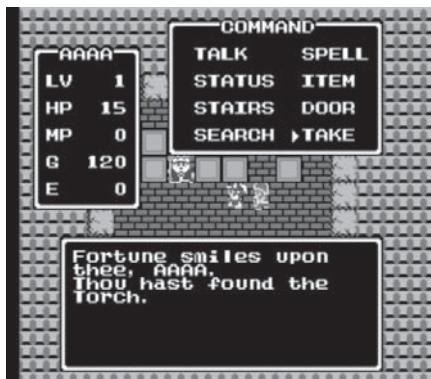
On a side note, relatively few *Zelda* fans are aware of three poorly conceived *Zelda* games made exclusively for Philips' short-lived CD-i platform. Nintendo had licensed the *Zelda* franchise to Philips as part of a deal to develop a CD-ROM for their Super Famicom system but later dropped the idea. Philips, however, took advantage of the licensing agreement to develop and release *Link: The Faces of Evil*, *Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon* (both 1993), and *Zelda's Adventure* (1994). These games feature plenty of full-motion video sequences created by Russian animators, but they suffer from wretched voice acting, bad writing, and unpolished gameplay. They are wonderfully obscure today, though they're still the butt of an occasional spoof on YouTube and can command high prices on eBay.

## The *Dragon Warrior* Series

Enix Corporation's *Dragon Warrior* was originally released in 1986 as *Dragon Quest* for the MSX computer platform, which was then quite popular in Japan. It wasn't until 1989 that the game finally arrived in America, having been translated and ported to the NES. The name was then changed to *Dragon Warrior* to avoid problems with an American tabletop RPG named *Dragon Quest*. Although phenomenally successful in Japan, the series hasn't fared as spectacularly here, though it's unfair to call it obscure. Unlike the *Zelda* series, the *Dragon Warrior/Quest* series is most definitely an RPG, with an experience point-based level system, a spell point-based magic system, and fairly standard *D&D* style weapons and armor. *Dragon Warrior* seems to have laid the foundation for most other JRPGs, not surprising given its monumental sales record in its home country.

*Dragon Warrior* seems to have been inspired by the early *Ultima* games. Much of the gameplay occurs from a top-down perspective and features colorful tile-based graphics. Combat, however, is turn-based and reminiscent of *Wizardry* or *The Bard's Tale*, with the attacking enemies shown in first-person. The player controls a single, predefined character, although this character can be assigned a new name.

This character is the descendent of the legendary Erdrick, a brave warrior who once used the Balls of Light to vanquish evil. Erdrick gave the Balls to King Lorick of Alefgard, who used them to protect the kingdom. The Balls were handed down to Lorick's heirs until they were stolen by the evil Drag-



The cute graphics of games such as *Dragon Warrior* are one of the distinguishing characteristics of the JRPG.

onlord, who used them to sow chaos across the land. Of course, it's up to the player to confront the Dragonlord and seize his Balls. If you've been chuckling as you read this summary, you may have some idea of the difficulties involved in translating a game intended for Japanese players to American audiences. No doubt, many of the game's subtleties are lost on the typical American gamer, and there are plenty of moments of what is likely quite accidental humor.

There are other oddities that can perhaps be summed up by the word *kawaisa*, a term used by Chris Kohler (author of *Power Up!: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*) to describe a marked Japanese tendency towards cuteness. For instance, one of the most characteristic aspects of the *Dragon Quest* series is a cheerful smiling slime, which looks about as threatening as strawberry shortcake. For American gamers accustomed to serious CRPGs like *Pool of Radiance*, this style is often quite disconcerting. Such jarring juxtapositions of light and dark elements are common in Japanese popular culture; no doubt their lack would be sorely missed by Japanese gamers. In short, Americans unaccustomed to JRPGs might be put off, at least initially, by the abundance of cute and cuddly characters and creatures alongside more frightening visuals.

### *Dragon Warrior II*

The second *Dragon Warrior* game for the NES arrived in 1990. This time, the main character is not alone but can recruit up to two other adventurers: a princess who wields magic and a prince with fighting and magical abilities. Combat is also more complex: up to six enemies can attack at once (all the battles in the former game are one-on-one). The mission is of the “kill the evil wizard” variety. The game also features a battery-backup system like the one seen in *The Legend of Zelda*.

### *Dragon Warrior III*

The third installment, released in 1992, offers even more innovations to the original model. This time, the player can name the main character and select a gender. Furthermore, it's now possible to recruit up to three other characters from six possible classes to form a party. These recruits can be swapped in and out as necessary. While most of the available classes are hardly unusual, the game does introduce a few novelties: merchants, who can appraise items; goof-offs, who enjoy tremendous luck; and sages, a prestige class with skills in fighting and magic. The goof-off is particularly unusual; the manual warns that he will only become more useless as the game progresses!



The third *Dragon Warrior* begins with the sixteen-year old avatar's first official visit to the castle.

This game is set before the action in the first game, and amounts to another quest to “kill the fiend,” this time a demonic being named Zoma. Solving the game requires fetching keys as well as six magical orbs. The game world is quite large and varied, with everything from Egyptian-style pyramids to arctic lands.

#### *Dragon Warrior IV*

The final *Dragon Warrior* game for the NES is the fourth installment, developed by Chunsoft and released in 1992. It’s probably the most epic in scope, with five distinct chapters. The player plays a different role in each of the first four chapters, switching among characters who unite in the fifth chapter, tying the seemingly disparate stories together. Other innovations include an artificial intelligence system for guiding the characters in battle, and a horse-drawn wagon that allows the player to choose which party members participate in battle. The wagon allows the player to have up to nine characters in the party, though only four can engage in combat. This wagon system seems to be the first of its type; at least, I don’t know of anything similar in earlier JRPGs, or CRPGs for that matter. Although the formal classes are gone, the characters still seem to more or less fit neatly into traditional categories (soldier, wizard, and so on).

The storyline and plot of the game are more sophisticated than in the previous *Dragon Warrior* games, and the characters are far better developed, with their own motivations that change over time. Nevertheless, there’s quite



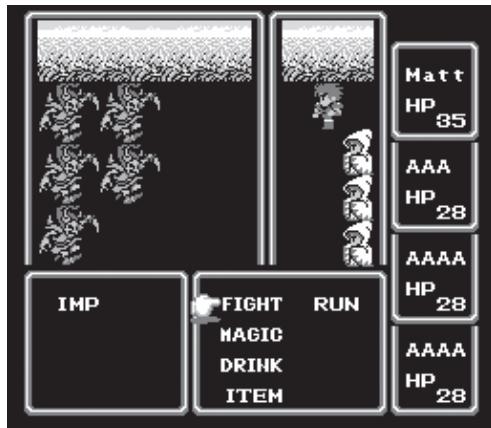
This cheerful smiling slime is one of *Dragon Warrior*'s signature trademarks.

a bit of “hack ‘n slash” gameplay, since the party will need to gain high levels to keep up with their enemies—who quickly increase in power as the game progresses.

The fourth game is often considered the best of the NES *Dragon Warrior* titles, even if it failed to win over audiences in the U.S. as it did in Japan. Apparently, sales were so below expectations that Enix failed to release the fifth or sixth installments in America; these shores wouldn’t see another *Dragon Warrior* game until 2001’s *Dragon Warrior VII* for the Sony PlayStation. Even so, the influence of this series on the genre is powerful, though indirect. If nothing else, other Japanese developers were surely intimately familiar with the series, since it posed such substantial competition for them in the Japanese market. Furthermore, the series established many of the conventions that would become standard in other JRPGs, particularly the simplistic (yet intuitive) gameplay and focus on linear story-telling with well-developed characters.

## The Perennial *Final Fantasy*

The last of the NES JRPGs we’ll talk about in this chapter is *Final Fantasy*, a game developed by Hironobu Sakaguchi of Square (later Square Enix) in 1987, though it didn’t debut in North America until 1990. Unlike the *Dragon Warrior/Quest* series, *Final Fantasy* was a smash hit in the U.S., where it remains one of the most highly regarded JRPGs. Indeed, it’s hard to exaggerate the adulation heaped on the series by its legions of staunchly loyal fans. Like *The Legend of Zelda*, it spawned a lucrative franchise of licensed merchandise



The player will deal with thousands of random encounters in *Final Fantasy*.

and spin-offs. It even served as the basis for an ambitious but unsuccessful feature film—*Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001).

The first *Final Fantasy* is a fairly straightforward “hack ‘n slash” game with a heavy emphasis on battles with random encounters and exploring a large overland gameworld. The player controls a party called the Light Warriors, composed of four adventurers. There are six classes available: fighter, thief, black belt (monk), and three types of mage (red, black, and white). Each class can also be upgraded to a prestige class and gain new abilities. For instance, the warrior can become a knight, who can cast low-level White Magic spells. Most of the game is shown from a top-down perspective, using tile-based graphics similar to those seen in the *Ultima* series.

Combat is turn-based and offers an unusual screen mode, with the player’s four characters lined up vertically on the right and the enemies in a larger window on the left. During each turn, the player selects an appropriate action for each character and a target. One nuisance in this combat system is that if the selected monster is killed before the round is over, any other characters directed to attack it will lose their turns. The order of attack is random.

The game’s plot seems to poke fun at the typical fantasy game. At first, the game seems to be yet another “rescue the princess” quest, but that mission is completed very early. The bulk of the game is spent hunting down four magical orbs needed to restore order and defeat Chaos himself. As Kohler puts it, “*Final Fantasy* is about much more than saving the princess. Compared to the adventure that is about to take place, saving a princess is merely child’s

play and prologue.”<sup>1</sup> Like some of the *Ultima* and *Might and Magic* games, the fantasy soon gives way to sci-fi elements, with robots, airships, and time travel. To succeed, the party must solve dozens of smaller quests, and, as in most JRPGs, it’s absolutely necessary to talk to every character in the game and take careful notes.

Although it spawned a massively influential franchise, the first *Final Fantasy* is usually considered the weakest in terms of gameplay and overall quality. The main problem is an inordinately high frequency of repetitive and tedious random encounters, which make the game unwinnable by all but the most patient players.

### *Final Fantasy II*

Here’s where things get a bit confusing. Technically, *Final Fantasy II*, released in the U.S. in 1991 for the SNES, is not the second but the fourth game in the series. However, the second and third games were released only in Japan, and Square apparently thought it better to represent the next international release as a direct sequel to the first game. Later releases reverted to the Japanese numbering, adding further to the confusion. For our purposes, I’ll use the original American titles and ignore the Japanese-only releases unless otherwise noted.

*Final Fantasy II* offers quite a few enhancements to the original engine, the most obvious being the improved audiovisuals made possible by the 16-bit SNES platform. Other key changes include a five- rather than a four-character party, and the Active Time Battle (ATB). ATB blurs the boundaries between real-time and turn-based combat in an interesting way. Simply put, the characters and monsters need time to recover after each action, but after this period of recovery, they can immediately perform another action. Thus, the player must think quickly during combat, rapidly selecting options as soon as a party member is ready, rather than sitting back waiting for the next turn. The system proved quite popular with gamers and has been widely used in other JRPGs.

The second game also is much more character- and plot-driven than the first and carefully balanced. There are 12 characters available, each with a preset class, personality, and role to play in the carefully contrived and rather impressive plot. The story follows the actions of a brave young captain named

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<sup>1</sup> See Chris Kohler’s *Power Up!: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*. (ISBN 0-7440-0424-1)



The second *Final Fantasy* offers a much richer plot and characters than the first game.

Cecil, who has lately begun questioning the motives of his king, who seems to have traded virtue for megalomania. Like the previous game, *Final Fantasy II* contains a mixture of fantasy and sci-fi elements—such as dwarves piloting tanks and a race of moon men.

*Final Fantasy II* was a rousing success, ensuring the series a foothold in America. Critics seemed to find no fault with the game, heaping on accolades and bestowing many awards. The title regularly shows up on “Best Ever” lists, despite some glaring problems with the English translation. The game was remade in 2001 for the Sony PlayStation and in 2005 for the Game Boy Advance mobile platform.

### *Final Fantasy III*

The last *Final Fantasy* game we’ll cover in this chapter is the third game, which is actually the sixth in Japan. *Final Fantasy III* was released in 1994 for the SNES, and, like the previous game, was later released for the PlayStation and Game Boy Advance. The game engine retains most of the conventions established by *Final Fantasy II* but has a more flexible character development system. Although the characters are pregenerated with their own personalities and fixed classes, the player can later alter them. Furthermore, the player can choose which spells the magic-users will learn rather than have them automatically assigned.

The game’s story is even more sophisticated and nuanced than in the previous game, with a long list of main quests as well as a dozen or so optional missions. The game is set a millennium after the War of the Magi, a magical war of apocalyptic proportions that destroyed much of the world and purged

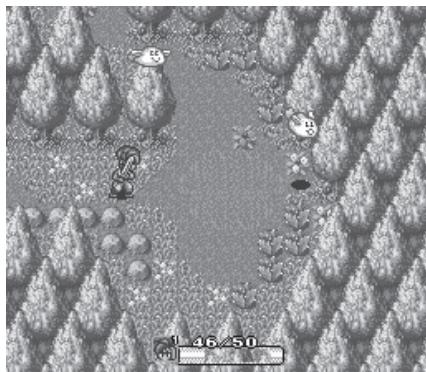
magic from the land. Now, technology reigns, though a power-hungry emperor seeks to revive magic, certainly not for virtuous purposes. The players soon find themselves entangled in a web of dangerous intrigue, with many unpredictable twists and turns.

*Final Fantasy III* is often considered one of the finest (if not *the* finest) of the series, most notably for the intricate storyline and sharply developed characters. It's certainly an impressive feat in terms of polish and attention to detail; even the soundtrack is classic, having been rearranged for a professional orchestra and released as an album, *Final Fantasy VI Grand Finale*, composed by Nobuo Uematsu and arranged by Shiro Sagisu and Tsuneyoshi Saito.

### *Secret of Mana*

Another game designed by Square that deserves mention is *Secret of Mana*, released for the SNES in 1993. It's mostly similar to the *Final Fantasy* games in terms of gameplay, with one major exception: real-time, action-style combat sequences instead of turn-based or ATB. It also allows up to three simultaneous players, though the third player needs a special "Super Multitap" accessory. A final noteworthy innovation is an icon-based "ring," or radial menu, that appears around the character during combat. A similar contrivance shows up in later games, including Troika's CRPG *The Temple of Elemental Evil* (2003).

Combat in *Secret of Mana* is arcade-style, comparable to *The Legend of Zelda* games. A stamina bar located at the bottom of the screen shows the character's hit points. Characters gain levels in weapons and magical powers



*Secret of Mana* offers real-time rather than turn-based combat.

depending on how much they use them. Characters also gain more powerful spells or weapon attacks as they gain experience, though the efficacy of these powers is counterbalanced by mandatory recovery periods (the more powerful the special attack, the longer the charge-up period).

In *Secret of Mana*, the player controls a young village boy who finds a sword mired in a river bottom. Unfortunately for the boy, the sword summons a horde of vile monsters, and the villagers expel the boy from the village. He is then assisted by a knight named Jema, who sends him on a quest to repair the sword and take control of the eight Seeds of Mana. Of course, solving the game will require exploring and gathering clues from the many characters roaming the Land of Mana.

Though it has its share of fans, *Secret of Mana* suffers from poor English translation that renders much of the plot virtually incoherent. It also has more *kawaisa*, or cute, elements than Square's other games, such as a mission to rescue Santa Claus. And there are problems with the AI engine, particularly with path-finding (the computer-controlled characters have a hard time navigating around obstacles). Most critics who praise the game highly do so because of the excellent multiplayer options or memorable soundtrack.

## *Chrono Trigger*

*Chrono Trigger*, a game released by Square for the SNES in 1995, isn't part of the official *Final Fantasy* series, though it is based on the same game engine and gameplay. It's worth mentioning simply because of its overall quality; it's



*Chrono Trigger* is my personal favorite of JRPGs. It offers a brilliant story, fun characters, and a great musical score.

no doubt one of the most carefully polished and balanced JRPGs in existence. It was designed by a dream team of experienced JRPG developers, some from *Final Fantasy*, and others from *Dragon Warrior/Quest*. It offers multiple endings, side-quests that relate directly to the plot, and a captivating soundtrack. It remains one of the most popular of JRPGs of all time.

One slight but notable innovation in the ATB combat system is that the battles occur directly on the exploration screen, and characters can team up for special cooperative attacks. Since the player will likely be adventuring with several different combinations of characters, the possibilities for coordinated attacks are vast. Another nice touch is that the player sees enemies at a distance rather than stumble upon random encounters. These innovations create a highly intuitive and compelling battle system.

However, the main appeal of this game is the superbly developed characters and intricate narrative based on a trek through time. The player's character, aptly named Chrono, must travel through the past, present, and future, fulfilling quests and eventually confronting a terrifically powerful foe who seeks to destroy time itself. The game also boasts excellent graphics and a superb score. In short, it's a masterpiece of design and is highly playable even today. Square released a sequel called *Chrono Cross* in 2000, a PlayStation game that dazzled critics and gamers with its charm and highly addictive gameplay.

## *Super Mario RPG*

One of the most unusual of the 16-bit era JRPGs is *Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars*, a game developed by Square and published by Nintendo in 1996. As the title suggests, the game is based on the internationally famous characters popularized in the *Super Mario Bros.* games, but it differs tremendously in terms of gameplay. It sports some of the best graphics ever seen on the SNES, but its late release date allowed Sony's PlayStation (released a year earlier) to steal much of its thunder.

*Super Mario RPG* is an interesting hybrid of action and tactical combat. Much of the gameplay is familiar to fans of the other *Mario* games, such as precision jumping sequences. However, the game also incorporates a turn-based combat system reminiscent of Square's *Final Fantasy* or *Chrono Trigger* games. The combat sequences include action elements, such as rapidly tapping a button to increase the damage of an attack. Square did a fine job integrating the two types of gameplay, and the polished graphics and smooth controls make *Super Mario RPG* a great deal of fun.



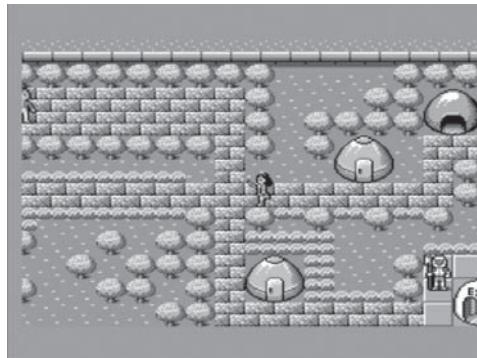
*Super Mario RPG* is an unlikely but effective combination of *Super Mario Bros.* and *Final Fantasy*.

However, we should take a moment to consider just how alien a game such as *Super Mario RPG* appears when placed alongside nearly any of the CRPGs we've discussed in this book. Even if we stick strictly to action CRPGs, such as *Diablo* and *Dungeon Siege*, the differences are profound. With only a handful of exceptions, Western CRPGs are grimly serious, realistic, and geared primarily towards teenage to adult males. JRPGs, conversely, are often intended for a much larger demographic. What *Super Mario RPG* demonstrates is that many of the more addictive and compelling qualities of CRPGs, such as tactical combat and point-based leveling systems, are actually quite universal, and needn't be confined to traditional swords and sorcery or sci-fi settings. Indeed, we see this tendency taken even further in Square's later *Kingdom Hearts* (2002) and *Kingdom Hearts 2* (2005), games that juxtapose *Final Fantasy* and Walt Disney characters in a manner that is downright surreal.

### Sega's JRPG: *Phantasy Star*

After spending so long discussing NES and SNES JRPGs, it seems only fair to take a moment to look at *Phantasy Star*, a long-lived JRPG designed for Sega's line of game consoles. The first of these debuted in 1988 for the Sega Master System.

*Phantasy Star* has much in common with the *Ultima* series. For instance, overland travel is shown in top-down perspective and utilizes colorful tile-based graphics, whereas dungeons are rendered in first-person with mono-



Sega's premier JRPG, *Phantasy Star*, is sci-fi rather than fantasy based.

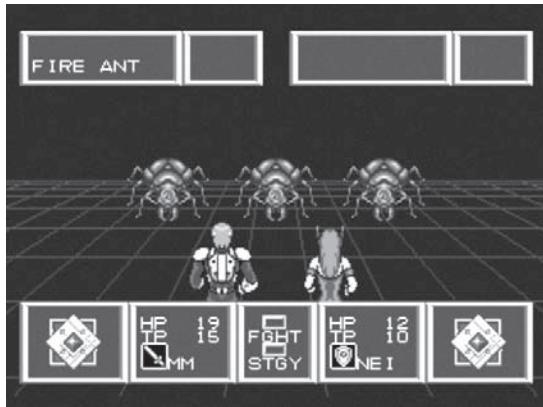
chrome graphics. Combat and conversation segments are shown in first-person, with pop-up windows for displaying text. The game also follows *Ultima*'s example in blending sci-fi with fantasy elements. It's also notable for being one of the few JRPGs (or CRPGs) to put the player in the role of a female, a fifteen-year old named Alis.

*Phantasy Star* also has its share of *kawaisa*. Alis's first companion is a talking yellow cat named Myau, who can fight with her claws, cast healing spells, and even disarm traps. Instead of quaffing healing potions, characters wolf down burgers and colas. However, the storyline also veers into darker territory. When the game begins, Alis comes upon Nero, her dying brother, who has just been brutally attacked by robotcops. The robotcops are the storm troopers of a tyrannical and warped king named Lassic, who was once a fine ruler but succumbed to hubris in his mad quest for immortality. Alis's brother tells her to seek out a strong warrior named Odin, who apparently has some means of helping Alis avenge her brother and restore prosperity to the solar system.

Despite its unusually high price (\$69, or \$125.34 in 2008 dollars), the game is one of the better known entries in the Sega Master System's game library. Along with *The Legend of Zelda*, it was one of the earliest cartridge games to feature a battery backup system to record saved games.

### *Phantasy Star II*

The second *Phantasy Star* was released in 1989 for Sega's new Genesis platform, the 16-bit descendent of the older Master System. Besides updated graphics and audio, the designers made some important changes to the in-



During combat in *Phantasy Star II*, the perspective shifts to a position just behind and to the center of the party, facing the monsters. Note the abstract grid layer.

terface and gameplay. It again retailed for a staggering \$69, but it was quite popular among Genesis gamers, and critics gushed with praise. As with most critically acclaimed JRPGs, the main appeal is a worthwhile plot and multi-faceted characters. It also veered bravely into more mature themes than most JRPGs, incorporating the death of beloved characters and raising issues about the future of technological societies. With *Phantasy Star II*, we've moved well beyond the trite "rescue the princess" or "fetch the orb" storylines and into far more compelling dramatic territory. These features help explain why *Phantasy Star II* is so often hailed as the best JRPG for the Genesis.

One noticeable change from the first game is the lack of first-person, 3D dungeons and a revamping of the combat screen. During a battle, the camera is stationed behind the party, who appears in a horizontal line facing the enemy. Like many other JRPGs, the player must assemble a party from a cast of premade characters, though these can be swapped in and out of the party as desired. Another innovation is a technique system based on technique points. Techniques are *Phantasy Star II*'s magic system, though there seems to be an effort here to supply at least a suggested scientific rationale for their effects. For instance, Zan Magics creates an atmospheric vacuum, sucking the air out of an enemy and crushing it.

The game is set a full millennium after the first game. This time, the player takes on the role of Rolf, an agent sent to investigate an accident at the Bio-Systems Lab. The accident seems to be responsible for the sudden appearance of Biomonsters, which now threaten the planet. Of course, there's

much more to do here than squash a few monsters, and it'll take time and substantial skill to solve the game.

### *Generations of Doom*

The third game was published in 1992, but critical reactions were (and remain) mixed. The problem is that *Generations of Doom* differs strikingly from the first two games, being set primarily in a Medieval setting and lacking the solid character development of the second game. On the other hand, it's a highly ambitious game with a unique plot device. Instead of controlling a single character or group, the player is put in charge of subsequent generations of heroes. In each case, the player is allowed to choose one of two spouses for his character, and the choice will affect which characters appear in the next generation.

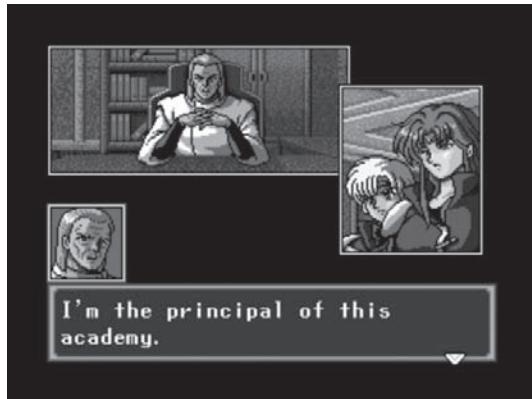
If nothing else, this setup should have ensured a high replay value, but, alas, the huge cast comes at the cost of well-developed characters. Instead of the sharply defined and multifaceted characters we saw in *Phantasy Star II*, we get rather barebones personalities with little enduring appeal.

Some critics also disliked the more Westernized style of the art and graphics, which seem to have abandoned the more heavily stylized anime art and *kawaii* elements of the previous games. Only the character portraits have maintained the original style, aesthetically clashing with the rest of the game. Another upset for some fans is the lackluster combat screen, which abandoned the waist-up rear view of the party, opting instead for a rather plain window with text and a few small icons. For these reasons the game is often considered the black sheep of the series, though it certainly has its share of loyal fans.

The basic gist of the game involves two feuding peoples, the Orakians and the Layans. The Orakians are a nonmagical race with physical strength, whereas the Layans are weaker but more proficient with techniques (the *Phantasy Star* equivalent of magic). The feud lends itself well to the generational setup of the narrative, since the player can decide whether to allow interracial marriages. There are several multiple endings that depend on which character the player ends up as in the last iteration.

### *The End of the Millennium*

The last *Phantasy Star* game released for the Genesis is *The End of the Millennium*, published in 1994. The game was originally intended for Sega's new CD-ROM add-on and was a very ambitious project that planned to offer



Multipaneled exposition sequences like this one from *Phantasy Star IV* help provide context and purpose to the game, as well as develop the characters' personalities.

first-person dungeons and full motion video cut scenes. However, poor sales of the Sega CD peripheral convinced Sega to scrap that idea, salvaging the rest of the design for a regular Genesis game.

*Phantasy Star IV* returned to the unique battle mode of the second game, showing the backs of the party members from the waist up as they faced their opponents. The game went a bit further, though, by adding colorful backgrounds rather than relying on the grid-like environment seen during battles in the second game. The colorful backgrounds were a selling point for the first *Phantasy Star* and added greatly to the realism. Combat is further enhanced with a macro system, which involves special coordinated attacks involving multiple characters. We saw a similar system used in Square's *Chrono Trigger* (1995).

The game is set 1,000 years after the events in *Phantasy Star II* and follows the adventures of a young bounty hunter named Chaz. Chaz and his companions must find a way to save Algo, a solar system threatened by a malfunctioning computer network. The plot thickens as the story progresses, eventually culminating in a fantastic confrontation with a seemingly immortal being of great evil. The fourth game also offers much better developed characters than the third; the generational system, while interesting, simply hadn't fared well among fans of the series. This game takes players back to drama with characters gamers can care about.

*The End of the Millennium* is widely hailed as the best game of the series. Unfortunately, it appeared rather late in the Genesis' career, and Sony un-

veiled its fifth generation *Sony PlayStation* a year later. There's little doubt that it would have been much more successful had it been released a year earlier, or had the original plans for the ambitious Sega CD version not failed due to that unit's poor sales. Nevertheless, it's a fine game and is quite likely the best JRPG for the Sega Genesis.

## Concluding Thoughts on Golden-Age JRPGs

For millions upon millions of gamers, JRPGs such as *Final Fantasy* and *Phantasy Star* are what comes to mind when someone mentions role-playing games. Far more children and teenagers had access to Nintendo and Sega's game consoles than to personal computers, which were much more expensive and required considerably more technical knowledge to operate. For those legions of gamers, heavily stylized art and linear, character-driven stories define the genre. Fans of American CRPGs, conversely, are often unfairly critical and perhaps even biased, fixating on the *kawaisa* and ignoring the compelling story arcs and well-crafted gameplay of the best JRPGs. For these gamers, kids with spiky blue hair, talking kitties, and smiling blobs of slime aren't compatible with *their* view of fantasy role-playing.

As far as who has it right is concerned, I feel that both American and Japanese RPGs have their merits and am quite happy playing both. That said, I doubt that I'll ever experience a JRPG the way a native born Japanese gamer might. Even with a good Japanese-to-English translation, I'll probably miss out on some of the cultural references and subtleties of the dialog. Nevertheless, I can appreciate a fine game when I see it. *Chrono Trigger*, *Final Fantasy III*, and *Phantasy Star IV* are exquisitely crafted games that deserve their reputations for excellence.

## Sierra and the Glorious Revolution

No discussion of the late 1980s era of CRPG history would be complete without mention of Sierra On-Line's well-known and critically acclaimed series *Quest for Glory*. Although we've already discussed some games that blurred the boundaries between the CRPG and adventure game genres, it's perhaps this series that did so most successfully. Indeed, many CRPG aficionados consider Lori Ann Cole's *Quest for Glory* series the best CRPGs ever made.

Sierra had earned a reputation for its adventure game line, which includes such well-known classics as *King's Quest*, *Space Quest*, and *Leisure Suit*

*Larry.* While these games were highly successful and remain on many gamers' favorites list, some critics sounded the familiar complaint: once players have beaten the game, there's little reason to continue playing. Furthermore, adventure games tend to be rather linear and limited; difficult puzzles often have a single, counterintuitive solution. If players can't figure it out, they must either cheat or give up. Cole's idea was to take Sierra's highly successful adventure game engine and modify it, incorporating CRPG elements that might address these problems. The result was highly playable (and replayable) games that, for many gamers, had the best of both genres.

### *Hero's Quest*

The first *Quest for Glory* game was originally titled *Hero's Quest: So You Want to be a Hero* and released for MS-DOS in 1989 (ports for Amiga and Atari ST followed). Sierra later found itself in a quandary with board game maker Milton Bradley, which also had a game named *Hero's Quest*. Rather than dispute the matter in court, Sierra decided to enhance and re-release the game in 1992 as *Quest for Glory*.

The game looks very much like a typical Sierra GAG (i.e., *King's Quest*, *Space Quest*), but offers CRPG elements such as the ability to select a character class (fighter, mage, thief) and to improve his skills. However, class selection plays a stronger role in the narrative than it does in most CRPGs. Its influence is most clearly seen in the puzzles, which offer solutions unique to each class. For instance, fighters and thieves can climb a tree to fetch a ring in



Sierra's ambitious *Hero's Quest* game offers a blend of adventure, role-playing, and action elements. Miraculously, it all works well.

a bird's nest, but magic-users must cast a spell. Of course, combat strategies differ by class as well. Mages and thieves should avoid close combat (melee), whereas fighters are encouraged to jump right in. In any case, combat is a timed, arcade-like affair that involves choosing appropriate moves and countermoves (e.g., strike when the monster isn't blocking). Since gameplay changes considerably depending on the character's class, the replay value of this game is much higher than in most graphical adventure games or CRPGs.

The tone of the game is decidedly satirical and often downright silly. For instance, the town, named Spielburg, is ruled by Baron Stefan Von Spielburg, and thieves can attempt to practice their pick-lock skill by typing "pick nose." It's definitely not a game that takes itself seriously or puts on literary airs. This tongue-in-cheek humor runs throughout the game and the manual, which is entitled "Famous Adventurer's Correspondence School" and has a page which reads: "This manual has been modified from its original version. It has been formatted to fit this page." The humor and shallow learning curve makes the game ideal for novice CRPG fans, as well as those put off by repetitive "hack 'n slash" gameplay.

*Hero's Quest* originally implemented a simple text-parser to carry on dialogues or perform actions—for instance, "ask about the brigands" and "climb tree." The re-release replaced the text parser with an icon-based, mouse-controlled interface. Of course, some fans of the original version were outraged by this "enhancement," arguing that it severely limits their ability to interact with the world. Sierra responded by releasing both versions in its *Quest for Glory Anthology* released in 1996. I suspect most modern gamers will prefer the later version.

The story and setting are culled from various fairytale sources, but the main objective is to fight the evil ogress Baba Yaga, who has put a curse on the land and seized the Baron's children. Monsters and bandits ravage the countryside. In addition to addressing these major concerns, the player also enters into optional side-quests.

### *Trial by Fire*

The next game in the series is *Trial by Fire*, released in 1990. This time, the inspiration for the story and setting are pulled from various Middle Eastern myths and stories, particularly those of the Arabian Nights. After succeeding in Spielburg, the hero is now beckoned to Shapeir, a desert city threatened by four elementals. Shapeir's sister city, Raseir, is missing its emir. Of course, it's up to the player to set things right. If the player succeeds, Shapeir's sultan



Although *Trial by Fire* features puzzles and other devices common in Sierra's adventure games, conventional CRPG elements play an important role.

adopts him into the royal family. On that note, the townspeople are also cognizant of the hero's progress and heap on praise after each achievement.

*Trial by Fire* allows players to import their old character, but it's also easy to create a new one. There are still side-quests available for each class and even prestige classes (called career paths.) For instance, successful fighters can become warlords, heroes, or paladins. Less successful fighters are stuck with less prestigious careers, such as combat instructor or security guard, or even babysitter. Each of the classes has this collection of successful and not-so-successful career paths. Perhaps the most humorous is the magic-user, who may become a computer programmer or corporate manager, if worse comes to worst. Each class also gets a different final scene, a fact that no doubt improves the game's replay value.

Like the first game, *Trial by Fire* is saturated with humor, puns, satire, and allusions to popular culture. There are a Cookie Monster doll, references to *The Maltese Falcon*, and a pair of X-Ray Specs. Although the X-Ray Specs are useless during most of the game, if the character dons them at a crucial moment, he can view a woman changing behind a curtain. Of course, the low-resolution graphics still leave much to the imagination, but it's a good example of the sort of pornographic Easter egg or hidden feature that would later arouse so much publicity in the *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* "Hot Coffee" controversy.

Perhaps a less welcome change is a time limit: the player must solve the game within the allotted 30 days. Furthermore, certain puzzles can be

solved only on a given day; some critics felt this system was rather arbitrary and forced the game into a rigidly linear frame. Many CRPG developers have struggled with ways to integrate time and a calendar into their games; we've already touched on the issue a bit in our discussion of the later *Ultima* games, in which important nonplayer characters were available only at certain times. Most gamers seem to want to explore games at their leisure, without having to worry about a time limit or perform an arbitrary sequence of activities before advancing to the next "day" or step in the plot. There's a fine line between realism and aggravation.

### *Wages of War*

The third *Quest for Glory*, *Wages of War* (1992), is the first to make the transition into 256-color graphics, digitized sound effects, and an icon-based interface. In addition, an overworld map was added that simulates travel across great distances, during which the character is subject to random encounters. The game is based on Sierra's SCI1 (Sierra Creative Interpreter, Version 1), which would also be used in several other Sierra adventure games of the era. Not surprisingly, all of these changes met with mixed reactions among fans, some calling the game the best and others the worst of the series. The criticisms are many but mostly emphasize the unchallenging puzzles and repetitive combat.

This game is set in the Kingdom of Tarna, an Africa-like environment. Two tribes are threatening to go to war with each other, and the hero is brought in as a peacemaker. After he's proven himself and gained membership in both tribes, they band together to fight the evil Demon Wizard. Most fans of the series regard it as pedestrian at best.

### *Shadows of Darkness*

The Coles seem to have recaptured some of their momentum with the fourth installment, *Shadows of Darkness*, released in 1993. One of the most noticeable changes here is a new combat system. The perspective shifts to a side view during battles, making the experience even more arcade-like, though it's important to note that there is an option to let the computer fight the battles instead. The game was released on floppy disk as well as in a CD-ROM version that features voice acting (most notably John Rhys-Davies and Bill Farmer). Unfortunately, the game was plagued with bugs, though some were patched and others can be worked around.



*Shadows of Darkness* is rather gloomy compared to the rest of the series.

As the title implies, this is a much darker game than the rest in the series. The story takes place in Mordavia, a setting clearly derived from the much-storied Transylvania. Vampires and other monsters are plaguing the locals, and the hero must find a way to fend off the darkness threatening the land.

### *Dragon Fire*

In 1998, Sierra released the fifth and final *Quest for Glory* game, *Dragon Fire*. Although the previous game had failed to generate good sales, fans pleaded with Sierra to let Lori Ann Cole put an end to the much-loved series. Unlike the previous games, *Dragon Fire* places much more emphasis on conventional CRPG elements (such as a wider variety of arms, armor, and magic items). Critics tended to be kind to the game despite its dated graphics, bugs, uneven voice acting, and awkward combat interface. Much was made of Chance Thomas's musical score, which lasts over three hours.

The game is set in the island Kingdom of Silmaria. The king has been assassinated, and the wizard Erasmus has declared a contest to determine the next ruler. The hero is brought in as a contestant, the idea being that he will ferret out the assassin. The bigger picture involves the lost Kingdom of Atlantis and a captive dragon. The dragon has hitherto been prevented from savaging the countryside by some enchanted pillars. Surely, only a madman would try to free the beast, and, naturally, it's precisely such a madman the hero must outwit to win the game.

Despite the series' initial success and continued popularity, few other CRPG developers have followed the example set by *Quest for Glory*. Recent

adventure games such as *Myst V: End of Ages* and *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey* offer no conventional CRPG elements, such as the all-important class and level system or experience points. Meanwhile, recent CRPGs still contain only the occasional puzzle or riddle, and JRPGs tend to prefer story and character development over combat and tactics. Perhaps the relative lack of successful adventure/CRPG hybrids today is a testament to the unique qualities of the *Quest for Glory* developers, who triumphed where so many others had failed.

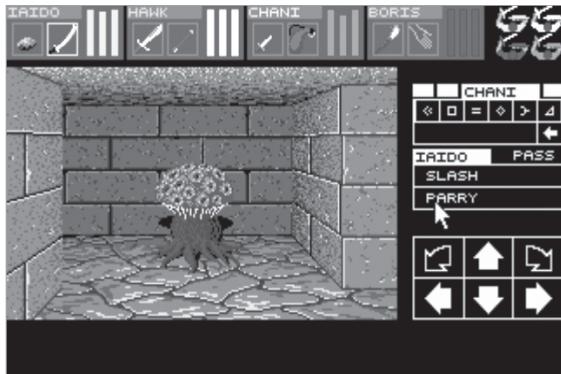
## *Dungeon Master* and the Rise of Real-Time 3D

In 2008, we might find it difficult to imagine a time when real-time, 3D games were still a novelty. With a few notable exceptions such as *Dungeons of Dagorath* (1982) and *Alterate Reality: The City* (1985), the great majority of early first-person CRPGs are turn-based. If the party doesn't move, neither does anything else in the game world. A few, such as *The Bard's Tale*, did generate random encounters even if the player was away from the keyboard, giving the impression that the monsters weren't just sitting on their thumbs waiting for adventurers to stumble across them. However, such tricks are no substitute for a truly persistent game world, in which monsters and other characters can move about independently and autonomously of the player.

Unfortunately, persistent game worlds posed quite a challenge for early developers, since most personal computers lacked the requisite memory and processor speed. Although real-time 3D graphics were certainly possible on these machines, they came at the expense of colors and textures, leaving a great deal of the gameworld to the imagination. However, by the late 1980s, a growing percentage of computer gamers had replaced their 8-bit machines with Atari ST and Commodore Amiga computers. These machines offered better graphics, sound, memory, and storage options—assets not lost on game developers, who saw the growing demand for games that show off the impressive new capabilities of these new systems.

### *Dungeon Master*

FTL Games responded early and decisively to the challenge, releasing their classic hit *Dungeon Master* in 1987. *Dungeon Master* spread like wildfire on the Atari ST, and it remains the most successful game ever released for that platform. The game struck gold a second time after it was ported to the ri-



*Dungeon Master* became the best-selling game of all time for the Atari ST. It revolutionized the industry and was still being cloned nearly a decade later.

val Commodore Amiga platform in 1988, again dropping jaws and sending hordes of gamers scrambling to their local game shop. Contemporary reviews sound like the most over-hyped ad-copy; one reads, “This has to be the most amazing game of all time, anywhere, ever—the best game we’ve ever seen.”<sup>2</sup> Even today, some twenty years after its initial release, *Dungeon Master* is still being enjoyed by thousands of fans, many of whom flock to online message boards to compare notes and swap stories about their favorite CRPG.

But what is it about *Dungeon Master* that explains its enviable success? Though it is hailed for its innovative use of sound and a storyline by a professional novelist (Nancy Holder), for our purposes the most significant feature is the game’s 3D interface and real-time gameplay. The bulk of the screen is composed of a first-person view of the party’s current perspective. This screen is updated in real-time as the player explores the dungeon, much like the setup of *Doom* and other first-person shooters. On the top of this window are four boxes showing the current status of the four characters, the items they are holding, and their relative position (e.g., who is in front and back). The rest of the screen is dedicated to the magic system, attack mode, and directional buttons. Although the directional keys are a bit cumbersome on the ST version (players must click them with the mouse), later versions allow all movement (including rotating) to be executed from the keyboard.

Unlike most games of the era, *Dungeon Master* offers real-time combat. When the party is attacked, the player must work frantically to issue orders

<sup>2</sup> See the review of the game in the Apr. 1989 issue of *Zzap!*

(i.e., attack, cast a spell, quaff a potion), always taking into consideration how long it will take each character to perform and recover (we might compare this system to Square's later Active Time Battle system). Since very few of these actions can be automated or prepared beforehand, players need rapid reflexes and considerable endurance to complete the game. Many gamers suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome today may have *Dungeon Master* to blame!

However, *Dungeon Master* is far from a simple clickfest. Most noticeably, the game's magic system is complex and arguably more logical than simple point-based systems (*The Bard's Tale*) or slot systems (*Pool of Radiance*, *Wizardry*). In *Dungeon Master*, players cast spells by stringing together runes. Although only certain predetermined sequences actually have effects, players can determine the potency of any spell (or potion) and subsequently how much magical energy to expend in the process. Furthermore, although any character can try to cast a spell, only practiced mages and priests can pull off really effective feats of magic. However, the manual doesn't include a magical recipe book, so players must either find spells sprinkled throughout the vast dungeon, experiment in a trial-and-error fashion, or consult a hint book. In any case, it's a versatile if somewhat daunting spell system for novices. A comparable system shows up in Event Horizon's *The Summoning* (1992) and Dynamix's *Betrayal at Krondor* (1993).

Adding to the real-time aspect is the need to provide food and water for the characters—a gameplay element seen in many earlier games, including *Ultima* and *Might and Magic*. Thankfully, the need for sustenance in *Dungeon Master* is infrequent enough to avoid being a nuisance. As in *Rogue*, hungry characters can even gobble down the carcasses of many of the slain monsters, though it's best to collect the turkey legs and other foods conveniently left lying about the dungeon (one wonders about the sanitation, though). Navigating the many corridors is itself quite challenging. Particularly infamous are the rotating traps that spin the party and bewilder the player. It's well worth hunting down the compass, a rather essential item secreted away in the dungeon.

### *Chaos Strikes Back*

Considering the success of the first *Dungeon Master*, one wonders why FTL took a full two years to follow up with *Chaos Strikes Back*. Although details are hard to come by, there seem to have been substantial production delays. One contemporary reviewer quipped, "The game has been due out 'in two weeks' for over a year and half."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Heidi Brumbaugh's review of the game in the June 1990 issue of *START*.

When *Chaos Strikes Back* was at last released, it was marketed as “expansion set #1,” though no further expansions were ever offered. Usually, expansion sets require the original program to run, but this was not the case with *Chaos Strikes Back*—though the difficulty level was enough to stop all but the most determined new players at the gate. Indeed, even veterans found the game exceptionally challenging. FTL seems to have anticipated a negative reaction to the game’s difficulty and included a Hint Oracle, which offers hints based on the party’s position in the dungeon.

*Chaos Strikes Back* uses the same game engine as the first game, though with some new graphics and monsters. There’s a greater emphasis on puzzle solving and navigation; in general, the game is more difficult. Players can either create new characters or import their old ones, editing their portraits and names using the included Utility Disk. In any case, the party begins the game without equipment or supplies. The party’s mission is to find and destroy four pieces of a magical ore called corbum, which Lord Chaos needs to draw power. Naturally, the corbum is hidden deep within a booby-trapped and monster-infested dungeon and can only be disposed of in the magical Forge of Fulya.

Considering the unprecedented success of the first game, it’s no surprise that *Chaos Strikes Back* sold well initially. However, the game’s extraordinary difficulty level probably explains why it’s not as well known as its famous predecessor.

### *The Legend of Skullkeep*

The last of the *Dungeon Master* games, *Dungeon Master II: The Legend of Skullkeep*, appeared in 1994 for the Sega CD, and a year later for DOS and Macintosh. Although FTL was an American company, they decided to first release the game in Japan, targeting the PC-9821, FM Towns, and Sega CD platforms. Again, FTL seems to have been stymied by production delays, and by the game’s release date had still barely managed to enhance the aged game engine with an automapping system and shops for buying equipment. The game was not well received by critics, who found its graphics and gameplay quite dated for 1994. Although the first *Dungeon Master* is a fine game, it was really the wow factor of the graphics that catapulted it into the mainstream. Lacking impressive graphics and the enthusiastic support of the Atari ST community, *The Legend of Skullkeep* was doomed from the start.

### *Eye of the Beholder*

SSI was one of the first publishers to follow in the wake of FTL’s *Dungeon Master*, releasing Westwood Associates’ *Eye of the Beholder* in 1991 for the

Commodore Amiga and DOS platforms. *Eye of the Beholder* was the first in what would become a trilogy of “Black Box” games, so named after their distinctive black packaging that otherwise resembled the highly successful “Gold Box” CRPGs.

We’ve already encountered Westwood in previous chapters: they were responsible for porting several popular Apple II CRPGs to other platforms and were thus exposed to a wide variety of design strategies. In 1988 they released their first original CRPG, a sci-fi game called *Mars Saga* for the Commodore 64, enhanced and re-released as *Mines of Titan* for DOS. These games were much in the vein of the “Gold Box” series, with first-person exploration and turn-based, top-down combat. 1988 also saw the release of one of Westwood’s most popular CRPGs, *Battletech: The Crescent Hawk’s Inception*, a game based on the well-known *Battletech* wargaming franchise. We’ll talk more about this game later in this chapter.

Westwood’s *Eye of the Beholder* games are set in TSR’s Forgotten Realms, the same popular universe used in *Pool of Radiance* and its sequels. As in *Dungeon Master*, the player controls a party of four characters—however, in *Eye of the Beholder*, two nonplayer characters can also join the party. Another key difference is that players create their own characters rather than select them from a Hall of Heroes, as in *Dungeon Master*. Further differences are a built-in compass and a slot-style spell system with over 40 spells. Players



Westwood combined *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* with *Dungeon Master* and emerged with one of the best games of the early nineties.

select which spells they wish their mages to memorize or clerics to pray for, then camp until the characters done completed the task; it's basically the same system seen in the "Gold Box" games.

The story in the first game concerns a mysterious evil presence underneath the city of Waterdeep. Little is known about the nature of this evil, but the name Xanathar seems relevant. Naturally, the characters are instructed to investigate, but a sudden cave-in leaves them stranded in the sewers beneath the city. The only way out of the sewers is through the dungeon, which, of course, is crawling with monsters and loaded with booby-traps.

### *The Legend of Darkmoon*

The second *Eye of the Beholder* game, *The Legend of Darkmoon* (1991), adds outdoor areas and focuses more on plot and dialog with other characters. It also offers a better system for saving the game: instead of replacing a single saved game with each save, players choose among six different slots.

Though the story starts off as vaguely as the first—players must explore a mysterious evil in the Tower of Darkmoon. People have been inexplicably disappearing from villages to the north and west of Waterdeep, and it's suspected that a powerful artifact might be involved. Perhaps as a nod to the classic "Gold Box" games, the manual includes a sampling of numbered journal entries that provide additional context, though (thankfully) these are meant to be read at once rather than at appointed times during the game.

Most fans of the series consider *The Legend of Darkmoon* the best of the series. While it sported impressive graphics and sound for its time, it's probably the meticulously crafted gameplay and fascinating setting that endeared it to so many gamers.

### *Assault on Myth Drannor*

The third and final *Eye of the Beholder* game is *Assault on Myth Drannor*, released in 1993 and almost universally regarded as a disappointing and lackluster finale to the series. One possible reason for the game's poor performance is that it was not developed by Westwood, but rather by SSI's own internal development team. It does add some nice features, such as an ALL ATTACK button that commands the entire party to attack with a single mouse click. Another nice innovation concerns pole-arms, or weapons with long shafts. Now, a character wielding a spear or halberd can attack from the rear, taking advantage of the extended reach of the weapon. It also offered more cinematic intermissions than the previous game. Even the manual tried to surpass the

previous installments, featuring a 26-page novelette by Ed Greenwood, creator of the *Forgotten Realms* campaign setting. However, these touches weren't enough to salvage the dull, repetitive, and frustrating gameplay.

Like the other *Eye of the Beholder* games, the party's ultimate goal is kept shrouded in mystery. Ostensibly, their quest is to enter the haunted ruins of Myth Drannor in search of an artifact held by a lich, a powerful undead being. Unfortunately, neither Greenwood's novelette nor the storylines of the previous two games are integrated into *Assault on Myth Drannor*. Instead, we get a drab and unimaginative "hack'n slash."

### Dungeon Hack

Although not technically part of the *Eye of the Beholder* series, *Dungeon Hack* shares much of the underlying graphics technology. However, as the name suggests, *Dungeon Hack* is an attempt to update the old random-dungeons of games such as *Rogue* with a first-person, 3D interface. Developed by DreamForge and published by SSI in 1993, *Dungeon Hack* is a straightforward dungeon crawl with an emphasis on hack'n slash-style gameplay. As with *Rogue* and *Nethack*, the player creates and controls a single adventurer.

Indeed, even the plot is reminiscent of many an old mainframe CRPG: players must descend into a dungeon to recover an orb. Still, while simplistic, the random but customizable dungeons and AD&D game rules make for a compelling, if brief, experience. It's a great game for gamers who don't wish to invest the hundreds of hours necessary to complete an *Eye of the Beholder* game; it's a quick fix, much like the mainframe games it's based on. The only



DreamForge combined *Rogue* with *Eye of the Beholder* to create *Dungeon Hack*.

real complaint from critics (then and now) is the difficulty of finding enough food to keep the adventurer alive.

## *Crystals of Arborea* and the *Ishar* Trilogy

*Crystals of Arborea* is the prequel to the well-regarded *Ishar* trilogy, a series of games developed and published in 1990 by Silmarils, a French company founded by brothers Louis-Marie and Andre Rocques. *Crystals of Arborea* quickly faded into obscurity, though it does offer an interesting innovation to the *Dungeon Master* model: the six-member party can be split up into smaller, autonomous groups as in *Midwinter* and *Hired Guns*, which we'll discuss in a moment. Another change from the *Dungeon Master* model is a special tactical screen for combat—a simple grid with only the heads of characters and monsters shown.

*Crystals of Arborea* puts players in the role of Prince Jarel of Arborea. The evil Lord of Chaos and Death, Morgoth, has been so vile of late that the gods send a great flood, which leaves all but the land of Arborea underwater. To appease the gods, Jarel must recover the four crystals stolen by Morgoth and replace them in their shrines. The game had promise but was not a hit with critics, who disliked its steep difficulty level and over-emphasis on combat.

### *Ishar: Legend of the Fortress*

*Ishar: Legend of the Fortress*, released by Silmarils in 1992, was the first of what would become a modestly successful series of CRPGs based on the *Dungeon Master* model. Critics were impressed with the high-quality graphics, vast gameworld, and nonlinear gameplay.

*Legend of the Fortress* did away with the autonomous parties and special combat mode of *Crystals of Arborea*. Instead, it uses an interface that resembles *Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra*, with a row of character portraits at the bottom of the screen and a large, 3D view of the scenery. Perhaps the most original aspect of the game concerns the party, which must be recruited from a cast of predefined characters encountered during the game. Each character has a unique personality, and some are treacherous and less than polite. Party management is a key part of the game, since the companions can form friendships with each other. If the player wants to dismiss a companion, the decision will be put to a vote by the party, who may choose not to honor the request. The storyline is rather vague but amounts to entering the titular fortress and liberating Arborea from the evil overlord Krogh.



The *Ishar* series is a *Dungeon Master*-inspired game from France.

Perhaps the least popular innovation in *Legend of the Fortress* is a save game system that costs the player gold. This is especially problematic at the start of the game, when gold is scarce and probably better spent on other needs.

### *Messengers of Doom*

The next *Ishar* game is *Messengers of Doom*, released in 1993. *Messengers of Doom* is based largely on the previous game engine, though the gameworld is greatly expanded, with over 40,000 locations. The party members can now recruit pets for allies (a feature common to several roguelikes) and have the ability to create potions. Players can create new characters or import their old ones. The story this time concerns an evil wizard named Shandar, who is trying to conquer Arborea with a powerful hallucinogenic drug. Reviewers were again impressed with the overall quality of the game, granting it high scores and recommending it strongly to fans of the genre.

### *The Seven Gates of Infinity*

The third and final game of the trilogy is *The Seven Gates of Infinity*, released in 1994. Widely considered the best of the series, the final episode boasts excellent photorealistic graphics, puzzles, and side-quests, as well as an exceptionally large game world.

The party defeated Shandar in the previous game, but he's determined to make a comeback—by transferring his spirit into the body of a black drag-

on! Of course, it's up to the party to stop him, a task that will take them all over the world and even through time.

Although reviewers were generally approving, they did poke fun at the discrepancies in dress. As one put it, "Leather-clad fetishists rub shoulders with cider-swilling country bumpkins—the effect is ludicrously laughable rather than atmospheric."<sup>4</sup> Many of these characters are part of the background and cannot be interacted with, which annoyed some reviewers—though others found them handy references for navigation. We'll talk about other experiments with photo and cinematic realism (full motion video) when we discuss *Guardians of Destiny* and *Prophecy of the Shadow*.

All in all, the games of the *Ishar* series were impressive at times but seemed to have been more popular in Europe than North America. Though the games were available for Atari ST and DOS, the Amiga versions were the most successful. This fact might explain why the series fared better in Europe, since the Amiga remained a well-supported platform there for many years after it had ceased to be supported in the U.S.

## *Realms of Arkania*

In 1993, Sir-Tech jumped on the *Dungeon Master* craze by publishing Attic's *Realms of Arkania: Blade of Destiny*. It was the first of what would become a trilogy of games based on the tabletop RPG *Das Schwarze Auge*, or *The Dark Eye*, a strong competitor for *AD&D* in Germany. One of the innovations of this role-playing system is that the characters have seven negative qualities (superstition, acrophobia, claustrophobia, avarice, necrophobia, curiosity, violent temper) as well as the seven positive qualities (courage, wisdom, charisma, dexterity, agility, strength, intuition), all with direct effects on the gameplay. Although these qualities are selected randomly by rolling for each statistic, the player has the option to tweak them with the change attributes tool. However, every positive trait raised in this fashion is counterbalanced by a mandatory two-point change to a negative attribute. It's a brilliantly balanced and intuitive system but seems to have spawned no imitators.

In addition to the fourteen attributes, each character also has training in skills, which are broken up into seven basic categories: combat, body, social, nature, lore, craftsmanship, and intuition. Each time a character levels up, he or she gets a certain number of points to distribute among these skills, though the points are not allocated equally. For example, a character leveling

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<sup>4</sup> See Steve McGill's review of the game in the Sep. 1994 issue of *Amiga Format*.



*Realms of Arkania* offers a *Dungeon Master*-style exploration mode coupled with isometric, turn-based combat.

up will get only one point to put toward a combat skill, as opposed to two points for body skills and three for lore. A check is made against the characters' skill level whenever they attempt a relevant action. As if this weren't complex enough, some of the checks also take various attributes into consideration. For instance, if a character wants to earn a few extra crowns playing music in a tavern, a check is made against his or her instrument skill, which factors in wisdom, intelligence, and dexterity. Likewise, the attributes can be affected by the character's condition—drink too much ale, and charisma plummets.

Another major deviation from the *Dungeon Master* model is a separate interface for combat, which utilizes a tile-based isometric perspective. Furthermore, combat is turn-based rather than real-time, allowing for more emphasis on tactics and strategy. The game is also noted for its realism, which takes into consideration the party's hunger and thirst as well as the effects of weather and terrain on movement. Careful study of the 76-page manual is essential for successful gameplay.

Like *Legend of the Fortress*, *Blade of Destiny* penalized players for saving the game, this time costing them experience points rather than gold. Players who saved the game frequently would see their party steadily weaken. The rationale behind these design decisions is that conventional save game systems lower the stakes too much, reducing the vital element of risk that makes a game fun to play. We'll see plenty of other attempts to deal with this "problem," which seems to bother developers far more than players.

As the title suggests, *Blade of Destiny* is a quest for a magical sword. The six-member party must first seek out the map, which has been torn into nine pieces and scattered across the land. Attic went to great pains to flesh out the gameworld with details from the tabletop RPG, much as SSI did with its TSR-licensed games. The result is a richly nuanced game with plenty to offer those willing to dedicate the time and attention needed to learn it.

The next two entries in the series, *Star Trail* and *Shadows Over Riva*, shift from the *Dungeon Master* mold to the smooth-scrolling technology of *Ultima Underworld*. We'll discuss these games in Chapter 10.

## *Lands of Lore*

After completing *The Legend of Darkmoon*, the second game in the famed *Eye of the Beholder* series, Westwood set to work on *Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos*, the first of what would become a three-game series. However, only the first game employs the *Dungeon Master* model of discrete rather than fluid movement through the 3D environment. Despite this limitation, fans usually consider it the best game in the series.

*The Throne of Chaos* was published in 1993 by Virgin and quickly won over gamers and critics with its intuitive interface, polished graphics, quality soundtrack, and intelligent story. It is an exceptionally accessible game, with enough wit and charm not only to please existing CRPG fans but to make new ones as well. Westwood even managed to recruit the voice talent of Patrick Stewart, the famed Captain Picard of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. What really makes this game stand out, though, is the almost alarming ease



Westwood's *Lands of Lore* offers a great story, superb graphics, and a slick interface. It's just as playable today as it was in 1993.

with which a new player can master the interface and become emotionally invested in the outcome.

Much of the game's brilliance lies in its simple yet effective interface. The commands and statistics are deliberately kept to a minimum—each player only has two ability scores, might and protection—the higher the number, the better. The three classes (fighter, rogue, and mage) are not predefined but are treated as skills that increase with practice. A simple bar graph shows how much more practice is needed to advance to the next level in each skill. Players are also spared the need to create a character from scratch, instead choosing one of four predefined characters at the beginning of the game. Other characters are recruited later on.

The interface also follows the precedent established in *Might and Magic: Clouds of Xeen* by showing the characters' faces along the bottom of the screen; damaged characters appear swollen and bruised. Such visual cues are much more effective than a simple number or line graph. Another good example of superior design concerns the shops: rather than select items from a text menu, the player simply clicks on the items he or she wishes to purchase. Westwood seems to have taken every opportunity to replace text and numbers with self-explanatory visuals. Even the automapper is a cut above, showing not only where the party has been, but also the location of doors and the names of special rooms.

The magic system is quite intuitive, consisting of a short list of spells that can be cast at different levels of power. Pumping more power into a spell deals more damage but costs more magic points. We saw a similar system in

*Dungeon Master*, though in that game casting spells was greatly complicated by the need to memorize and quickly arrange runes.

The game's storyline concerns an evil witch named Scotia, leader of a Dark Army and wielder of a powerful artifact that allows her to assume the form of any creature. The player is commissioned by King Richard to fetch a mystical ruby, but the party arrives too late, and the king has been poisoned in the interval. It's up the party to save King Richard as well as defeat Scotia.

If *Realms of Arkania* extended the *Dungeon Master* model to add complexity and nuance, *Lands of Lore* compressed it, making a game that was much easier to learn but not without challenge. The result was a thoroughly captivating game that is as fun to play today as it was in 1993. Westwood followed up with two sequels, which we'll discuss in Chapter 10.

### *Anvil of Dawn*

One of the last *Dungeon Master* clones is *Anvil of Dawn*, developed by DreamForge and published by New World Computing in 1995. *Anvil of Dawn* is often compared to *Lands of Lore* because it offers a good balance of combat, story, and puzzle solving. The interface is quite intuitive, with a great automapper, a journal (to keep track of the story and quests), and a sensible inventory system.

The player starts off by selecting one of five avatars, three males and two females (including a black female). The characters come with preset attributes, though the player can modify them as desired. The choice of character also affects the narrative, especially the ending (each character has a unique



DreamForge's excellent *Anvil of Dawn* offers a diverse cast of player characters to choose from.

ending). The story concerns a terrible Warlord whose might seems unassailable. The player's character is among five volunteers who pledge their lives to defeat the Warlord, though it'll be a while before the player learns how to achieve this goal.

Combat is superbly handled—the left mouse button attacks with the weapon in the character's left hand, and the right mouse button swings with the right. It's a simple and straightforward technique that enhances the player's identification with the hero. The magic system is also quite clever. Instead of casting spells from a book, the character traces out a magical pattern with his or her finger. Doing so uses up spell points but also takes time, depending on the symbol; there may not be enough time to cast a long spell before a monster is near enough to attack.

All in all, *Anvil of Dawn* is one of the best of the *Dungeon Master*-inspired games and remains quite playable today. Although it lacks the real-time rendering of later games such as *Ultima Underworld*, careful pacing, splendid music, and a superior interface more than make up for this disadvantage.

## *Stonekeep*

Interplay released *Stonekeep* in 1995, touting it as an “epic production” with “Hollywood special effects.” What’s interesting here is that the “snapping” camera of *Dungeon Master*-style engines was actually quite dated by 1995, some three years after *Ultima Underworld* and *DOOM* established a new standard for first-person perspective gameplay. The relative obsolescence of the engine is likely explained by its rather painful production cycle; it spent nearly seven hectic years in development. However, the game does feature some of the best cinematic elements of 1995, making good use of the new CD-ROM storage format. It’s noted for its full-screen gameplay, which is kept free of informational windows.

*Stonekeep* is comparable in many ways to *Anvil of Dawn*, particularly regarding combat. Again, the left and right mouse buttons correspond to the left and right hands of the hero. However, in this game the player has no say in the generation of the main character (or the other characters who join him later). There’s also a good journaling and automapping system that tracks the hero’s activities, and players can add their own notes.

The character’s development is based on a simple skills system: the more the hero uses a particular weapon (hammer, dagger, etc.), the more skilled he’ll become in its use. The “magick” system is rudimentary but intriguing in concept. To use magic, the hero must first find runes, which can be scribed



Interplay's *Stonekeep* is one of the few CRPGs to feature extensive live action sequences.

onto wooden sticks called rune casters. The rune casters must be regularly recharged via Mana Circles. Many of the spells are offensive, though there are also defensive, preparatory, and teleportation spells.

The point of the game is to free the goddess Thera by recovering nine receptacles. Only then can the evil god Khull-Khumm be defeated and Stonekeep restored to its former glory. Of course, finding the receptacles will entail quite a bit of combat as well as puzzle solving.

Most critics who praised this game did so because of the immersive atmosphere created by the music, sound effects, voice acting, and cinematics. The game box featured a hologram on the cover and included a paperback novel named *Thera Awakening*, penned by Steve Jackson and David Pulver. Unfortunately, critics lamented the many bugs, including several that cause the game to crash. It's also a very difficult game to get running properly on modern operating systems.

## Other *Dungeon Master*-Inspired Games

If we judge CRPGs according to their influence—as measured by the number of clones and imitators that follow in their wake—then *Dungeon Master* certainly deserves a revered place in the canon. Although SSI's *Eye of the Beholder* series is probably the most famous to follow FTL's example, others followed all throughout the 1990s, slowing down only when computer technology finally made it feasible to offer fluid rather than discrete movement (a topic we'll address later on).

Some *Dungeon Master* clones, such as Pandora's 1988 release *Death Bringer* (released in Europe as *Galdregon's Domain*), are quite rough, unimagi-

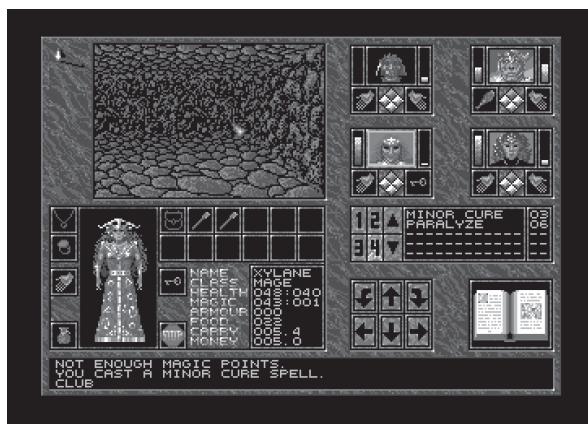
native, and unplayable by modern standards. Others are of much higher quality, with promising innovations to the original *Dungeon Master* model. The games we'll discuss are *Abandoned Places*, *Black Crypt*, *Bloodwydch*, *Captive*, *Liberation*, and *Hired Guns*.

### *Abandoned Places*

One of the most unabashed *Dungeon Master* clones is ArtGame's *Abandoned Places: A Time for Heroes*, a game published in 1992 for the Commodore Amiga and DOS platforms. This German game did make some interesting innovations to the gameplay, however, by liberally adding cinematic cutscenes and a top-down "bird's eye" display mode for overland travel. Like *Lands of Lore*, the characters' portraits change to reflect the amount of damage they've suffered in combat. There's also a diamond-shaped directional selector for attacking in any direction. It's even possible to get the signals crossed and attack a fellow party member!

*A Time for Heroes* offers *Dungeon Master*'s four-party setup and even employs a similar story behind their selection (twelve heroes are preserved in stone for just such an occasion, but Kalynthia's wizards only have enough power to restore four of them to serve the quest). The resurrected heroes are sent after the evil Bronakh.

*A Time for Heroes* is also noted for being particularly difficult at the beginning of the game. The party must escape from a monster-infested tem-



Curiously obscure, *Abandoned Places* is a German *Dungeon Master* clone that lets individual party members attack in different directions.

ple—without any arms or armor. It's a particularly difficult sequence and establishes early on that the game is not for novices.

Though *A Time for Heroes* had promise, its publisher, Electronic Zoo, collapsed soon after its release, and many English-speaking players never saw it. A sequel was published by International Computer Entertainment in 1993, *Abandoned Places II*, which made some improvements to the interface, such as a heartbeat sound that grows louder and more frantic when monsters are nearby—a nice effect pioneered in the much older *Dungeons of Daggorath*. Unfortunately, *Abandoned Places 2* was never ported to the DOS platform, making it more obscure than its predecessor.

### *Black Crypt*

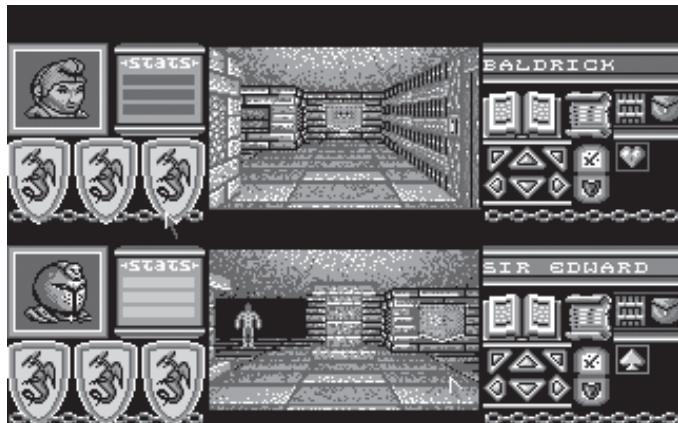
*Black Crypt* was developed by a Wisconsin-based company called Raven Software, who would go on to create many well-known games for the PC. Published in 1992 by Electronic Arts in 1992, *Black Crypt* is an Amiga-only CRPG that is virtually unknown outside the Amiga community, where it enjoys a reputation as a solid, well-crafted example of the genre. *Black Crypt* is a fairly straightforward *Dungeon Master* clone, though players create characters rather than selecting them from a cast of prerolled heroes. The storyline has the party seeking out an evil cleric named Estoroth Paingiver, who's somehow managed to escape his magically sealed Black Crypt and now threatens the land of Astera.

*Black Crypt* was originally envisioned as a conventional tabletop RPG, designed by brothers Brian and Steve Raffel. The brothers are credited as artists on the Amiga version. Later, the Raffel brothers designed *Shadowcaster*, an unusual first-person fighting and CRPG hybrid based on the *Doom* engine.

### *Bloodwych*

Mirrorsoft's *Bloodwych*, published in 1989 by Konami for a wide range of platforms, is one of the earliest CPRGs based on the *Dungeon Master* model and is most noted for its split screen interface, which allows two players to enjoy the game simultaneously. Each player controls a four-member party that can move about the dungeons independently of the other. Players can also swap party members around as they see fit, hiring new members if the original ones don't live up to their expectations.

The goal of this dark fantasy game is to destroy the evil Zendick, whose undead minions have been terrorizing the village of Treihadwyl. Only a secret alliance of psychic sorcerers named the Bloodwych can prevent Zendick from



*Bloodwyche* features a split-screen option so that two players can enjoy the game simultaneously.

ravaging the land of Trazere. Ultimately, the party must confront the Lord of Entropy, a being whose purpose in life is to dissolve the “fabric of the universe” and restore it to its original chaotic state.

The game is also noted for its dialog system, which grants the ability to interact with friends and foes even during combat. Allies need to have their egos stroked (but not too much, or they’ll get too confident in their judgment), and flattering the merchants will win the party discounts on merchandise. The spell system is based on a big book of spells rather than on the esoteric rune-arranging system of *Dungeon Master*. Any character can cast spells if he or she has enough magic points, though these will be far scarcer for warriors than mages.

Unfortunately for Mirrorsoft, critics mustered little praise for the game. Although the story and multiplayer options were admirable, the graphics were dull compared to *Dungeon Master*'s, and the soundtrack was lamentable. The developers went on to create *Hexx: Heresy of the Wizard*, a 1994 game that we'll discuss in Chapter 10.

### Xenomorph and Space Wrecked

Although Pandora's *Death Bringer* is insipid at best, their 1990 game *Xenomorph* is much more interesting, being something of a sci-fi thriller reminiscent of the film *Aliens*. It's set in a mysteriously abandoned mining station, where the player's character has been forced to dock his heavily damaged ship.

The player's primary mission is to gather the parts needed to repair his craft, though along the way he'll learn what happened to the crew of the station—and, of course, battle plenty of fearsome aliens.

Unfortunately, as with *Death Bringer*, the production values were low, with poor sound and graphics. Critics also complained about the lack of automapping and difficult navigation. Like many games of the era, much of the story was printed in the game's manual as novelistic prose.

*Space Wrecked: 14 Billion Light Years from Earth*, developed by Celestial Software and released in 1990, is in much the same vein but offers the option to program six different droids to assist with the mission. Although promising, it too attracted little more than faint praise from critics and is now just another crumpled box at the bottom of the CRPG bargain bin of history.

### *Captive*

*Captive*, by Antony and Chris Crowther of Mindscape, is an imaginative and well-regarded game, released in 1990 for the Atari ST and the Commodore Amiga, and two years later for DOS. Perhaps the best way to describe the game is as an amalgamation of *Dungeon Master* and Infocom's classic text adventure *Suspended* (1982), with a hint of Interplay's *Neuromancer* tossed in for spice.

In brief, *Captive* casts players in the role of an imprisoned amnesiac, whose only means of interacting with the outside world is a briefcase computer. The computer is networked to four droids, who must explore a series of bases (sci-fi themed dungeons) located on different planets, gathering information and battling vicious alien creatures and robots. Once the droids have explored all the bases, they can free the player and end the game—or the player can opt to be recaptured, restarting the game with a fresh mission. Like *Telengard*, *Captive* generates dungeons using an algorithm, allowing up to 5,957 different missions on some versions (the DOS version is limited to 257).

The droids don't gain experience points that can be used to increase their skills. Most of these deal with proficiency with certain weapon types (i.e., rifles, swords, automatics). The robotics skill is more generalized; if it's too low, the droid won't be able to use advanced gadgets and accessories. The droids also have scores in dexterity (ability to hit), vitality (ability to dodge), and wisdom (percentage of experience points gained). The droids' various parts can be upgraded and accessorized with all sorts of useful gear, such as radar and an automapper, as well as a diversity of weapons. As in *Dungeon Master*, the droids are arranged in a front and rear rank; the ones in front do

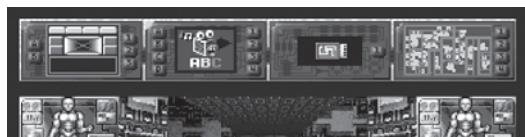
the bulk of the heavy fighting, while the rear droids are limited to projectile weapons. The most damaging weapon in the game is the dreaded spaygun, a rather humorous compositor's error for "spraygun."

*Captive* won many awards but fared better in Britain and France than North America, perhaps not surprising since Mindscape is based in Europe. On a side note, it's this company that purchased SSI in 1994, becoming part of Ubisoft in 2001.

### *Liberation*

Mindscape published Antony Crowther's sequel to *Captive* in 1994, a game entitled *Liberation* for the short-lived Commodore Amiga CD32 game system and later for the stock Amiga platform. The game picks up after the conclusion of the first game, though this time the setting is a cyberpunk world. The story concerns a powerful corporation named BioCorp that has infiltrated the political system to cover up a deadly defect in the droids they are manufacturing for the police. It's up to the player—and his four trusty droids—to expose the plot and convince the emperor to address the situation.

*Liberation* is most often noted for its exceptional graphics, which began with an extensive and well-crafted introductory cinematic that established the context for the game. The characters and creatures roaming the city are composed of solid-color polygons, appropriate considering that they're being viewed through robotic eyes. As before, the player can upgrade the droids with new weapons, parts, and accessories. Combat is fast and furious, though there are also plenty of opportunities for dialog.



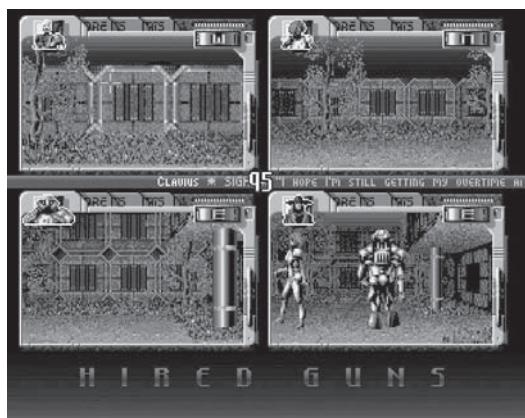
*Liberation* is a futuristic cyberpunk CRPG with a non-intuitive interface.

Though *Liberation* was critically acclaimed by contemporary reviewers, it's not very well known today. The main problem is that it was intended for the CD32 platform, which became defunct rather quickly. Although Mindscape later offered a stripped down floppy-disk version for the stock Amiga platform, it wasn't nearly as impressive. Finally, the game has a fairly steep learning curve, with a complex interface that requires a thorough reading of the manual to understand. Nevertheless, *Captive* and *Liberation* are certainly two of the most intriguing and unusual of the *Dungeon Master*-style games.

### *Hired Guns*

Another company that made bold innovations to the *Dungeon Master* model is DMA Design, whose *Hired Guns* was published in 1993 by Psygnosis for the Amiga and DOS platforms. *Hired Guns* expanded on the multiplayer model of *Bloodwych* by allowing up to four simultaneous players. The screen is broken up into four rectangular windows, one for each of the characters. Characters can move independently or be commanded to follow others (quite useful in single player mode).

Like *Liberation*, *Hired Guns* is set in a dystopian cyberpunk future of 2712. A party of mercenaries is sent to Graveyard, a planet whose terraforming project has gone horribly awry, churning out deadly mutants. A nice twist is that the party has been told they're only there to rescue some hostages but then is marooned on the planet to kill or be killed. The game includes a novella entitled *Countdown to Graveyard*, which establishes the context and biographies of the twelve playable characters.



The Amiga classic *Hired Guns* features a four-way split screen.

*Hired Guns* was sensationaly popular on the Amiga platform, though mostly unnoticed by DOS gamers. If nothing else, it raises interesting questions about the role of cooperative gameplay in CRPGs; obviously, such teamwork is essential in tabletop RPGs. Carving up the screen into multiple windows is certainly one way to bridge the gap, though DMA's example was not followed by others. The problem is that such divisions greatly reduce the viewing area of each window. Later CRPG developers would solve the problem by using local area networks (LANs) and, still later, Internet servers, which allow players to coexist in the same gameworld without having to share the same monitor.

## Other Games of the Golden Age

Although *Dungeon Master*-style games seems to have dominated the cutting edge platforms of the early to mid 1990s, there were plenty of other worthy contenders. Some of these, like Infocom's *Beyond Zork* and Masterplay's *Star Saga*, are eccentric, one-of-a-kind games whose design strategies have not been reattempted by major developers.

### *Battletech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception*

We've already talked a great deal about Westwood Associates, the talent behind the *Eye of the Beholder* games and *Lands of Lore*. Now we turn our attention to *Battletech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception*, a popular game published in 1988 by Infocom. *The Crescent Hawk's Inception* is based on the FASA Corporation's *Battletech* wargaming franchise, a highly developed fictional universe comparable in scope to TSR's various campaign settings. However, in *Battletech* the battles are between giant, highly advanced "Mechs" rather than dragons. Mechs come in many different sizes and shapes, and serve different purposes, but they're usually large fighting vehicles with legs for movement—somewhat like the two-legged AT-ST walking artillery in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*.

Westwood could have taken many different approaches to adapting *Battletech* as a computer game, and most subsequent developers chose strategy or first-person shooter action games. Westwood's game, on the other hand, is a top-down CRPG with turn-based tactical combat and manga-style graphics. The plot focuses on Jason Youngblood, eighteen-year old son of a fallen war hero, who is just learning how to pilot Battlemechs. However, soon after the game begins, Jason's base is overrun by an attacking army. Narrowly escaping



Westwood's *Battletech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception* is a cult classic featuring turn-based combat in giant, bipedal tanks.

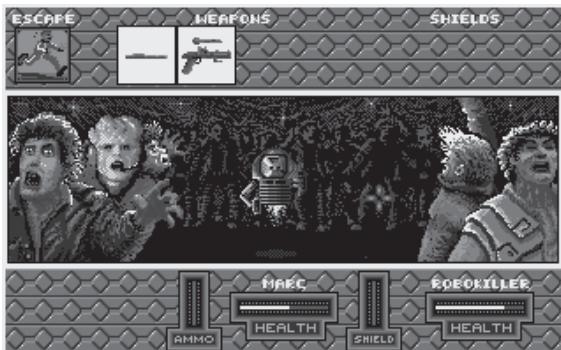
from the enemy, Jason's only hope is to unite with the mysterious Crescent Hawks and organize a guerilla army to retake the Pacifica.

One unusual aspect of the gameplay is the need to invest in the stock market. Money (called c-bills) is very important in the game, since Jason needs it to buy equipment, upgrade, and repair his Mechs. Although many CRPGs offer banks or casinos as way to earn money, few have gone as far as *The Crescent Hawk's Inception*. The game also features an enormous gameworld, which even has Jason traveling to other planets.

The game was generally well received, though some gamers complained about the graphics and sound, which were quite weak by 1988 standards. Most praised the dialog and story, which were well-developed and relevant to the gameplay. Infocom followed their tradition of including some "feelies" in the box, this time a poster and a lapel pin. Westwood and Infocom followed up in 1989 with *The Crescent Hawk's Revenge* for the DOS platform. However, despite the similarity of the name, it's a real-time strategy game and not a true sequel.

### *B.A.T.*

*B.A.T.* is a cyberpunk CRPG, developed by a French team named Computer's Dream and published by UbiSoft in 1990. It's a very unusual game set in an environment reminiscent of the movie *Blade Runner*, with an odd point-



Combat is fast and furious in the cyberpunk game *B.A.T.*

and-click interface and a rapid combat mode that gives players mere seconds to respond. Instead of moving by selecting a direction as in most CRPGs, the player sweeps the mouse over the screen until the pointer indicates a possible exit or action (e.g., talk to a character). This system is very common in most graphical adventure games of the era. The player's mission is to find Vrangor, a criminal mastermind who has just escaped from prison. Vrangor's out to conquer the entire city of Selenia.

The most intriguing aspect of the game is the B.O.B., a "biodirectional organic bioputer." B.O.B. is a computer that's embedded in the character's arm. B.O.B. monitors the character's condition and translates the language of the many robots and aliens he'll encounter. The player can also program B.O.B. using a primitive form of BASIC. Doing so automates many procedures, such as switching between the alien and robot settings when translating dialog, or alerting the player if the character is hungry or thirsty. It's a brilliant innovation that opens up a great many possibilities. There's also a minigame based on a 3D flight simulator.

The character creation system includes fixed attributes as well as selectable competencies and aptitudes, which are similar to the skills systems we've discussed earlier. For instance, there's the Evaluate aptitude, which is checked whenever the character tries to make a purchase. If it's high enough, he'll instantly recognize forgeries; otherwise, he'll be tricked. There are a total of 12 competencies covering a broad spectrum of activities.

Unfortunately, despite *B.A.T.*'s originality, its cumbersome interface kept it out of the spotlight. The second game, *B.A.T. 2: Koshan Conspiracy* (1992), improved the interface and is usually considered the better of the two. In the

sequel, players must stop terrorists and restore the economy, which has been wrecked by the titular conspiracy. The game is considerably larger than the first, and includes racing and arcade as well as flight simulator mini-games.

Both *B.A.T.* games are respectable achievements, with unique gameplay and sophisticated (but not overly complex) character development. Why they didn't fare better in the marketplace is a mystery; the most likely explanation is that they simply got lost in the shuffle. Another possibility is that the point-and-click interface, while so familiar to adventure gamers, simply doesn't work well for CRPGs.

## *Beyond Zork*

Infocom is far better known for their classic text adventures than their occasional foray into other genres, though after their acquisition by Activision in 1986, they seemed more willing to experiment. One such experiment was Brian Moriarty's *Beyond Zork: The Coconut of Quendor* (1987), a zany game that introduces CRPG elements into the classic and much-loved series. Although mostly text-based, it does offer a graphical automapper and an endurance bar for combat, as well as limited support for the mouse.

The CRPG elements are concerned mostly with character creation and combat. The main character now has six attributes: endurance, strength, dexterity, intelligence, compassion, and luck. The attributes improve as the player progresses through the story, and some puzzles can be solved only if the requisite score is high enough.

The story has the player seeking the titular coconut, which somehow will ensure the continued existence of magic. Naturally, there's much more to the plot, with plenty of characters and conundrums along the way. Critics were generally pleased with the game, though by 1987 text-based games had long retreated to the fringes of the commercial game industry. As usual with hybrid games, fans of one or the other contributing genres offered contrasting complaints. CRPG fans didn't feel there was enough focus on combat and character development, whereas text adventure fans thought there was too much. In any case, no other major developers have been willing to revisit the design.

## *Star Saga*

Another of Masterplay's forays into CRPGs is *Star Saga*, a highly innovative game from the cocreator of *Wizardry*, Andrew C. Greenberg. Published by Electronic Arts in 1987, *Star Saga* was intended to be a trilogy, but only

two games were ever made—a sad but common fate in the annals of CRPG history. *Star Saga* is unique because of its determined effort to more closely emulate tabletop role-playing games (it's allegedly based on a tabletop game called *Rekon*). The approach was to heavily integrate extra-game materials, such as a hefty collection of printed texts ("textlets") and even a game board and pieces.

The idea was that players could enrich their computer game experience by referring to these materials during game sessions, for example, moving the tokens around on the map. All that appears on the screen is text describing the current situation and the effects of the players' actions. *Star Saga* is intended to be played by more than one player (up to six), and each player has a unique role and set of tasks. In so many ways, the game functions as a robotic Dungeon Master, and the real action takes place on the tabletop. Obviously, the game can't be properly played via an emulator, so anyone interested in learning more should find an original copy with all the included printed material (nearly three pounds worth). By all accounts, the writing is quite excellent.

The sequel, *Star Saga Two: The Clathran Menace*, appeared in 1989. Unfortunately, despite hyperbolic praise from critics, the games turned out to be an evolutionary dead end. Indeed, nowadays it's rare for developers to include a printed manual and even rarer to find in the box the type of fancy and costly accessories included with *Star Saga*.

## *Mega Traveller*

GDW's *Mega Traveller 1: The Zhodani Conspiracy* was not the first attempt to adapt GDW's classic *Traveller* tabletop RPG for the desktop. That honor goes to Edu-Ware's *Space*, a 1979 game we discussed in Chapter 4. However, Edu-Ware had failed to license or even ask permission before they marketed their game, and GDW was not pleased. GDW announced then that they would license another game based on the franchise, but it took them eleven years to honor their promise. They selected Paragon to publish and codevelop the game, a company that at the time had published only one other CRPG, the surreal *Alien Fires: 2199 A.D.*

*The Zhodani Conspiracy* is certainly an ambitious CRPG, with inordinately sophisticated character creation and development, a massive game-world, and real-time tactical combat. As we might expect, much of the gameplay is similar to what we saw in *Space*. *The Zhodani Conspiracy* offers a five-member party, and each member of which can develop 54 different skills.



Like the *Traveller* RPG it's based on, *The Zhodani Conspiracy* is a difficult game with a steep learning curve.

The game shipped with a 144-page instruction manual—quite a lengthy read for the casual gamer. Needless to say, this game had little appeal beyond the hardcore CRPG community and was more suited to those who were already on intimate terms with the *Traveller* RPG. Although critics were genuinely well-disposed towards the game, noting its varied and open-ended gameplay and almost obsessively compulsive attention to detail, they were quick to alert novices to its steep learning curve and complained about the unwieldy combat mode.

The game is set in the distant future, long after mankind has colonized the stars. The story concerns a particularly aggressive alien race named the Zhodani, which is plotting to ignite a war against the Imperium (the good guys). Treachery and duplicity abound.

After *The Zhodani Conspiracy*, many of Paragon's developers defected and formed their own company, Event Horizon, whose SSI-published games we discussed in the previous chapter.

### *Quest for the Ancients*

The next *MegaTraveller* game is *Quest for the Ancients*, released in 1991—an impressive achievement, considering that most of the original team had left the company. Critics were immediately impressed with the better graphics and improved interface, though the combat mode still posed a few problems, and a serious bug prevented some lines of text from disappearing.

The story concerns an ancient alien artifact that has inexplicably begun to produce a poisonous slime. It's up to the player to find a way to shut it down before it destroys a planet. Again, the game's inordinate complexity ensured that novices had a great deal to learn before playing the game, and again sales were limited mostly to hardcore gamers and fans of the tabletop RPG; the planned third game never appeared.

### *Space 1889 and Twilight 2000*

Paragon also developed two other CRPGs based on GDW tabletop games: *Space 1889* (1990) and *Twilight 2000* (1991).

*Space 1889* is a “steampunk” game set in an alternate universe based on the futuristic writings of early science fiction authors (Verne, Wells, Doyle, and others). The player can create up to 20 characters, each with six attributes and 24 skills, and swap them in and out of the five-character party as desired. The game boasts over 500 distinct nonplayer characters and a large arsenal of unusual weapons, such as “Dr. Gattling’s machine gun.” Unlike most of Paragon’s other offerings, this game is more focused on exploration and puzzle-solving than on tactics. Space travel is a matter of sailing through the “ether,” navigating by the constellations.

The story concerns time travel, which in this universe has been invented by Thomas Edison. The characters set off to find King Tutankhamen’s fabulous treasure but can easily get lost in the countless subplots and nonlinear gameplay. Though the game is something of a cult classic today, it seems to have slipped under the radar of most CRPG fans at the time. No doubt this is mostly owed to the game’s overwhelming complexity.

*Twilight 2000* is set in the postapocalyptic aftermath of World War III. Players control only one character, though they’re in command of 20 soldiers, each of whom has a unique personality and motivations. As in the *Megatraveller* games, players must grapple with intricate character development, with five attributes and 49 skills, and three career types broken into 60 specific occupations. It’s really amazing how detailed character creation can become. The manual outlines a typical scenario: “A character becomes a Farmer for his first four years. After being a Farmer for four years, he may join a military branch or go to school.” The manual also warns that not all of the skills and stats will have a direct bearing on the gameplay, but they may be useful for gamers who wish to transfer their characters to the tabletop game.

The game also features a sophisticated simulation mode for vehicle operation, but ground operations are turn-based. The game is just as complex as

the other Paragon/GDW games and takes players about as far from instant gratification as they can get without joining a monastery.

Paragon's games raise an interesting question about the degree of complexity that goes into a successful CRPG. More complexity makes for more realistic and nuanced gameplay, which appeals strongly to a certain type of gamer. However, most gamers don't want to read a hundred-page rule book just to get started. On the other hand, it's easy to get carried away in the other direction, creating games that can be mastered quickly but subsequently become tedious. It would take developers several more years to master the art of gradually (and painlessly) teaching novices how to play their games using the in-game tutorial. We'll talk more about this topic in later chapters.

## *Whale's Voyage*

*Whale's Voyage* is a 1993 game released for the Commodore Amiga and DOS platforms. It's probably best described as an attempt to blend *Starflight* and *Mega Traveller*. The most interesting aspect of the game is the character creation process, which begins by selecting parents for each of the four characters in the party. The next step is choosing a name (gender is assigned randomly), then mutating the DNA of the baby. However, too much mutation will weaken the baby's genetic structure, theoretically making him or her more susceptible to diseases. I say theoretically here because, although the manual includes this warning, there do not appear to be any such diseases in the game. To my knowledge, this is the only CRPG to introduce such a scheme, though we saw something similar in the JRPG *Phantasy Star II*. Finally, the player must select a school and a college for each character. There are six possible careers, which are determined by the choice of school and college.

While some of the game takes place on a spaceship, the CRPG elements kick in when the player beams down to a planet. Then, the interface changes to the classic *Dungeon Master* model but with a nice automapping tool. The game's storyline amounts to defeating General North, a powerful commander in charge of a fleet of warships, though most of the game is concerned with acquiring wealth and fame, usually by buying and selling goods. The biggest problem (at least at the start of the game) is the party's lack of funds and the rather sorry state of *Rustbucket*, their scrapheap of a ship. The graphics are rather on the primitive side, but the soundtrack is very pleasant.

Unfortunately, *Whale's Voyage* suffers from a downright unbearable interface. Attacking an enemy requires clicking through several menus. Since the battles are in real-time, the party might die before the player can wade



*Whale's Voyage* had promise but suffers from a baffling and cumbersome interface.

through the menus and select an attack. Critics were united in their disdain for the interface, but the developers (NEO Software) didn't bother to address these issues when they released an enhanced version for the Commodore Amiga 1200 and CD32. The save game system is also poor, allowing only one save per game. Curiously, the game does offer codes at certain points. If the party dies, the player can use these codes to restart the game at a later point, with a predetermined party and inventory. Obviously, such a scheme isn't likely to appeal to gamers who grow attached to their original characters. Despite its initial promise, *Whale's Voyage* was far from successful, even on the CD32, a platform on which precious few titles to compete.

## *Darklands: A Historical CRPG*

*Darklands*, published by MicroProse in 1992, is a meticulous historical CRPG set in medieval Germany. It is undeservedly obscure, despite its mind-boggling attention to detail. For instance, not only does the game include historically accurate arms and armor, but even the weight and relative effectiveness of weaponry are incorporated into the gameplay. Even the old German calendar and currency are preserved. The game also boasts a huge gameworld with over 90 German cities and towns, all with historically accurate place names. The manual crams historical information as well as detailed instructions for gameplay into 115 pages.

The character creation process bears an uncanny resemblance to the one seen in the *Mega Traveller* games, beginning with the birth of the charac-



*Darklands* is a meticulous historical CRPG set in medieval Germany.

ter. After selecting a name and gender, players select one of six family backgrounds, which affect the stats and skills and restrict the choice of occupation. The next step is choosing from a list of a dozen or so available occupations, which the character will engage in for five years. The player can then decide whether to spend another five years in an occupation or begin adventuring. As with *MegaTraveller*, there's a tradeoff. Spending more years at various careers builds up skill and experience, but aging decreases agility and other attributes. The player controls a party of four adventurers, so the creation stage can be lengthy—however, the game includes a quick start option that automates much of the process.

The goal of the game is simply to win fame and fortune; the game is quite open-ended and avoids many of the stale *D&D* clichés. There's not even a defined ending. However, there are countless quests to keep the player busy and a rather pertinent mission to save the world from total destruction.

Magic is based on the ancient art of alchemy and is quite intricate. First, the would-be alchemist needs a formula, which states the difficulty of the potion and list of ingredients. The alchemist can mix only a single batch per day but can vary its size (at a proportionate risk of failure). A big goof can damage the party and its equipment; a catastrophe can make an inn or campsite uninhabitable. Any character can use the finished potions. Clerical magic is also more complicated than in the typical CRPG. Clerics can discover and call on 130 different saints, each with a unique personality. However, calling on a saint uses up divine favor points, which must then be regained by performing various deeds. The cleric can also find relics (sacred artifacts) that can boost

stats and decrease the cost of calling on saints; maintaining high virtue is always important for clerics.

Overland travel is shown on a map, but battles are shown from a top-down perspective in real-time. As in the later game *Baldur's Gate*, the player can stop the battle at any time to issue orders, such as aiming at a new target or quaffing a potion.

Unfortunately, the game's code was riddled with show-stopping bugs, and gamers found the save game system irritating at best. Despite these problems, *Darklands* has become a cult classic with a small but highly dedicated following.

## *The Four Crystals of Trazere*

Another exotic game of the Golden Age is Mindscape's *The Four Crystals of Trazere* (1992), released in other countries simply as *Legend*. It's worth mentioning just because of its forward-thinking interface, which involves (among other things) a real-time isometric perspective with independent control of four characters—in other words, an early form of the interface seen in *Baldur's Gate* and *Diablo*.

*The Four Crystals of Trazere* also features one of the most interesting magic systems of any CRPG, comparable in some ways to the component-based systems of the Golden Age *Ultima* games. Preparing a spell requires both spell ingredients and magical runes. There are 16 of these runes broken into two categories: Effecter runes determine the spell's effect, whereas Director runes control the area to be affected. However, these runes are useless without the necessary ingredients. There are eight of these in the game—the stereotypical arcane substances such as wing of bat and phoenix claw. The spells require at least one component from each of the two types of runes. For instance, making a simple magic missile spell requires first applying the Director rune to a batwing, then the Effecter rune to a piece of brimstone. These two components are then mixed to form a spell. A handy remix button lets the player prepare a number of these spells at once, though doing so uses up ingredients.

The starting runemaster has very few runes and can only get more by buying them from The Ancient, a mountain-dwelling master mage. Ingredients can be bought in shops or found in dungeons; found reagents have disguised names, such as “bag of ugly teeth” for dragon teeth. There are hundreds of possible spell combinations, many of which have multiple effects and can be quite powerful. In short, it's a highly flexible and dynamic system, but quite



*The Four Crystals of Trazere* features a sophisticated magic system based on reagents and runes.

easy to master once the player understands the basic principles. Although many spells are used for combat purposes, others are used to solve puzzles, mostly involving floor tile activators. For instance, the magic missile spell must be cast on a marked floor tile to open a door in the first dungeon.

Like many other games of the post-*Dungeon Master* era, the player doesn't create characters but selects them from a roster of predefined adventurers. However, the player can tweak their stats by adjusting the "four elements," which raise some stats and deplete others. The player can also rename the characters to further customize them. The party consists of four adventurers, one from each class: berserker, runemaster, troubadour, and assassin. These are basically equivalent to the standard fighter, mage, bard, and thief classes of *D&D*. The game is carefully balanced to take advantage of each of the companion's special abilities.

The story assigns the party the unenviable task of saving the citizens of Trazere, who have mutated and are wreaking havoc across the countryside. It's up to the player to put a stop to the mutations, which will require gathering up the titular crystals and figuring out how they work. The task will take the player all over and under the land of Trazere. Overland travel shows the party and their enemies and allies as moving flags on a map, whereas dungeons utilize the real-time isometric view.

There's no denying that this game had great promise, but it failed to win much of a following in the U.S., though again it's hard to say why. Some critics complained about the rather sparse manual, which doesn't go into much detail about the spell system and leaves out some rather important caveats that can easily frustrate would-be runemasters.

Mindscape followed up later in 1992 with *Worlds of Legend: Son of the Empire*, which is very similar to the first game except for a change in setting (the Far East). Though critics complained about the simplistic graphics, they applauded the spell system and the intensity of the real-time combat sequences.

## *Legend of the Red Dragon* and BBS Door Games

In passing, I'd like to mention a special category of CRPGs called "BBS Door Games." These games are similar to the MUDs we discussed in Chapter 3. However, these games were not run on mainframes but on personal computers equipped with modems and BBS (bulletin board system) software. In most cases, private enthusiasts would dial up their local BBS to exchange messages or software. Smaller BBSs might have a single line, though more sophisticated and commercially-oriented services could offer dozens of lines and allow visitors to interact in real time. BBSs thrived throughout the 1980s and 1990s, though the rise of the Internet (and especially the World Wide Web) eventually rendered them obsolete.

Many BBSs offered "door games" as a means of attracting and entertaining visitors.<sup>5</sup> These games are often quite simple compared to MUDs and standalone CRPGs. Graphics are either nonexistent or little more than an ANSI or ASCII title screen. Gameplay often consists of selecting options from a text menu. Nevertheless, many door games were quite popular and are the source of no small amount of nostalgia today.

The most important CRPG door game is Seth Robinson's *Legend of the Red Dragon*, released in 1989 for the Commodore Amiga and MS-DOS platforms. A dragon is plaguing a small town, and it's up to the player to gain enough experience and power to dispatch the beast. This quest requires dealing with random encounters in the forest, where the character slays monsters for experience points and gold.

Although *Legend of the Red Dragon* may not sound thrilling to gamers raised on *Dungeon Master*, it managed to compensate for its simplicity with charm and wit—it's not a game that takes itself seriously. There are also many random events that can occur, such as meeting fairies or a talking severed

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<sup>5</sup> These programs were called "door games" because they were launched externally by the BBS software. For more information, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBS\\_door](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBS_door).

head in the forest—it's even possible to get a proposal of marriage from Violet the barmaid and have children. The game limits players to a mere ten to twenty minutes daily, a limitation that helped free up the line and keep players from growing bored. For most fans, *Legend of the Red Dragon* was enjoyed the same way others enjoy the daily crossword puzzle—a pleasant way to occupy a few idle moments, but certainly not the sort of hobby that eats weekends for breakfast.

Today, gamers can play *Legend of the Red Dragon* in their browsers by visiting <http://lord.nuklear.org>, which offers a JAVA version of the program. There is also a PHP version available at <http://lord.lordlegacy.com>.

### *New World*

*Legend of the Red Dragon* was successful enough to warrant a sequel, *New World*, released in 1992 for MS-DOS. This game is a significant departure from its predecessor, offering top-down ANSI graphics and real-time gameplay. It's probably best described as a roguelike, though with more quests and opportunities for interaction with other players. We'll have a chance to talk more about Robinson in Chapter 10, when we discuss his *Dink Smallwood* action CRPG.

## Summing Up the Golden Age

Although we still have plenty of groundbreaking CRPGs to cover, the late 1980s and early 1990s were by far the most prolific and diverse period in CRPG history. Imagine the diversity, with games like *Star Saga* and *Beyond Zork* sitting alongside *Dungeon Master* and *Quest for Glory* on the same game rack. Meanwhile, countless games were flooding in from Europe, and console owners were getting a steady diet of Japanese hits like *Final Fantasy* and *Phantasy Star*.

We also see in this age plenty of games obviously designed with the hardcore gamer in mind, the type of person who knows the rules of complex RPGs like *Traveller* inside and out. Imagine opening a game box to find a textbook of a hundred pages or more of mandatory reading just to get past the character creation process, much less survive the first hostile encounter. Such games are virtually unheard of today, when gamers expect to be up and running with even the most sophisticated new games in minutes. Today, a sprawling project like *Star Saga* or *Darklands* wouldn't get past the first round of negotiation with a commercial publisher.

On the other hand, we also see the opposite trend, particularly with the JRPGs flooding into North America via Nintendo and Sega's cheap but capable game consoles. These games stripped the CRPG to its essence, then added action elements more reminiscent of *Super Mario Bros.* than *Ultima*. Nevertheless, highly successful and well-crafted JRPGs captivated gamers with thoughtful (if linear) narratives and deeply developed characters, far more so than most CRPGs. These two trajectories will merge somewhat as we move forward, with JRPGs taking on more strategy and CRPGs incorporating more action.

As the Golden Age draws to a close in the mid 1990s, we see a rising concentration of power in the hands of a few megasized publishers who cater exclusively to the mainstream. The games industry grows into a billion-dollar industry, and development will become increasingly specialized and professionalized. No longer will a lone programmer or even a single team of designers be responsible for an entire program. Instead, large and often unwieldy groups of diverse specialists will collaborate on games, though the lack of effective team programming tools and techniques (as well as a myriad of incompatible hardware and software standards) will lead to many bugs and glitches in their products.

Furthermore, publishers (and thus developers) will become more focused on interfaces and graphics than on bold but financially risky experiments in game design. In short, we'll see less invention and innovation, but more craft and sophistication as CRPG developers consolidate their gains.

# 9

## The Bigger They Come

The bigger they come, the harder they fall.

At least, that's one way we can account for the spectacular disasters we're about to see as we head deeper into the 1990s. SSI, Origin, and Interplay—the three biggest names in the industry—went from making the finest CRPGs in the world to producing travesties so wretched they threatened the future of the genre. It was a time when even diehard fans were turning away from their favorite hobby, fed up with the stinking, bug-infested games piling up in their local bargain bins. Indeed, the very words "role-playing game" were enough to rouse indignation among critics, who never tired of proclaiming the death of the CRPG—and good riddance.

As we'll see, the CRPG was far from dead—indeed, in a few more years, gamers would be treated to the best CRPGs ever made, ambitious new projects from bold new developers raised on the grand old games of better years. But this chapter isn't about the mammals.

It's about the dinosaurs.

### SSI's Utterly Forgettable Realms

We'll start with SSI's fall from grace, which began as early as 1992. The old computer wargames publisher had earned respect with early classics such as *Wizard's Crown* and *Phantasie*, then achieved national recognition in 1988

with its *AD&D*-licensed title *Pool of Radiance*. After the company had milked the “Gold Box” engine for all it was worth, they turned to Westwood Associates, who produced the *Eye of the Beholder* “Black Box” engine for them in 1991. That game and Westwood’s sequel were rousing successes, but SSI decided to go it alone with the third installment: the disappointing *Assault on Myth Drannor*, released in 1993.

Any company with SSI’s glowing reputation can afford a few mistakes. But few became many.

## *Spelljammer*

One of the biggest had occurred in 1992 with the publication of Cybertech’s *Spelljammer: Pirates of Realmspace*, a game based on TSR’s “steampunk” campaign setting. As with *Space 1889*, which we discussed in the previous chapter, we’re presented with an alternative reality based loosely on the works of novelist Jules Verne and the ancient astronomer Ptolemy. In short, the alternate physics make it possible to “sail” from planet to planet in magical ships called “spelljammers.” The unusual campaign setting is an interesting blend of sailing ships, steampunk, and high fantasy. Despite the uniqueness of the setting, many of the *Forgotten Realms* conventions, such as the spell system and racial profiles, are carried over.

*Pirates of Realmspace* offers a variety of gameplay modes, including real-time, first-person 3D flight simulation (for space travel), turn-based tactical “boarding combat,” and a menu-driven planet interface (for buying and selling cargo). It’s a fairly sophisticated game, though not as nuanced or detailed as *Space 1889*.



Cybertech’s *Spelljammer* game had potential, but gamers were turned off by its low production value and the many bugs.

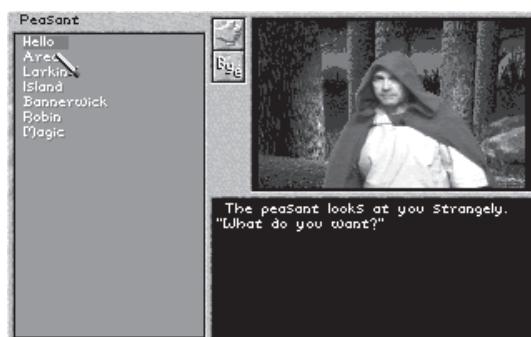
Although the setting was moderately successful among tabletop RPG hobbyists, Cybertech's effort to adapt it for DOS failed miserably. Besides lackluster graphics and the lack of a good plot, the game was not properly play-tested and frustrated gamers with bug-infested code and even misspellings. It was Cybertech's first and last game, and it generated bad publicity for SSI. Nevertheless, the company developed two other steampunk games, which we'll discuss in a moment.

### *Prophecy of the Shadow*

Another of SSI's 1992 lackluster releases is *Prophecy of the Shadow*, an original game aimed at novices. The player creates and controls a single character, using a simple question-and-answer process reminiscent of the *Ultima* series. The game also offers real-time combat and a fairly intuitive icon- and mouse-based interface. The graphics are typical for the era except for the keyword-based dialog mode, which features briefly animated digital images of live actors (usually turning their faces towards you or blinking).

There are no character classes, but the character does advance by mastering certain skills (e.g., attacking with a dirk or casting spells). Magic is based on a simple points system, though the player has to find "catalysts" and magic books to learn new spells. The choice of catalyst determines the strength as well as the type of spells the character can cast.

Overall, *Prophecy of the Shadow* isn't a bad game, at least for beginners. It seemed well poised to earn SSI at least a moderate profit, but the game suffers from a plebian plot and very poor combat segments. The storyline concerns the titular prophecy, which foretells of a Shadow Lord who will destroy



As their profits plunged, SSI was no doubt asking themselves the same question as this peasant from *Prophecy of the Shadow*.

civilization (starting with the magic-users). The player's character is a young apprentice, whose master (Larkin of Bannerwick) is killed by an unknown assailant. There's little character development, and the old "it's in the prophecy" gimmick had long gone the way of cliché. Furthermore, the combat and magic systems are really too simplistic, and the dialog doesn't allow the player to make meaningful choices. Plus, just getting around can be a chore because of jerky animation and unbalanced speed. Players can slow or speed up the character's gait, but this change exponentially increases the speed of opponents. Since combat is real-time, this effectively makes it essential to play in slow or normal mode.

In short, *Prophecy of the Shadow* wasn't terrible, but it certainly was not good enough to compete with the many excellent titles sitting by it on the shelf.

## *Dark Sun*

In 1993, SSI published *Dark Sun: Shattered Lands*, a top-down CRPG based on TSR's post-apocalyptic *Dark Sun* campaign setting, a harsh, arid water and metal-deprived world where only the strong survive.

*Shattered Lands* was SSI's effort to revamp the old "Gold Box" engine. Gone are the separate screens for exploration, combat, and dialog—now everything occurs on the same screen, shown in top-down isometric perspective. The player controls a four-member party, which is represented by a single character during exploration but by multiple characters during the turn-based combat sequences. The magic system is also much simpler, omitting the memorization routine altogether in favor of a simple slot-style system.

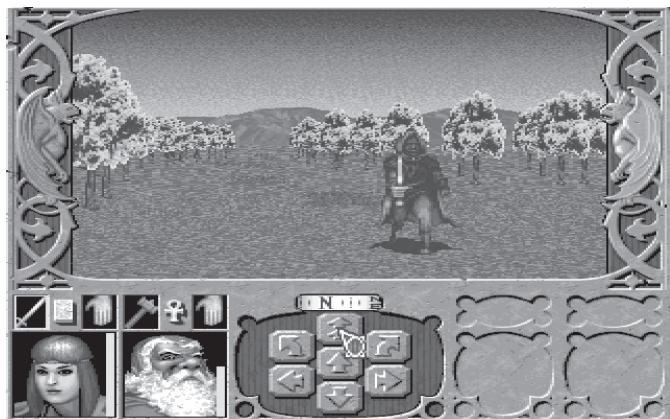


*Shattered Lands* introduced gamers to TSR's *Dark Sun* campaign setting, but buggy code and lackluster graphics doomed it from the start.

Despite an intuitive interface and intriguing setting, the game's mediocre graphics, jerky animation, typos, and buggy code kept it out of the lime-light. Nevertheless, SSI released a sequel called *Wake of the Ravager* in 1994. Even though the graphics were improved, the bugs were back in force. One particularly nasty one was quickly dubbed "The Bug." The Bug would prevent monsters from attacking the avatar, making the game a cakewalk rather than the intensely challenging experience it was supposed to be. Although such bugs can be easily enough addressed today by downloadable patches, that practice wasn't used widely in the early 1990s. Players unlucky enough to buy an early version of the game had to live with the bugs.

### Ravenloft

SSI also published games based on TSR's horror-themed *Ravenloft* campaign setting. The first of these, *Strahd's Possession*, was developed by DreamForge and published in 1994. Like Origin's *Ultima Underworld* (which we'll discuss later), *Strahd's Possession* is a first-person perspective, 3D game with smooth scrolling, though a "step" mode is available. A sequel named *Stone Prophet* appeared in 1995, offering enhanced graphics and some new abilities such as flying and levitating. Both of these games are based on neo-Gothic themes and seemed poised to take advantage of the vampire fad spurred by Ann Rice's vampire novels and Neil Jordan's film adaptation *Interview with the Vampire*, which had descended into packed theaters on November of 1994.



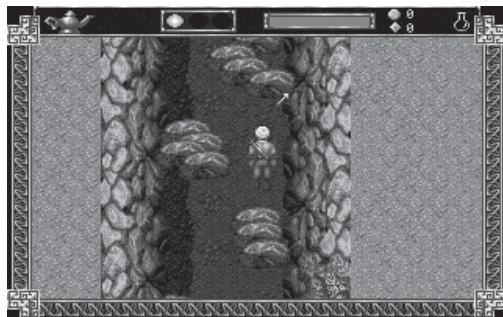
*Strahd's Possession* is an *Ultima Underworld*-type game based on TSR's Gothic *Ravenloft* campaign setting.

Why these games didn't receive more recognition is hard to determine. Perhaps they were damned by faint praise from critics, who couldn't find anything particularly good or bad about the series. Some critics complained that DreamForge just didn't understand what makes the *Ravenloft* setting appealing and that their game lacked the intense ambiance generated by the tabletop version. In any case, these games are surely better than Take 2 Interactive's *Iron & Blood: Warriors of Ravenloft*, a truly rotten fighting game published by Acclaim in 1996 for DOS and Sony's PlayStation.

## *Al-Qadim*

*Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse* is, as the title suggests, based on a TSR campaign setting reminiscent of tales from *The Arabian Nights*. It uses a similar engine to the one seen in *Dark Sun*, but this game is far more action-oriented—the player can't even upgrade the single character's armor or weaponry. Instead, the player must be dexterous with the keyboard or joystick, deftly dodging fireballs and striking opponents with the scimitar. Although there are plenty of monsters to dispatch, the emphasis here is on evading traps and solving puzzles—it's often compared to JRPGs such as *Legend of Zelda* or *Secret of Mana*.

The story puts the player in the role of the youngest son of the al-Hazrad family. The character has just completed his training as a Corsair and is ready for the final test. After the test, he must negotiate a peace between the al-Hazrads and the Wassabs, a rival family. Unfortunately, the family genie is accused of attacking a Wassab, claiming to have acted under the orders of the character's father. This leads to their banishment and the player's main quest—to piece together the real story.



Critics were generally pleased with *The Genie's Curse*, but this action CRPG is obscure today.

The game was developed by Cyberlore and published by SSI in 1994. Although the game received favorable reviews (including one in *Dragon* magazine, the world's leading magazine for tabletop and miniatures role-playing), it doesn't seem to have been enough to stop SSI's spiral into obscurity. One contemporary reviewer quipped, "Through some cosmic alignment of planets or other miracle, [SSI] has managed to produce a worthwhile game." This comment shows just how far SSI's reputation had fallen since the days of *Pool of Radiance* and *Eye of the Beholder*.<sup>1</sup>

### *Menzoberranzan*

The last TSR-licensed game SSI published was the infamously wretched (and hard to spell) *Menzoberranzan*, which appeared in 1994 for DOS. Another first-person, 3D game in the style of the *Ravenloft* games, *Menzoberranzan* seemed to have all the ingredients necessary for a hit. It features one of TSR's most famous characters, Drizzt Do'Urdan, a dark elf of the Underdark popularized by the novelist R. A. Salvatore. Furthermore, the developer (Dreamforge) had responded to earlier criticism and improved the game engine.

Nevertheless, gamers quickly complained about the endless number of boring battles that dragged out the game and ruined its pacing. This is particularly noticeable in the crucial first stages of the game; the game requires considerable patience before anything interesting happens. The lack of strong sales of these games and of SSI's two dismal console action titles *Slayer* (1994) and *Deathkeep* (1995) was no doubt what led TSR to sever its exclusive licensing agreement with SSI. I won't go into detail about these two games, but to give you some hint about their reception, here's a quotation from a contemporary reviewer: "[*Deathkeep*] has groundbreaking graphics. Unfortunately, they would only be groundbreaking if the game had been released in 1980."<sup>2</sup>

TSR decided to eschew exclusive licensing and extended their franchises to several rival companies, most notably Interplay, who, along with Black Isle Studios, published BioWare's *Baldur's Gate* in 1998. We'll discuss these games in a moment.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ibiblio.org/GameBytes/issue20/greviews/qadim.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See Anil Chhabra's review at <http://www.csoon.com/issue20/deathkp.htm> (originally published in the Dec. 1996 issue of *Coming Soon Magazine*).

## *Alien Logic*

In 1994 SSI released the little-known *Alien Logic*, a real-time, top-down and side-by-side game developed by Ceridus Software, based on the tabletop *Sky-realms of Journey* RPG. The game is set 3,500 years in the future, after Earth has established a colony on a planet already occupied by two civilizations. These civilizations don't object to the new colony as long as it stays in its place and receives regular shipments from Earth. However, the feeding tube from Earth is severed, and soon the colonists are left to their own devices—or rather, left to gobbling up more territory and resources formerly monopolized by the existing civilizations. The tensions escalate rapidly, and attacks have broken out.

The game is original in many regards and resists easy summary. However, much of it involves finding and chatting with other characters and gathering resources. The game offers a side-by-side fighter style mode for combat and close-up exploration. Combat is a furious affair involving rapid mouse work, but otherwise, this is more of a thinking person's game. The player will need to learn a great deal about the two civilizations and their technology, much of which is organic in nature.

Despite their praise for the game's innovative premise and gameplay, critics complained about the difficult install procedure and steep learning curve of the game's interface, and the game has faded into near-total obscurity.



*Alien Logic* is an unfairly obscure game that deserves more attention.

## *World of Aden*

After losing their licensing agreement with TSR, SSI had to invent its own game worlds and campaign settings. In 1995, SSI developed *World of Aden: Thunderscape* and, with Cyberlore Studios, *Entomorph: Plague of the Darkfall*, both published by Mindscape (who bought SSI in 1994). These games are based on a world similar to the one found later in Sierra's *Arcanum* and in the earlier *Space 1889* and *Spelljammer*; swords and sorcery meets steampunk. Magic is based on "mechamagic," which the box describes as a "crude marriage of steam-age technology and powerful sorcery."

*Thunderscape* takes place during the Darkfall, a mysterious blight that is spawning hordes of bestial "nocturnals." The nobler races are at war with these nocturnals, and it's up to the player to become the one leader capable of dispatching the threat. Combat in *Thunderscape* is turn-based, quite unusual for this type of game. The player controls a four-member party (fighter, healer, wizard, and thief), though nonplayer characters may later offer to join the party (though their true motives might not be clear until later).

The first game features first-person perspective similar to that in *Ultima Underworld*, but the second reverts to the familiar isometric perspective. *Entomorph* puts the player in the shoes of a young squire slowly falling victim to the Darkfall and becoming a giant insect. The squire must discover what's causing the Darkfall and stop it. One nice twist here is that the squire can take advantage of his new insect-like abilities to gain an edge in combat, though doing so speeds up the transformation. The box promises a "skin-crawling experience," which will no doubt be the case for anyone who dislikes bugs.

Sadly for SSI, these well-crafted and highly playable games attracted little interest from CRPG fans then or now. Perhaps if SSI hadn't ruined its reputation with abysmal games such as *Slayer* and *Deathkeep*, offerings such as *Entomorph* and *Shattered Lands* would have fared better, despite their many bugs. As it was, most gamers weren't willing to give SSI another chance. SSI's last gasp was the dreadful *Legends of Valour*, touted loudly as "better than *Ultima Underworld*." We'll talk about this game in Chapter 10; for now, we can simply say that it most definitely wasn't.

To be fair, though, even the best of SSI's post-"Black Box" era games were mediocre at best, certainly nothing that could compete squarely with the truly magnificent titles we'll discuss in the next few chapters. SSI, once ranked among the world's best CRPG developers and publishes, was fading fast. After trading hands a few times, the brand ended up at Ubisoft and was laid to rest in the early 2000s.

## *AD&D Gets Dumber and Dumberer*

Although TSR was probably correct in the assumption that SSI was no longer the best company to represent their interests, they didn't exactly strike gold with their next few licensees. Many of these games were action or strategy titles, but there were a few CRPGs in the mix, such as Sierra's *Birthright: The Gorgon's Alliance* (1996) and Interplay's *Descent to Undermountain* (1998). *Birthright* was developed by Synergistic Software and is a mix of adventure and strategy as well as more conventional CRPG elements.

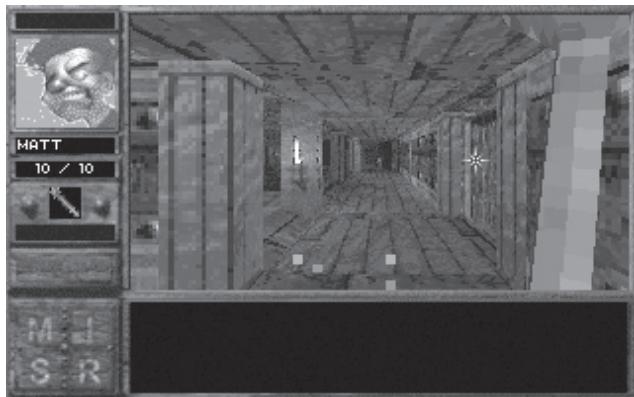
The game is based on TSR's highly successful *Birthright* game and features a great story about a menace named The Gorgon, who is hellbent on killing and extracting the divine blood of kings to secure his power. The game promises plenty of political intrigue and many multifaceted characters, and players can control not just single heroes but an entire kingdom. Finally, *Birthright* had Sierra's powerful name recognition behind it, which included their stunningly successful and highly innovative *Quest for Glory* series.

Unfortunately, *Birthright: The Gorgon's Alliance* failed for rather banal reasons. Yet again, a promising game was stymied with game-crashing bugs that irritated even the most forgiving players, but the bigger problem was that *Birthright* wasn't content with being a strategy, CRPG, or adventure game—it tried to please fans of each of these genres. The result was a learning curve steeper than Mt. Doom, which eliminated all but the most dedicated gamers from the start. The so-called adventure mode had a rather tacked-on feel to it and isn't as integrated into the gameplay as it should have been. Although it had its moments, *Birthright* amounted to little more than a few freckles and a mole.

### *Descent to Undermountain*

Interplay's *Descent to Undermountain* is an even less satisfying game than *Birthright*. *Descent to Undermountain* attempted to ride some of the hype surrounding their immensely popular *Descent* game by modifying its 3D, first-person shooter engine. The plan may have seemed like a good one, but an apparently harried production schedule resulted in one of the worst CRPGs of all time. The task of transforming Parallax Software's brilliant FPS engine into a CRPG platform proved far more formidable than anyone had assumed, but there's little excuse for this travesty.

Besides sloppy coding and countless game-stopping bugs, the game suffered from a lack of polish. The levels were dreary and looked too much alike,



*AD&D*-licensed games such as *Descent to Undermountain* were so awful that many wondered whether the franchise might be headed towards extinction.

and most players didn't appreciate their confusing, maze-like arrangement. The banal storyline was yet another quest for a sword, and poor graphics coupled with worse artificial intelligence added up to predictable result—the game promptly descended from the shelf to the bin.

One blurb on the game's box is apropos: "In the end, you'll trust no one but yourself." TSR must indeed have been wondering whom they could trust with their venerable franchises and campaign settings! Fortunately, events would soon take a major turn for the better with the publication of *Baldur's Gate*, the game that finally returned TSR-licensed CRPGs to the public eye. I'll return to this game in the next chapter.

## Origin and the Demise of *Ultima*

Origin's story during the mid to late 1990s is one of peaks and valleys. They were still eminently capable of releasing innovative new games, especially their *Wing Commander* series, an action- and story-driven space simulator that debuted in 1990 and became dizzyingly successful. However, *Wing Commander* is no CRPG and is a far cry from the gameplay of Origin's classic *Ultima* series. It's to this series that we now turn.

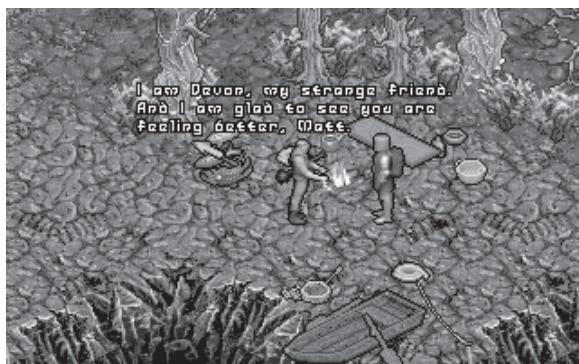
We've already seen that Origin was willing to introduce new series based on the *Ultima* franchise, such as the two *Worlds of Ultima* games we discussed in Chapter 7. These spin-offs were relatively short-lived and didn't compete

directly with the main series. A more decisive fork occurred in 1992 with *The Stygian Abyss*, the first of Blue Sky's *Ultima Underworld* games, which we'll discuss in more detail in the next chapter. These very important games paved the way to the smooth-scrolling 3D action seen in *Doom* and modern CRPGs such as *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*. Although the *Ultima Underworld* games failed to achieve the success of the main *Ultima* series (much less that of the new *Wing Commander*), they are nevertheless remarkable for their achievements in 3D graphics.

Another spin-off is the *Runes of Virtue* series—two action CRPGs published in 1991 and 1994 for Nintendo's Game Boy handheld console. These games are most remarkable for their cooperative gameplay option, which allows two Game Boys to be connected via a Game Link. Even though Garriott himself refers to the first of these as “the best non-PC *Ultima* that was ever made,” the underpowered unit simply couldn't offer the depth *Ultima* fans expected.

## Pagan

The next true *Ultima* game was *Ultima VIII: Pagan*, published in 1994 for DOS. It was a game with a somewhat controversial title that aroused even more controversy among long-term fans of the series. Again, Garriott seems to have returned to the drawing board, this time deciding that what the series demanded was more physical rather than intellectual challenges. Thus, like so many console hits of the day, in *Pagan* the avatar can run, jump, and climb across moving platforms.



Origin thought the series needed a dose of running and jumping action sequences. Many fans thought it was sacrilege.

Combat was reduced (or, enhanced, depending on your perspective) to a series of rapid-fire mouse clicks, requiring more dexterity than strategy to win. As you might expect, the game gravely disappointed some fans and thrilled others, but the general consensus was that the game wasn't up to the *Ultima* standard. Many of the key innovations that had made *The Black Gate* so successful, such as depicting night and day, were abridged or omitted. As if these faults weren't enough to commit *Pagan* to the flames, a plethora of bugs surfaced, frustrating even fanatical *Ultima* fans. Garriott blamed the problems on Electronic Arts and a rushed production schedule. However, the worst was yet to come.

### *Ascension*

The last and worst of the single-player *Ultima* games, *Ultima IX: Ascension*, was published in 1999, and fans were even more disappointed than they had been with *Pagan*. The problem this time was a bait-and-switch game played by Garriott, who promised a product more in line with the classic *Ultima* games and went to fans for advice. They provided it, diligently. Unfortunately, the production cycle hit gravel early on, and the code went through at least four different versions and twice as much drama. *Ultima Online* was also in production as this time and no doubt added to the chaos (I'll have more to say about that game in Chapter 11). The end product was a buggy and even more reflex-oriented game than *Pagan* that abandoned the by then conventional isometric perspective for a fully 3D world in third-person perspective.



The final *Ultima* game is legendary only for its bugs and banality. (Screenshot courtesy of Adam Haase.)

Most *Ultima* critics bitterly dismissed *Ascension* out of hand, but the game has managed to attract a small, dedicated fan base. The complaints and defenses are many. One of the most often heard is that it's really more of an action adventure than a true CRPG, a claim based on *Ascension*'s limited leveling up capabilities and linear plot structure. Fans of *The Black Gate* were irritated by the rigidity of many of the game's events, such as a love story that some felt was "shoved down their throats."

On the other hand, no one complained about the game's lush graphics or excellent music. The day/night cycle had also returned, and there was also a high level of interactivity with objects. However, a combination of poor voice acting, lackluster dialog, and rather banal characters certainly didn't win over diehard *Ultima* fans, much less mainstream gamers. Indeed, even a special "Dragon Edition" large-box version of the game that included several trinkets—a nod towards older and more revered *Ultima* games—wasn't enough to win over jaded fans. Needless to say, *Ascension* was a sad way for this grand old series to end.

If we can learn anything from the *Ultima* story, it's that any long-running series has to be careful to preserve enough consistency across games to please the fans. I have little doubt that Garriott and Origin thought deeply about what elements really made the older games successful, but nevertheless miscalculated. At least some of *Ultima*'s many fans seemed early on to develop an elitist attitude towards twitch games such as *The Legend of Zelda*, which were nevertheless selling tens of millions more copies than even the best-selling *Ultima* ever had. We can see the logic behind Origin's decision to graft these elements onto the *Ultima* series, but the result was not what they'd hoped. Instead of attracting millions of new gamers to the franchise, the game only alienated existing fans. My guess is that Origin would have fared much better by simply giving fans more of what they wanted rather than catering to the fickle mainstream. On the other hand, as we'll see when we discuss the last of the *Might & Magic* series, it's also important to freshen up a series with a constant flow of useful innovations and modest experiments.

## Transcending *Ascension*: The *Gothic* Series

Even though *Ascension* failed miserably, German developer Piranha Bytes was able to follow more successfully in its footsteps, pushing the action and adventure boundaries even further. The *Gothic* series debuted in November of 2001, featuring a real-time, 3D world set in third-person "over the shoulder" perspective. Gameplay focuses on inventory-based puzzles as well as a diffi-

cult arcade-style combat system. The game is most noted for its dark, realistic ambiance and open-ended gameplay, which seems similar to that found in the *Elder Scrolls* series but with more focus on character interaction. Despite some irritating interface problems and bugs, the game attracted a loyal and dedicated following. Piranha Bytes followed up with *Gothic 2* in 2003 and released *Gothic 3* in 2006. Both games offer graphical and interface enhancements over their predecessors.

In some ways, these games hearken back to those aforementioned German imports, the *Realms of Arkania* series. They have much to offer but have not received the attention they warrant. While the strong competition has undoubtedly been a factor, there are other rationales for *Gothic*'s mediocre ratings. The second game suffers from bad voice acting and poor translations, and the third game has enough bugs to make an entomologist's career. As reviewer puts it, "When the scenery looks like a postcard, but the Hero wears his shield inside of his humerus, there are some major quality control issues going on."<sup>3</sup> Critics have remained unwilling to forgive the awkward combat system, and there doesn't seem to be any hope for a general consensus on the overall quality of these games.

## In the Next Chapter

Some might readers might assume that with so many disappointing games, the 1990s must have been a terrible decade for CRPGs. However, nothing could be further from the truth—for, although Origin and SSI seemed to have lost their edge, other CRPG developers were emerging to take up the slack. In the next chapter, we'll talk about some truly revolutionary games that reestablished the genre and propelled it to new heights.

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<sup>3</sup> See Tim Tackett's review at [http://www.gamerevolution.com/review/pc/gothic\\_3](http://www.gamerevolution.com/review/pc/gothic_3).

# 10

## The Platinum Age

In the last chapter we discussed some of the low points of the 1990s, focusing on the tragic collapse of SSI and Origin’s celebrated *Ultima* series. However, although the 1990s might have gotten off to a slow start, it’s during the latter half of this decade that we find the best CRPGs ever made—the magnificent *Baldur’s Gate*, *Elder Scrolls*, and *Diablo* games, as well as *Might and Magic*’s excellent *Mandate of Heaven* and *For Blood and Honor*. We left Interplay smarting after the disgraceful *Descent to Undermountain*, but they’ll return with a vengeance in this chapter with *Fallout* and *Planescape: Torment*, which are among the best CRPGs ever to grace a desktop.

The games of the Platinum Age stand on the shoulders of giants. New developers such as Bethesda and BioWare didn’t start from scratch—they, like the makers of *The Bard’s Tale* and *Pool of Radiance*, had a wealth of excellent precedents to follow, as well as the enlightening results of failed experiments. Furthermore, computer technology had improved considerably since the early 1990s, and the bewildering array of incompatible graphics and sound cards for the PC was coalescing into a few recognized standards. Most of these were spurred by Microsoft, whose Windows 95 and 98 operating systems now dominated the industry, leaving incompatible platforms in the dust. Microsoft enticed developers to its Windows operating system with its new DirectX application programmer interface (API), which made integrating advanced graphics, sounds, and game controllers easier than ever. Now game developers could focus their resources on a single platform. Furthermore, new coding practices, such as the licensing of third-party graphics engines, were helping CRPG developers speed up production and greatly reduce the frequency of bugs.

Nevertheless, the cost of producing games had never been greater, with budgets that rivaled or even exceeded many Hollywood films. The tombstones of bankrupt developers littered Silicon Valley, grim warnings to those whose aspirations outweighed their talents. Years of over-hyped but mediocre CRPGs had jaded even many hardcore fans of the genre, and it was certainly unclear if even a superb new CRPG could compete head on with the awesome might of the new first-person shooter genre, particularly in its multiplayer incarnations. Computer gamers were just discovering the joys of LAN parties, a movement that would eventually culminate in the massive multiplayer online (MMO) games that now dominate the industry. No doubt many a marketing analyst concluded, on the basis of very sound evidence, that the classic single-player CRPG had moved on to the underworld.

As it turns out, they were right.

## *Ultima Underworld: Who's Dungeon Master Now?*

Origin's *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*, published in 1992, deserves a special place in any book on CRPGs—or computer games in general, for that matter. It was one of the earliest games to offer fluid movement through a 3D world of fully-textured polygons, rendered on the fly in first-person perspective. This was quite a feat at a time when similar games offered only wireframe or solid-color polygons; achieving anything greater necessitated prerendering the scenery and “snapping” rather than “panning” to new vantage points. In other words, it was the difference between *Dungeon Master* and *DOOM*.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves here. *The Stygian Abyss* debuted months before id's *Wolfenstein 3D*, the direct precursor of *DOOM*. Indeed, John Carmack, one of id's key developers, actually saw a demo of *The Stygian Abyss* a year before his company released their celebrated FPS.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, *The Stygian Abyss* is actually more technically advanced than either *Wolfenstein 3D* or *DOOM*, neither of which boasts the detailed realism of *Ultima Underworld*.

*The Stygian Abyss* was not developed by in house by Origin, but rather by a small New Hampshire-based group named Blue Sky Productions (now Looking Glass Technologies). Blue Sky showed Origin the prototype of their

<sup>1</sup> See Eric-Jon Rössell Waugh's “A Short History of id Software” at [http://www.next-gen.biz/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=3720&Itemid=2](http://www.next-gen.biz/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3720&Itemid=2).



The *Stygian Abyss* offers full 3D exploration, including swimming.

engine, and the *Ultima*-elements were grafted on later. In short, *Ultima Underworld* is a 3D spin-off of Origin's celebrated *Ultima* series, but its gameplay focuses more on physical reflexes than on mental acumen. On the surface, it seems like a brazen attempt to plagiarize *Dungeon Master*, and some borrowings are hard to deny. Like *Dungeon Master*, *The Stygian Abyss* is set in a dank, dark dungeon, and the Avatar needs to continuously look for food and light sources (in this case, torches). Even the magic system is similar: spells are cast by arranging sequences of rune stones found sprinkled throughout the dungeon.

However, unlike *Dungeon Master*, *Ultima Underworld* features fluid 3D movement in 360 degrees. Players can not only turn left and right smoothly, but also look up and down, jump, and even swim. Players also have more direct control during combat: the type of attack (slash, stab, hack) is indicated by the position of the mouse pointer, and the power by how long the player holds down the mouse button. Many gamers and critics argue that these innovations make the game realistic and thus more immersive, as though players are actually in the game rather than simply controlling it from a distance. Another nice feature is a powerful automapper that not only tracks movement but allows players to enter their own notes. Finally, on the screen at all times are two large glass bottles, one red (for hit points) and one blue (for magic power). The bottles get emptier as the character suffers damage or expends magical energy. It's a brilliant system that will show up in plenty of later games, including Blizzard's *Diablo*.

The story is more or less of the “damsel in distress” type; this time a baron’s daughter has been kidnapped by a mysterious creature. The Avatar happens to materialize during the abduction and is held as a suspect. The Avatar tries to explain the odd circumstance, but the baron decides to put his word to the test by sealing him into the titular abyss, with the mission to recover the princess or die in the attempt. However, the abyss isn’t just crawling with monsters. Indeed, part of the fun here is interacting with the many intelligent denizens wandering the corridors.

You don’t have to be a game historian to see how this game paved the way for the *Elder Scrolls* series and countless other derived games. It was immediately recognized as an important breakthrough in the genre, and *Computer Gaming World* named it the best role-playing game of the year. Indeed, the only people who didn’t seem to be excited about the game were Origin’s team—a point we’ll return to momentarily.

## *Labyrinth of Worlds*

Despite disappointing sales of the first game, Origin published Blue Sky’s sequel, *Labyrinth of Worlds*, the following year. The sequel made few innovations other than the implementation of digital sound effects and an expanded viewing area. The storyline is also more complex and more closely related to the main *Ultima* series. A magical crystal of blackrock has formed over Lord British’s castle, isolating the land of Britannia from its foremost defenders. Fortunately, the Avatar can use a smaller crystal to travel to eight different dimensions in search of a solution to the dilemma. It’s a massive game, and the alternate dimensions allow for many intriguing scenarios, such as a fortress floating in the sky, an icy wasteland, and a surreal Ethereal Void. Critics seemed generally pleased with the game, but again Origin wasn’t satisfied with the game’s performance in the market.

Why wasn’t Blue Sky’s *Ultima Underworld* as big a hit as id’s first-person shooters? Perhaps the key reason is that Blue Sky’s games demanded more computer power than most PC gamers had at their disposal in the early 1990s. The games themselves were a whopping \$79.95 each, which in 2006 dollars is \$121.68 (id’s products were much cheaper and partly distributed as shareware). The minimum specs for *The Stygian Abyss* called for an Intel 80386-equipped PC with a full 2 megabytes of RAM. According to a 1993 survey published in *PC Week*, only 46% of PC users had a ’386 or better at the time (and most of those machines were probably on the low end). Compare that to *Wolfenstein 3D*’s specs, which ask for a humble ’286 processor

with only 640 kilobytes of RAM. In short, you needed a cutting-edge PC and plenty of money to enjoy *The Stygian Abyss*, and that stopped many gamers at the gate.

Another problem, according to Paul Neurath (one of *The Stygian Abyss*'s key developers), was that Origin didn't properly support the games. "The Underworlds never got the level of marketing that some of the other top Origin games received," says Neurath.<sup>2</sup> However, the games did sell half a million copies over the long haul, still a modest number compared to some of Origin's other products. Perhaps if Origin had waited until the latter part of 1993 to release *The Stygian Abyss*, they might have ridden the wave generated by the best-selling *MYST* and *DOOM* games, which also required cutting-edge machines. However, these games enjoyed a tremendous burst of media publicity and word-of-mouth advertising, which were enough to convince countless PC gamers to ante up for the new standards despite the cost. When Blue Sky approached Origin with ideas for a third game, the company turned them down.

Nevertheless, the *Ultima Underworld* games are still fun to play today, and not just for their historical value. Compared to other games published in 1992, they are unbelievably ahead of their time. Blue Sky went on to produce the groundbreaking FPS *System Shock* in 1994, another game that performed poorly in the market, though it is widely hailed today as a masterpiece.

## *Ultima Underworld* and the Rise of Fluid First-Person 3D

Although Blue Sky's *Ultima Underworld* games weren't financially successful, other developers were quick to jump on the 3D, texture-mapped bandwagon. Again, it's important to keep *Wolfenstein 3D* and especially *DOOM* in mind, id's FPS that blasted onto the scene like a rocket-propelled grenade. Furthermore, id employed an interesting marketing strategy based on the shareware practice. Essentially, id released a shareware version of their games with only the first few levels. Players were encouraged not only to try the game for free, but to copy and distribute the files to their friends. Thus, substantial word-of-mouth advertising sprang up around the two games, and countless gamers decided to pay for the full commercial versions. This strategy was tremendously successful for id, and the company was soon among the top computer game developers in the world.

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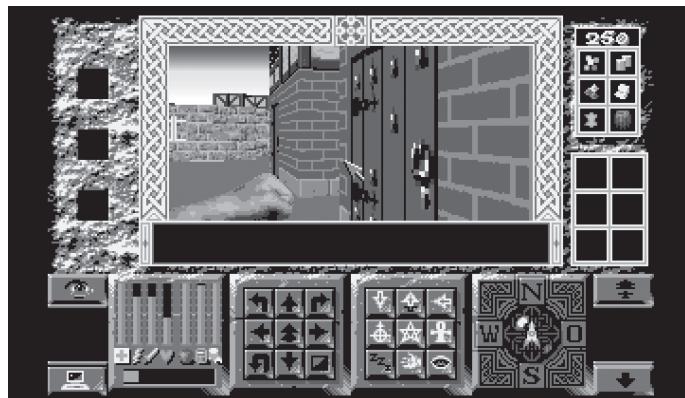
<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/article.php?id=28003>.

CRPG developers, then, had two examples to follow for 3D gaming. They could go back to Blue Sky's *Underworld* model, with its sophisticated CRPG elements and emphasis on exploration, or they could try to adapt the much better established *DOOM* model, grafting on simple CRPG elements to the arcade-like shooter engine. Most developers seem to have borrowed freely from both models. We've already mentioned a few games that seem inspired by *Ultima Underworld* and *DOOM*, such as SSI's *Thunderscape* and Interplay's *Descent to Undermountain*, but these were hardly the best examples. What we need to cover here are the more innovative and successful efforts, such as Bethesda's *Arena* and New World Computing's *Mandate of Heaven*.

### *Legends of Valour*

We'll start our discussion with *Legends of Valour*, one of the earliest and most unabashed attempts to mimic the *Underworld* model. Developed by Synthetic Dimensions and first published by SSI in 1992, *Legends of Valour* was available not just for DOS but also for the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST platforms, ensuring it a larger audience than its predecessor. It was also applauded at the time for its graphics, which many critics felt were more refined than those in *The Stygian Abyss*.

SSI was very conscious of Blue Sky's game and made every attempt to convince gamers that their game was better. The box blurbs declare, "Unlike the competition, the fast, seamless first-person view never jerks or slows down." SSI even claims that the humble '286 can run the game without prob-



SSI's much-touted *Legends of Valour* was a hit only on the Commodore Amiga platform.

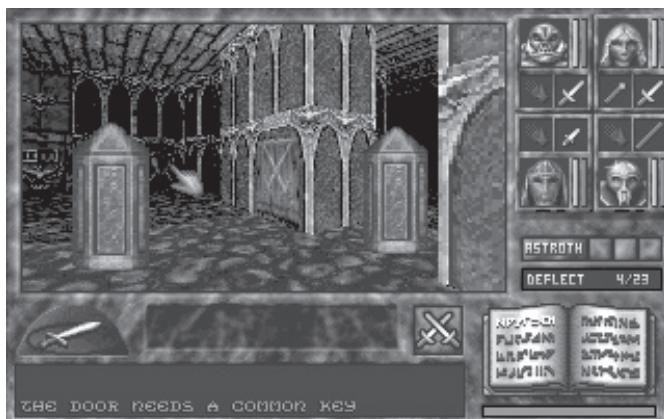
lems, an exaggerated claim if there ever was one. The game also features a day and night cycle, which *The Stygian Abyss* lacked since it was set entirely underground. Finally, there are 45 quests, multiple endings, and “an unparalleled array of professions” available at guilds and temples. To complete the game, the player’s character must join at least four guilds, rising up the ranks in at least one temple and guild to become their master.

Although the Amiga version of the game was praised by critics, the DOS version hasn’t endeared itself to many gamers. They typically complain about combat, which has been reduced to a simple reflex action (how fast players can click the mouse), as well as the constant need to find food and water for the character. Even more infuriating are the many bugs, which can dim even the most forgiving player’s enthusiasm.

### *Hexx: Heresy of the Wizard*

A lesser known *Underworld* clone is *Hexx: Heresy of the Wizard*, developed and published in 1994 by Psygnosis. The development team included the makers of *Bloodwyck*, an innovative game we discussed in Chapter 8 (along with Psygnosis’ other notable CRPG, *Hired Guns*).

Perhaps the best way to describe this game is as a combination of *Dungeon Master* and *Ultima Underworld*. The biggest change here from the *Underworld* model is that the player controls a party of four adventurers rather than a lone hero. As with the earlier *Dungeon Master*, the player doesn’t create characters but selects them from a pool of 16.



*Hexx* was Psygnosis’ attempt at a *Dungeon Master* clone.

Unfortunately for Psygnosis, *Hexx* doesn't seem to have made much impact on the market. Although relatively free of bugs, the game suffers from a somewhat clumsy interface, particularly when players cast spells during the real-time combat segments. The bigger problem is more likely the overall mediocrity of the game: the graphics weren't as impressive as other games, and it lacked a compelling story or notable characters.

### *Star Trail*

In Chapter 8, we discussed Attic's *Realms of Arkania*, a series of German CRPGs that brought *The Dark Eye* tabletop game to a *Dungeon Master*-style interface. The next entry in the series, published by Sir-Tech in 1994, is *Star Trail*, which offers smooth-scrolling 3D movement and animated isometric 3D combat. It's often considered the best of the trilogy despite its steep learning curve and daunting complexity. No doubt part of the game's appeal is owed to the superior graphics and digitized sound, made possible by CD-ROM. There are also a few key enhancements to the engine, such as a more powerful automapper with zoom.

The game starts off with a seemingly straightforward quest for the ancient Salamander Stone, though two different parties ask for it, and the player can't please both. The party is also asked to retrieve a throwing axe called Star Trail, though the motives behind these requests are vague and ambiguous. Meanwhile, the orcs are terrorizing the land in force, and the dwarves and elves can't seem to settle their differences long enough to fend them off.



*Star Trail* asks players to choose a side: elves or dwarves.

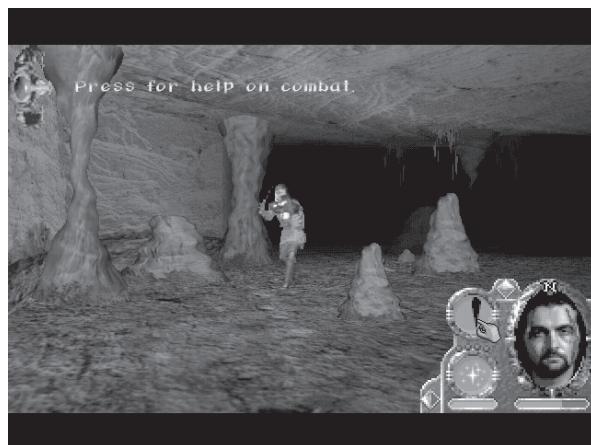
### *Shadows Over Riva*

*Shadows Over Riva*, published in 1996, is the last of the *Realms of Arkania* games. Like its predecessors, *Shadows Over Riva* offers a real-time, first-person exploration mode and turn-based isometric combat. While critics were generally impressed with the former, the combat mode seems a bit cramped and dated, but no one complained about the high level of detail and options for character customization. What other game allows a character to learn dancing or become a jester? There's also an interesting option to split the party, temporarily leaving a member behind if he or she needs time to recuperate.

The story concerns the titular town of Riva, which is under siege by orcs. There's evil magic involved, and it's up to the player's sextet to discover its source and save the town. The plot quickly thickens, and the many intriguing characters won the game much praise in the story-telling category. Most fans of the series, though, focus on the game's extraordinarily involved character development options.

### *Guardians of Destiny*

Like Attic's *Realms of Arkania* series, Westwood's *Lands of Lore* began with a *Dungeon Master*-style game, though *Throne of Chaos* is more friendly to novices and focuses more on story than sophisticated role-playing. The next game in the series, *Guardians of Destiny*, published in 1997, enhanced the graphics engine to allow for fluid 3D movement but went a step further by introducing



*Legends of Lore* got a full motion video update with *Guardians of Destiny*.

hours of full-motion video and live action sequences à la *The 7th Guest* or *Gabriel Knight II*. The game also incorporates many arcade elements, including some timed sequences and lots of running and jumping, to the point where some critics labeled it an action adventure rather than a true CRPG.

The CRPG elements are limited because the player controls only a single character, Luther, who comes to the game with a predefined personality and purpose in life. Luther is the son of the villainess in the first *Lands of Lore* and has inherited his mother's poor reputation as well as a powerful (but uncontrollable) ability to morph into different forms (human, lizard, beast). Luther's task is to clean up after his mother, stopping Belial from coming back to wreak havoc. There are five possible endings that hinge on whether Luther succeeds in his quest and whether he's been good or evil.

As before, the game limits the CRPG elements to gradual increases in magic and combat, and the quality of armor and weapons is shown abstractly as lines on a graph. The interface foreshadows New World's *Mandate of Heaven*, which debuted a year later. The graphics are faux 3D, and Luther's face is shown in photo-realistic detail at the lower right corner of the screen. The soundtrack is by Frank Keplacki and David Arkenstone, a noted new age composer.

Fans of the series have long been divided over whether *Guardians of Destiny* is the best or the worst of the series. The popularity of FMV plummeted in the late 1990s, when it became seen as a cheesy gimmick rather than a technological marvel. Many CRPG fans resented the action elements, and more than one critic called it a "jack of all trades, master of none."

### *Lands of Lore III*

The last game in Westwood's series, *Lands of Lore III*, ditches the live action for motion-captured animation and voice acting, but most critics consider it the weakest of the three. Again, players are not allowed to create their own character—which, when done properly, can turn out to be a feature rather than a limitation. However, critics also complained about the repetitive gameplay, poor artificial intelligence, unbalanced graphics, and the constant annoyance of having to find food for the character. The game is also plagued by bugs, which certainly didn't improve its reputation.

This time the player assumes the role of Cooper LeGré, the illegitimate son of the king's brother. While on a hunting trip, Cooper and the family are ambushed by "rift hounds," who pop in from another dimension and slaughter everyone but Cooper (though they steal his soul). Everyone suspects that



The third *Lands of Lore* is often considered the weakest of the trilogy.

Cooper killed his companions to secure the throne for himself, so he must prove them wrong and recapture his soul in the process. That will entail traveling to over six worlds and battling plenty of monsters, as well as solving puzzles and navigating tricky action sequences.

Westwood responded to the limited character development in *Guardians of Destiny* by revamping the leveling system. *Lands of Lore III* offers four guilds for the character to join, each with its own skill sets, quests, and familiars. The familiars serve to complement the player's strengths and weaknesses, but they also have their own personalities. The character can join any combination of the four guilds (warrior, mage, cleric, and thief) and recruit any familiar. In most games of this type, too much hybridization results in a useless character, but the difficulty level is low enough that it pays to gain skills in each guild.

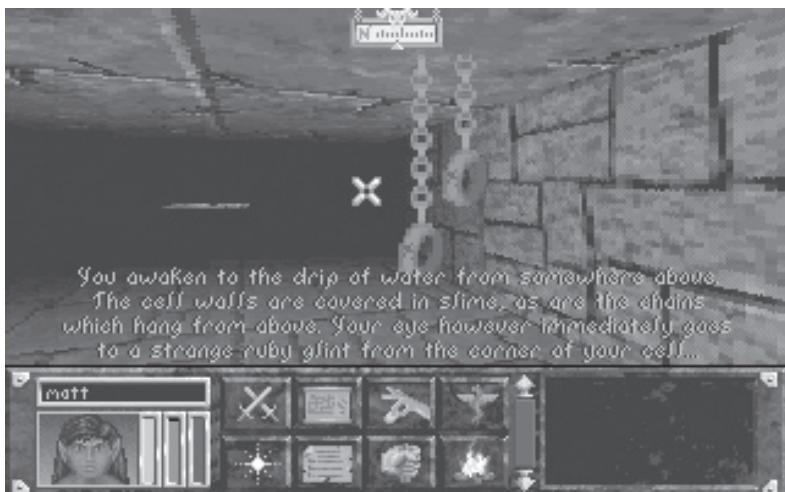
Most critics were displeased with the graphics, which looked far more pixilated and indistinguishable than other 3D games of 1999. Although the game boasts several outside areas, the character must follow narrow paths through them; freely roaming across these expenses is impossible. The game was poorly received at the time, and its reputation has not improved since. Still, it's far from unplayable and no doubt of interest to fans of the first two games.

## Bethesda and the *Elder Scrolls*

Perhaps the most successful of all games inspired by *Ultima Underworld* are the *Elder Scrolls* series, a line of first-person, 3D CRPGs developed by Bethesda Softworks. Indeed, it's the longest-running CRPG series still in active development. Although Bethesda's games are not terribly original, they've always managed to impress gamers with their immense size and scope. The games are also known for their open-ended and unpredictable gameplay, which heightens replay value while providing tremendous room for customization and character development. The games are praised for offering cutting-edge graphics and sound effects—a well-earned reputation that will prove most invaluable as we head deeper into the 1990s.

### *Arena*

The first *Elder Scrolls* game, *Arena*, was published by U.S. Gold in 1994 for DOS. Like its many sequels, *Arena* features real-time 3D graphics in first-person perspective. It also boasts a huge gameworld with over 400 cities, towns, and villages, all of which can be explored—it's a cornucopia of CRPG delights. Although it is not as well known today as *Morrowind* or even *Daggerfall*, you don't have to look too hard to find fans who rank it as not only



*Arena* is the first entry in Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* series, which is still going strong today.

the best game in the series, but as the best CRPG, period. While I wouldn't go that far in my praise, there's no point in denying it a respected place in the CRPG canon.

One way of thinking about *Arena* is as a combination of *The Stygian Abyss* and *The Black Gate*. While *Arena* offers a real-time, 3D, first-person perspective like that of *The Stygian Abyss*, it also features a realistic and persistent game world like *The Black Gate*'s. Not only do players observe the passing of time from night and day, but it even rains and snows according to the season! It's really the sophistication of this virtual world that makes the game so notable. The quest—find the eight missing pieces of the Staff of Chaos and rescue the Emperor from a dimensional prison—is hardly original. What impressed gamers were the incredible size of the world, the open-ended nature of the gameplay, and the high replay value. I should note, however, that although the game offers considerably more freedom of action than most games of its type (particularly regarding stealing items from merchants), players hoping to win still need to perform a fairly linear sequence of quests.

*Arena* also has an intelligent combat system, in which the position of the mouse pointer determines which of five attacks the avatar performs. We saw something similar in *The Stygian Abyss*, though that game offers only three attacks (bash, slash, and thrust). With *Arena* we get two diagonal slashes, horizontal cut, vertical chop, and thrust. These are accomplished by holding down the right mouse button while moving the mouse as directed. Although this method is slightly more complex than simply clicking a button, it contributes to the immersion by tying the player's mouse movements to the movements of the weapon on the screen.

*Arena*'s character development system is based on eight stats and races, and eighteen classes grouped into three main categories (thief, warrior, mage). Most of these classes are hybrids of conventional AD&D classes. For instance, Battle Mages can cast spells but also wield any weapon, wear leather armor, and carry a round shield. The Spellsword mage is even more skilled in weaponry and armor but takes a penalty in spell points. Players can either select their class from a list or answer a series of *Ultima*-style ethical questions.

The game also features a more sophisticated armor system than most CRPGs. Instead of just plate mail, for instance, characters can be decked in helms, pauldrons (shoulder guards), cuirasses (chest and back guards), gauntlets, greaves (waist and upper-leg guards), and boots. Further adding to the realism, arms and armor can be damaged and broken. They can also be composed of eight different metals, including silver—the only metal that can damage certain creatures.

Although the game is impressive, it's still far from perfect. Like so many other games of this period, it suffers from bug-infested code. The battles are also quite a bit tougher than some gamers could handle, and the game's formidable specs limited its appeal to those with cutting-edge machines. For these reasons, it enjoyed little more success than Origin's *The Stygian Abyss*. In any case, the game set a new standard for this type of CRPG, and demonstrated how much room was left for innovation. Bethesda has been kind enough to re-release the game as freeware and currently offers it for free download on their website.

### *Daggerfall*

In 1996 Bethesda followed up the modestly successful *Arena* with *Daggerfall*, a game that is still widely regarded as one of the most immersive and extensive CRPGs ever designed. The game is set in Tamriel, one of the largest worlds ever seen in a CRPG, and holds almost limitless possibilities for gameplay. It also marks the first *Elder Scrolls* game to use Bethesda's XnGine 3D graphics engine, which they had developed for two *Terminator*-licensed first-person shooter games.

The developers intentionally downplayed the story of the game. No reference to an overarching quest is made on the box, and the manual puts the matter thus: "What's the story?" It is not for us to answer. Follow your own



*Daggerfall* took the concept of open-ended gameplay to a new level.

spirit and tell your story in your own way. We hope only to help you make it *real*." To this end, the manual warns players against abusing the save game feature. "If your character is caught pick pocketing, if a quest goes wrong, or some other mundane mishap occurs, let it play out. You may be surprised by what happens next." This style of gameplay, later described as the sandbox style, had been explored in many early mainframe CRPGs, but *Daggerfall* was one of the earliest and most self-conscious attempts to introduce it to the mainstream.

Bethesda's gamble paid off. Many (if not most) players enjoyed the lack of narrative guardrails, reveling in the freedom to explore Tamriel and develop their characters. A contemporary reviewer described the gameplay quite well: "No longer forced to play the way The Man wants, we are now free to ignore the pleadings of the princess, wander off, and get involved in other complex tales that change and evolve in response to our actions."<sup>3</sup> Comments like this are common in most fans' discussions of the game and help explain its broad appeal.

The leveling system was also made more dynamic, with the addition of dozens of skills. The skills here are divided into primary, major, and minor depending on the character's occupation. Many of the skills are related to combat and weapon proficiencies, but there are also skills for mages and thieves. Others, such as etiquette, mercantile, languages, and streetwise, help the hero get the most out of dialogs with other characters. Each skill also has a governing attribute, such as strength for jumping and climbing. All in all, it's a logical and refined system reminiscent of the older CRPGs inspired by the *Traveller* RPG. Furthermore, the old rigid class structure was abandoned in favor of a much more open-ended guild system. Players can customize their characters however they see fit, letting their creativity run wild. Since the statistics can be rather daunting to novices, Bethesda kept the *Ultima*-style morality quiz option from *Arena*.

Unfortunately, Bethesda's ambitious code wasn't easy to manage, and gamers were again presented with a myriad of bugs, though by this time they could probably use the Internet to find and install a patch to fix at least some of them. Another big problem is the lack of balance in the game's difficulty. It doesn't take experienced players long to gain enough experience to simply walk through the game, obliterating even the most powerful enemies with ease. Finally, there were problems with movement; players could get stuck

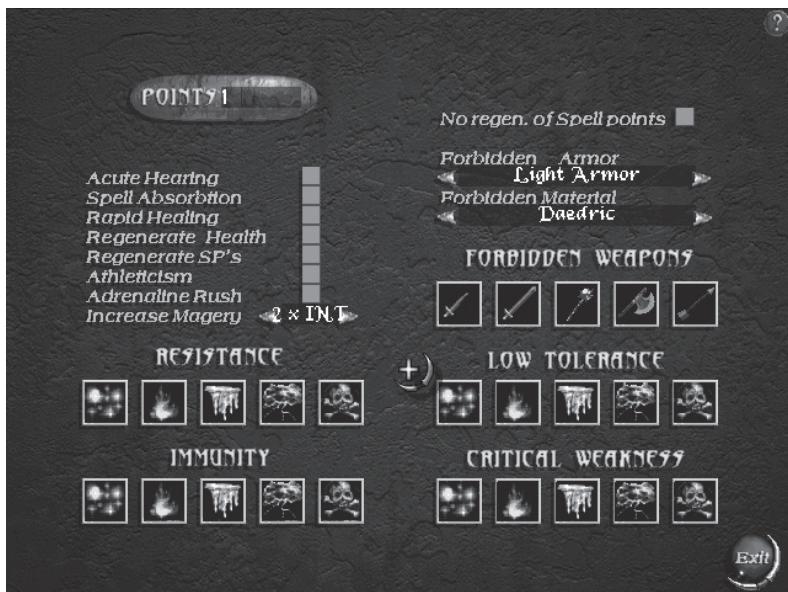
<sup>3</sup> See Trent C. Ward's review of the game at <http://www.gamespot.com/pc/rpg/daggerfall/review.html>.

between objects and have no choice but to restart. Nevertheless, most critics were willing to overlook these issues, and *Daggerfall* received countless awards from the most prestigious PC and gaming magazines. The game continues to enjoy a loyal fan base even today, supported by several dedicated fan sites and message boards.

## *Battlespire*

Bethesda developed and published two spin-offs before releasing the third entry in the official *Elder Scrolls* series. These were *An Elder Scrolls Legend: Battlespire* (1997) and *The Elder Scrolls Adventures: Redguard* (1998). Although not nearly as well known as the main series, these two games represent some of Bethesda's more radical experiments with the genre and paved the way for their later hit *Morrowind*. However, both games use an enhanced version of XnGine, the 3D-graphics engine used in *Daggerfall*.

*Battlespire* is in many ways a simplified, "hold the extras" version of *Daggerfall* and is often described as having more traits of a first-person shooter than of a true CRPG. The reduced learning curve is apparent from the



*Battlespire* simplified the *Elder Scrolls* formula but still offered considerable customization options.

character creation stage, which now utilizes a series of on-screen help menus to guide the player through the process. More important, the game is much less random and open-ended than *Daggerfall*, with much more linear, story-driven gameplay. The story is set in the titular spire, which was once a proving grounds for the Imperial Guard (one thinks of Sir-Tech's first *Wizardry* game). The spire has been overrun by the legions of Mehrunes Dagon, a vile Daedra Lord, who cares very little for our young hero's safety. The gameplay emphasizes precise control and jumping, which has never been easy in first-person perspective games like this one.

Unfortunately for Bethesda, *Battlespire* was not well received by critics. Again, players were besieged by bugs, many of them caused by the outdated XnGine, which was designed with DOS in mind and runs poorly on Windows 95. The enemy's pathfinding routines are also quite poor, and otherwise challenging opponents are prone to getting stuck on polygons—and other objects just float in mid-air! It's also extremely challenging to get this game running under a modern operating system. After hours of failed attempts, I was finally able to get it running under Windows XP using the latest version of DOSBox, but I had no luck at with Vista, even with Bethesda's 1.5 patch.

### *Redguard*

*Redguard* departs from the first-person perspective of the other games in favor of a third-person view, with the player's avatar visible on screen. If *Battlespire* leans towards the FPS, *Redguard* leans toward the traditional adventure game. Completing the game requires conversing with a great many characters



Unlike the previous *Elder Scrolls* games, *Redguard* offers third-person perspective.

and plenty of backtracking, but also some *Tomb Raider*-like action sequences including climbing, jumping, and swimming.

Although both games have their good points, neither seems to have won over as many fans as the main series. In any case, it's likely that Bethesda's team used these games as an opportunity to experiment with different interface and gameplay techniques.

## *Morrowind*

Perhaps the best known of all the *Elder Scrolls* games appeared in 2002: *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. *Morrowind* combined the first-person perspective of the earlier *Daggerfall* with the third-person of *Redguard*. For the first time, players could choose between the different perspectives as they saw fit. Players soon discovered that each mode had its advantages. For instance, third-person perspective makes it easier to dodge attacks.

The leveling system had also been revamped and split into two: Primary Stats (speed, personality, luck, etc.) and Secondary Abilities (combat arts, magic arts, etc.). Primary stats rise only when the character gains a level, but secondary abilities improve with use. The system may sound complicated, but it's actually quite intuitive. Characters who run and jump often will see a spike in their acrobatics score. Characters who wield an axe will see their axe score rise, and so on. Besides practicing a skill just to gain experience, characters can also buy training or read special books sprinkled throughout the game.



*Morrowind*'s beautiful graphics and open-ended gameplay cemented Bethesda's reputation as a master developer.

Indeed, there have been very few CRPGs as complex and flexible as *Morrowind*. Even after I had completed the main quest, I still had explored perhaps only 60% of the incredibly massive and diverse game world. Bethesda even included *The Elder Scrolls Construction Set*, a somewhat intimidating program that allows users to make their own modifications to the game. Hundreds of users have made their mods freely available online, but the quality varies. Most mods consist of powerful new items, though others add new textures or alter the interface. Some are just plain odd—like the popular “20 Books” module, which incorporates several works of H. P. Lovecraft, the brothers Grimm, and Lewis Carroll. Once the mod is installed, the player can visit various booksellers in the game to buy these texts and read them verbatim on the screen. Others, such as “A Call to Issilar,” add massive quests, characters, and areas. Provided players are willing to separate the wheat from the chaff, this free content adds value to an already good game.<sup>4</sup>

*Morrowind* is not without its problems, however. As in *Daggerfall*, players will eventually reach a level of experience that reduces even the game’s most formidable foes into pushovers. There are also many ways to exploit the game’s leveling system, such as standing in one place and casting the same spell over and over again. Nevertheless, the game continues to attract gamers and is still actively played today—as the many active fan websites and message boards attest. Bethesda produced two expansions for its third game: *Tribunal* (2002) and *Bloodmoon* (2003). Both expansions met with fairly good reviews, though the latter is perhaps the better of the two. I’ll discuss the fourth game in the next chapter.

## *Might and Magic*: From Platinum to Pabulum

We last spoke of New World Computing’s *Might and Magic* series in Chapter 7. The series received a major overhaul with the publication of *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven* in 1998. It had been a full five years since the previous installment, enough time for many fans of the series to have long ago moved on to other games. New World knew its flagship franchise would need more than just a facelift if it were to compete with the massively successful CRPGs of the late 1990s, which include such classics as BioWare’s

<sup>4</sup> For a list of freely available and ranked mods for *Morrowind*, see <http://planetelder-scrolls.gamespy.com/View.php?view=mods.HOF>.

*Baldur's Gate*, Blizzard's *Diablo*, Interplay's *Fallout*, and Bethesda's *Daggerfall*—in short, the games that define the Platinum Age. New World would need plenty of its own might and magic to stand up to this competition!

We should recall that in 1995 New World released its *Heroes of Might and Magic*, a highly successful turn-based strategy game that is still spawning sequels today. Although the *Heroes* games differ fundamentally from the main *Might and Magic* series, they were competition for New World's development and marketing resources—particularly as we head into the 2000s. The *Heroes* games, which trace their ancestry back to New World's 1990 *King's Bounty*, would eventually replace *Might and Magic* as New World's premier franchise. The older series would peak with *The Mandate of Heaven* and its sequel, then sadly nosedive, as Origin's *Ultima* series had done.

Finally, it's important to bear in mind that Trip Hawkins's 3DO company had purchased New World in 1996. 3DO had just given up on its attempts to market an expensive CD-ROM based game console, and it was hoping to leverage its marketing resources to publish games for other platforms. Just as Richard Garriott had lived to regret his decision to sell Origin to Electronic Arts, Jon Van Caneghem soon found himself at odds with 3DO. In a 2004 interview, Caneghem complained that 3DO was "very scared of doing something new." It's worth quoting a bit more from this interview, since it sheds much light on the debacle that follows:

"[3DO] always wanted to stick with building a sequel that they knew had a built-in sales number they could achieve. The execs look at the numbers and they go, 'Hey, but we got such a fan base. Can you make another one?' Nine *Might and Magic* and four *Heroes* later, it gets to the point where I go, 'Come on guys, let's do something new!'"<sup>5</sup>

3DO probably should have listened to Caneghem, since they declared bankruptcy in 2003 and ended up as part of Ubisoft. Caneghem later joined Garriott's NCsoft company.

## *The Mandate of Heaven*

New World's *The Mandate of Heaven* was the first in the series to feature fluid 3D motion, placing it firmly in the camp of *Ultima Underworld*-inspired games. However, *The Mandate of Heaven* is much more than a clone of Blue Sky's masterpiece. Rather than offer up yet another single-character game, New World chose to adapt most of the established conventions from earlier games in the

<sup>5</sup> See [http://www.gamespot.com/news/2004/06/18/news\\_6100916.html](http://www.gamespot.com/news/2004/06/18/news_6100916.html).

series. The most noticeable of these is the familiar row of animated character portraits along the bottom of the screen, though now they are photo-realistic and so even more lifelike. As before, the characters' faces react to situations and change to reflect the mood and condition of the characters. Being able to see characters wince from a blow adds greatly to the immersion, as does seeing them blink or yawn. They also speak at certain intervals, particularly when the party enters a new dungeon or after a particularly ferocious attack. This banter adds greatly to the feeling of actual role-playing with friends rather than with the standard cardboard characters of so many other games.

It's also worth pointing out that very few *Underworld*-style games allow for multiple characters, though *The Mandate of Heaven* was preceded in this regard by *Hexx: Heresy of the Wizard* and *Shadows Over Riva*. In any case, *The Mandate of Heaven* and its first sequel are no doubt the most commercially successful multicharacter adaptations, and, at least in my opinion, do the best job of incorporating conventional role-playing elements into the *Ultima Underworld* formula.

As with previous games in the series, *The Mandate of Heaven* requires players to make many important choices as they develop their characters, and it's worth taking a moment to examine this brilliant system in detail. Though a quick start option puts them in the action right away if they so choose, many players (particularly expert CRPG fans) will want to roll their own. After an initial choice of class, players decide how to expend skill points. Skills are divided into four basic areas: Weapon, Armor, Magic, and Miscellaneous. This last category includes some metaskills such as learning, which affects all



*The Mandate of Heaven* is one of my all-time favorite CRPGs.

the other skills by boosting the experiences points awarded after a battle. Although each character selects from a limited number of free skills at creation, the rest must be secured by joining guilds and paying to learn skills.

Each time characters reach a new level, they receive a number of skill points to distribute among the skills they have learned—or they can save them for later. The cost of raising a skill level increases incrementally. For example, raising a character's chainmail skill from one to two would cost two points, whereas raising it a third time would cost three. The system encourages well rounded parties whose characters employ a variety of useful skills, such as the ability to spot and disarm traps, identify mysterious items, or haggle with merchants.

If a character pumps four points into a skill, he or she is eligible for expert training with a trainer. These special trainers are sprinkled across the country but usually reside in houses in the towns. Each skill gains extra abilities at the expert level, such as reduced recovery time for armor or the ability to wield two daggers instead of one. Later on, the expert character can become a recognized master of the discipline, though the prerequisites vary across the different skills (many of the most important require the fulfilling of special class-related quests). Expert and master training is particularly exciting for mages and clerics, whose entire spell books change with each stage. For instance, a spell that affects only a single character at the novice level may affect the entire party at the expert level, and in general all spells become more powerful and useful as levels rise.

All in all, it's an intuitive and highly customizable way to handle the leveling issue. I should note also that characters do not automatically gain levels but must seek out and pay for general-purpose trainers, who won't take them on as pupils unless they've earned enough experience points. Since cash is relatively hard for new parties to come by, players have to make strategic decisions about how to spend it—does it make more sense to buy a new weapon or magic scroll, learn a new skill, or level up a character? Though training costs are negligible at first, they become much steeper at higher levels.

Combat is also handled well in *The Mandate of Heaven*, offering a real-time and a turn-based mode. During a battle, the player can act in real-time by attacking or casting "readied" spells, or hit a key to enter turn-based mode. In turn-based mode, the game pauses between each action on the battlefield and is very useful for major encounters. However, there is a glitch in the system. All four characters are assumed to be standing in a parallel line facing their enemies; thus, weaker characters are just as exposed and vulnerable to attack as well-armored warriors and clerics. Thankfully, mages can wear leath-

er armor and protect themselves with magical items and spells; in general, a mage can usually end up with a armor class comparable to that of the knight. Still, I'm sure I'm not alone in wishing that the weaker characters could have somehow stood behind the plate-mailed warriors, as in *Dungeon Master*.

As with the earlier *Xeen* games, *The Mandate of Heaven* offers players a myriad of subplots and side-quests. There are so many of these that it's quite easy to get distracted from the main mission, which concerns some aliens who have invaded the planet. Eventually the party will confront these aliens, after equipping themselves with futuristic armor and weaponry. Thus, *The Mandate of Heaven* hearkens back to the early *Ultima* games that blended conventional fantasy with sci-fi elements (laser blasters, space ships, and so on). In true *Might and Magic* tradition, *The Mandate of Heaven* offers players a huge game world and enough gameplay to keep them busy for months. Indeed, I lost a whole summer to *The Mandate of Heaven* back in 1996 and another to the sequel in 1997!

The game won high praise from critics, and for good reason. Who can forget the first time their wizard cast a fly spell, sending the party soaring high above Enroth? The music is also lively and inspired, setting a great mood for many nights of gaming. Perhaps more importantly, though, *Might and Magic VI* is blissfully free of bugs. At a time when almost every other major CRPG was so riddled with errors that manuals advised players to routinely save the game every few minutes, this stability is nothing short of remarkable. I was even able to run it flawlessly in Windows Vista, which says something about the durability of the code. It's an incredibly ambitious game that actually works as advertised, and that alone makes it stand out against much of the competition. It's certainly one of my favorite CRPGs, and I would recommend it highly to anyone—well, anyone with plenty of free time!

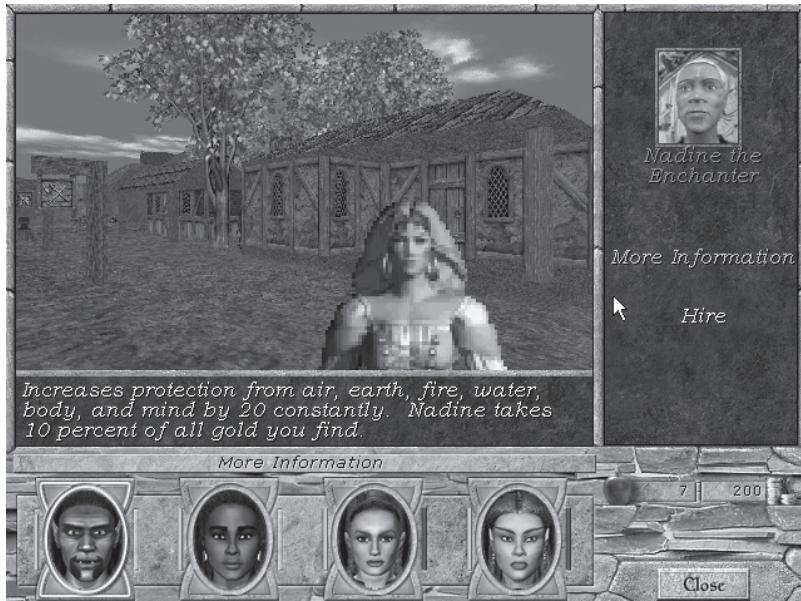
## *For Blood and Honor*

New World's next entry in the series, *For Blood and Honor*, is often hailed as the last good *Might and Magic* CRPG, and it offers a few welcome innovations to the interface over its predecessor but shares those qualities that worked so well for the first game. One important change is the introduction of three new playable races—elves, dwarves, goblins—each with their own benefits and weaknesses. The photo-realistic portraits have also been replaced with more CGI style faces. Other useful tweaks include a more comprehensive automatic note-taking system and the option to always run. This last improvement may sound minor, but in the previous game the only way to run

was to hold down the shift key. Since there is no fatigue system in either game, running saves a great deal of time.

*For Blood and Honor* also honed the skill system by doing away with some of the guilds. Now characters can learn new skills at shops, such as axe and bow at the local weapon smith. The game maintains the expert and master system described above but extends it with a grandmaster level that offers some truly remarkable enhancements to skills. However, each class can only reach expert, master, or grandmaster rank in certain skills. For instance, only snipers and master archers (prestige classes for the archer class) can attain grandmastery with the bow. There are also quite a few new classes, including the thief, who has the ability to steal from shops. Incidentally, it's with some indignation that I must point that the default party has a single African American in its ranks—a thief. Fortunately for 3DO and New World Computing, however, no one seems to have fussed much over this potentially damaging gaffe.

The game's story is perhaps more sophisticated than *The Mandate of Heaven's*, and gives the player significant leeway in determining how the plot



*For Blood and Honor* kept most of the engine intact, though players can now create characters of different races.

unfolds. The player must decide which of the many groups to side with, taking on quests that favor one or another. In short, the player can choose the light or dark path, leading to very different quests and endings. *For Blood and Honor* also introduces a mini-game called *Arcomage*, which is roughly based on the popular Wizard of the Coast card game *Magic: The Gathering*. *Arcomage* would show up again in the sequel, as well as in a standalone, multi-player game published in 1999.

*For Blood and Honor* was noted at the time for its excellent operatic score, composed by Paul Romero and produced by Robert King. However, some critics complained about the voice acting, which does tend to get repetitive after the same utterance has been made for the ten-thousandth time. Some criticized the game for being dated, particularly in terms of its graphics. By the late 1990s, games like Epic's *Unreal Tournament* were setting much higher benchmarks for 3D graphics, and *For Blood and Honor* does look quite aged by comparison. Still, most fans of the series were more than happy to overlook these problems and enjoy what is really another classic *Might and Magic* experience.

## *Day of the Destroyer*

With *Day of the Destroyer*, the eighth *Might and Magic* game, the series began to take a turn for the worse. Released in 2000 still using *Mandate of Heaven's* engine, the game looked very dated and even obsolete before it hit the shelf. However, poor graphics weren't the only problem.

Although the earlier games had certainly had their share of dull moments, *Day of the Destroyer* is almost painfully repetitive. Even the surprising decision to allow the player to create only one character (the rest of the five-member party must be recruited later) does little to affect the monotony, since the additional characters are almost entirely devoid of personality and impact on the story. The ability to add a dragon to the party may sound like a cool feature, but doing so ruins the game's balance, reducing it to an unbearably dull walk-through. Sadder still is the unforgivably buggy code, of which random crashes are some of the least irksome results. Needless to say, the game made little impression on those who weren't already in love with the series.

Nevertheless, *Day of the Destroyer* does have its good points and was noted for its excellent storyline. The main story is focused on the land of Jadame, where a giant crystal has popped up out of the earth, devastating the area and opening four elemental portals. It's up to players to set the balance right again—a quest that will take many weeks in real-time as they level up



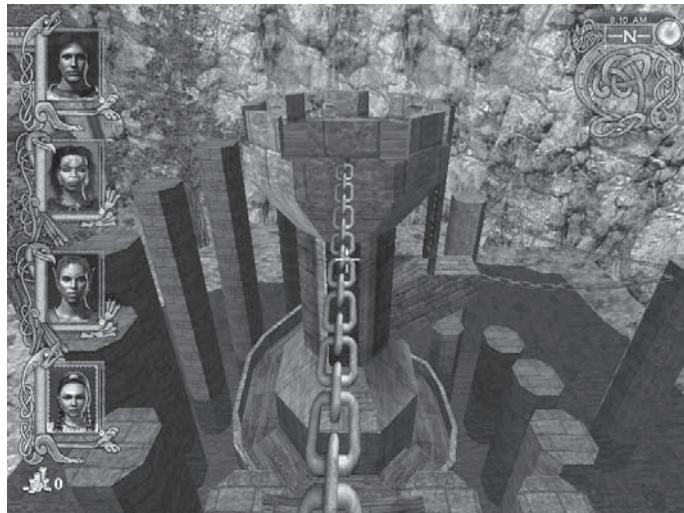
Unlike the other *Might and Magic* games, *Day of the Destroyer* allows the player to create only a single character, though nonplayer characters can be recruited later on.

their characters in preparation for the big bout with Planeswalker Escaton. The turn-based combat mode has also been enhanced. After all the combatants have executed their moves, the player has an opportunity to advance or withdraw the party a short distance. This movement phase can make a big difference in major battles, particularly if the party's strength lies in ranged attacks.

## *Might and Magic IX*

The last game in the series, *Might and Magic IX*, was released in 2002 to harshly critical reviews. Although 3DO had finally taken the plunge into full 3D graphics with Monolith's LithTech Talon engine, the graphics were still behind the times, and the interface can be rather unwieldy. The game was rushed through production, with the typical result—hundreds of game-crashing bugs and a general lack of polish. Although 3DO released a patch, it was up to fans to address most of the issues in an unofficial patch.

The LithTech Talon engine had powered some successful games in the early 2000s, such as Fox Interactive's *No One Lives Forever* and *Aliens versus*



*Might and Magic IX* was a tragic way to end the series. Here we see the party tight-rope-walking across a narrow chain.

*Predator 2*. However, even though they had a powerful and proven 3D engine at their disposal, New World doesn't seem to have had the resources or determination to put it to good use. Many settings and characters are recycled over and over, to the extent that one wonders whether the game world is overrun by clones. Indeed, many critics pointed out that the crude, polygonal characters and monsters look much less realistic than the old 2D versions in the previous installments. Even worse, the storyline borders on the incoherent, especially during the crucial first stages of the game. Reviewers lampooned the game, giving it pitifully low scores and warning all but diehard fans of the series to stay away. One contemporary reviewer quipped, "It's a safe bet that nobody will ever wax nostalgic about *Might and Magic IX*." In short, New World and 3DO had repeated the miserable failure of Origin and Electronic Arts's *Ascension*, which ended the grand old *Ultima* series with a similarly bad note.

Nevertheless, I think the development team had some good ideas, even if the resulting product was severely disappointing. For one thing, the game returned to the older convention of having the player select four characters, who could be half orcs, dwarves, elves, or humans (the party can later add three nonplayer characters to its ranks). Besides choosing among several portraits, the player can also choose a voice for each character—handily described

as assertive, arrogant, happy, cowardly, dim, or angry. Although the voice acting isn't tremendous, the idea is sound (though it was pioneered in the earlier *Baldur's Gate* series).

New World dumbed down the class system substantially from previous games. Indeed, there are only two classes available at the creation stage: fighters and initiates. Of course, later on these characters can specialize in different skills and join one of 12 different classes. For instance, a fighter might later become a mercenary, and from there an assassin or a gladiator. The old personality and intellect stats have been subsumed into a single magic stat. The skills are pretty much intact from previous games, except for magic. Now, all mage spells are learned via the elemental skill, and all clerical spells rely on the spirit skill. There are also light and dark magic skills, which concern attack spells and healing spells, respectively. It's really not a very good improvement over the old system—I much preferred the older system, which, if nothing else, helped maintain a healthy distinction between schools of magic and offered at least a greater semblance of variety.

Some other interesting changes concern movement. Now, the party can climb, crouch, swim, and strafe (move from side to side). I might point out, though, that occasionally this mobility makes odd demands on the player's suspension of disbelief. For instance, how can a party walking in a horizontal line successfully cross a tightrope? Again, New World made no effort to display the player's characters on screen. However, one nice touch is that the player can finally arrange the party members into ranks, putting the more heavily armed units in front and weaker characters in the rear. Unfortunately, this feature doesn't seem to have been well integrated into the game; at least, it doesn't seem to make much practical difference in actual gameplay.

Combat has been altered, and probably not for the best. Now, much depends on the player's ability to line up a pair of crosshairs on the enemy, who can often be quite small. Attacking is performed by rapidly clicking the mouse buttons. Thankfully, there is still the trusty turn-based mode for players with slower reflexes.

The game is also stymied by a rather poor automapping system, which is not shown on screen as in the previous games but must be accessed on a slow-loading screen—and it doesn't seem very accurate. All of the old information pages (character display, spell books, and the journal) have been redone in a very nice style reminiscent of an ancient book, but for some reason the game hangs for several seconds while these screens load. Since these screens will of necessity be displayed thousands (or even tens of thousands) of times during the course of the game, that's a considerable amount of wasted time.

Apologists for the game insist that it gets better after fifteen or so hours of rather dull, repetitive gameplay, but I doubt many gamers are willing to endure that much tedium. But why did the game falter so badly? Jon Van Caneghem remarked in an interview in *Computer Gaming World* that he had “little to no involvement” with the game, and that “if it had been my decision, it would have never shipped.”<sup>6</sup> In any case, it’s a dismal way to end a long-lived and much-loved series. If there’s a lesson to be learned here, it’s that developers should think twice about selling out to larger game publishers, who may very well not understand or appreciate the enormous creativity and lofty vision that goes into making truly great games.

### *Arx Fatalis*

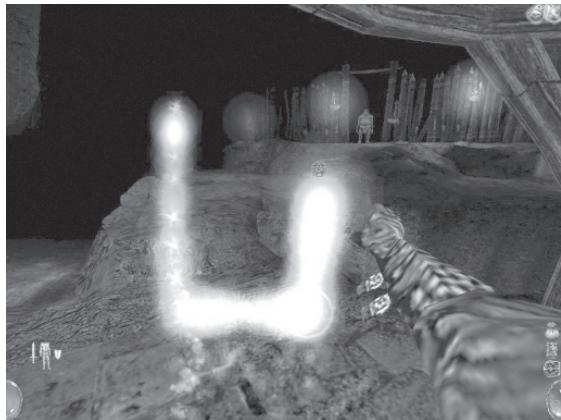
In 2002, French developer Arkane Studios released *Arx Fatalis*, a game that started out as *Ultima Underworld III*. Unfortunately, the developer was unable to come to an agreement with Electronic Arts over the licensing.<sup>7</sup> Arkane Studios went ahead with the project anyway, and while the final product doesn’t bear the moniker, *Ultima Underworld*’s influence is unmistakable. Although not technically set underground, the gameworld’s lack of a sun makes for a familiarly dark and brooding atmosphere.

There are other innovations here worth noting. One is Arkane’s goal to keep the player immersed in the main game window. Whereas most CRPGs switch to a different screen and interface when players are purchasing items in a store, for instance, *Arx Fatalis* handles the transaction by having the player drag items from the merchant’s chest into the character’s inventory.

The game begins just after the main character is knocked on the head and tossed into a goblin prison. Predictably, he’s lost his memory, and a good portion of the game involves rediscovering his identity. Although we’ve seen this setup in other CRPGs (*Planescape: Torment*, *Captive*), it works well within the plotline, a morbid tale involving the summoning of an evil god. The plot is rather linear, though the character’s ability to interact with the environment compensates for this limitation. *Arx Fatalis* is one of a handful of CRPGs that allow item combining, a feature far more common in adventure games. For instance, combining a rope with a pole results in a fishing pole; this can be used to catch fish, which can be combined with fire to cook a good meal.

<sup>6</sup> See the Apr. 2004 issue of *Computer Gaming World*.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.gamespot.com/pc/rpg/arxfatalis/news.html?sid=28563841>.



*Arx Fatalis* features an intriguing spell system based on mouse gestures.

There are no classes, but the character does receive four primary ratings and some secondary skills (ranged attack, close combat, and so on). These skills are boosted as the player completes quests and gains combat experience, and the player gets to decide which skills warrant improvement. The spell system is rune-based and comparable to *Stonekeep*. In *Arx Fatalis*, the character must first find runes, then discover which combinations of runes result in useful magic. The runes are “drawn” with the mouse, though three of them can be precast and cast instantly later on. A great part of the fun is experimenting with the runes to chance upon more powerful spells.

Although critics praised the graphics and storyline, most found the combat system disappointing. Besides poor collision detection and physics, the combat mode is just too banal: click the mouse on the enemy, repeat. Critics also railed against the many game-crashing bugs, some of which can cause the player to lose saved games (and possibly hours and hours of work). Thankfully, most of these bugs have been fixed in subsequent patches, and it seems to me that *Arx Fatalis* is about as close to an *Ultima Underworld III* as we’re likely to get.

## A Blizzard Blows In

So far, the Platinum Age games we’ve discussed have been concerned primarily with offering players massive 3D worlds to explore in real-time, first-person perspective. The best of these, *The Stygian Abyss*, *Daggerfall*, and *Mandate of*

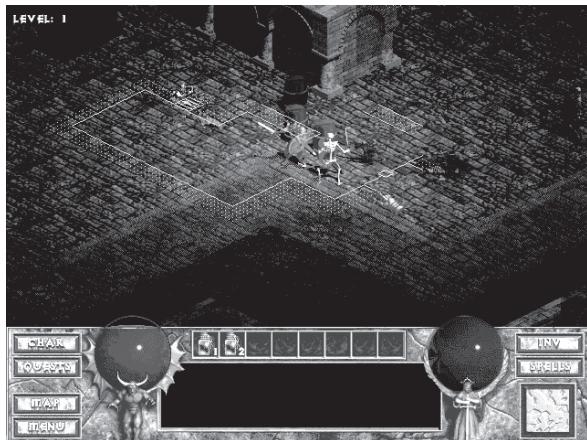
*Heaven*, try to put the player directly in the role of the adventurer, trading the contemplative joys of tactical combat for the adrenaline-soaked thrills of the first-person shooter. These games owe much of their existence to the classic *Dungeon Master* and the older *Wizardry* series, as well as the highly successful *DOOM* and later FPSs.

However, whether CRPGs work better in first-person or third-person perspective is a much-debated question. Third-person can look quite impressive in 2D, particularly when it uses isometric rather than flat top-down perspective. We've already discussed a number of isometric CRPGs, such as *The Four Crystals of Trazere* and *The Summoning*, and hybrids such as *Pool of Radiance* and *Realms of Arkania*. In general, a third-person, isometric perspective has the advantage of allowing the player to actually see the characters in action, which can often be just as appealing as seeing through the characters' eyes. A handy analogy for understanding this advantage is the miniatures version of *AD&D*, which offers a much different experience than purely verbal gameplay and, at least for many, makes combat feel much more tactile and more enjoyable. There's also something to be said for the visceral reaction many gamers have when they actually get to see their characters being mauled by monsters. Though they may not feel like they *are* these characters, they can and often do feel very sympathetic towards them.

With the key exceptions of Origin's *The False Prophet* and *The Black Gate*, most previous efforts to incorporate real-time gameplay into isometric CRPGs were not successful. The popularity of the FPS ensured that many publishers would favor CRPGs with similar interfaces; anything else would seem hopelessly outdated before it hit the shelf. Nevertheless, the most successful CRPGS of the late 1990s and early 2000s were in fact real-time, isometric games that were in every way as immersive as their first-person counterparts, if not more so. The secret of their success was not graphical wizardry, but exquisitely crafted gameplay.

## *Diablo*

Blizzard is probably better known today for *World of Warcraft*, an MMORPG loosely based on the company's best-selling real-time strategy (RTS) series, *Warcraft*, which launched in 1994. Blizzard also made gaming history with the release of *StarCraft* in 1998, an immensely successful RTS that is widely regarded as the finest such game ever developed. Clearly, Blizzard was a developer that knew how to make great games with very broad appeal. When the company entered the CRPG market with the publication of *Diablo* in 1996,



Blizzard's *Diablo* established a new paradigm for CRPGs that is still in use today.

they scored yet another triumph. Critics raved about it in magazines and websites, doling out awards and giving it near-perfect scores in their reviews. The game is *still* being sold as part of the *Diablo Battlechest*, a best-selling compilation that includes the sequel and expansions.

Despite its unquestionable success, *Diablo* remains a divisive subject among aficionados of the genre. Even today, a decade later, no other game has polarized CRPG fans more than *Diablo*. Are *Diablo* and its sequel the best CRPGs ever made, or the worst? Let's take a closer look and see if we can understand the source of this contention.

*Diablo* is usually described as an action-CPRG, a label that indicates its gameplay is focused more on fast reflexes than on tactics. It also features a vastly simplified character development system compared to most CRPGs. The player only controls a single character, who can be one of three basic types (Warrior, Rogue, and Sorcerer). The differences among these types are somewhat superficial; warriors can cast spells and sorcerers can wear armor. However, the choice of class does determine the best strategies for surviving battles, and, as usual, it's the magic-using class that starts off weakest and ends up strongest. Each time the character gains a new level, the player receives five points to distribute among the four attributes: strength, magic, dexterity, and vitality. Although quite simple on the surface, Blizzard's genius was doing more with less. Instead of baffling players with a complicated skill system like those in the *Elder Scrolls* or *Might and Magic* games, *Diablo* offers fewer choices but makes each choice more significant.

The interface is also marvelously simple, based almost entirely on mouse clicks. Left clicking on part of the screen sends the character to that location, and clicking on a monster causes it to attack. While a single blow is enough to dispatch many monsters, others require multiple strikes (and thus multiple clicks with the mouse). A right click activates the current spell or skill and is also used to quickly quaff potions or recite scrolls stored in the character's belt. A simple paper doll system lets players equip the character. Finally, two globes—one red, one blue—show the character's current hit and mana points (we saw this convention in Blue Sky's *The Stygian Abyss*.)

Just as important as the intuitive interface is *Diablo*'s virtue of constantly rewarding the player. This is most noticeable in the leveling up process. Most CRPGs are quite stingy with levels, promoting characters only after hours or even days of gameplay. *Diablo* reversed this trend by greatly reducing level requirements. Indeed, especially at the crucial early stages of the game, it's possible to reach new levels every ten to fifteen minutes. Likewise, powerful arms and armor are liberally distributed throughout the dungeons. The system is geared towards providing a continuous stream of rewards for the player that undoubtedly accounts for some of the game's immense popularity with mainstream gamers.

*Diablo* is also noted for its high degree of randomization. The dungeons, monster locations, and item capabilities are randomized, not only ensuring surprises but also enhancing the game's replay value. You may remember our earlier discussion of *Rogue* and *The Sword of Fargoal*, which also offer relatively simple "hack 'n slash" fun in randomized environments. Indeed, one of the most common phrases used to describe *Diablo* is a "Roguelike for the 90s," though there are plenty of *Rogue* fans who object to the comparison. For one thing, *Diablo* features a coherent storyline that concerns nothing less than a struggle between Heaven and Hell. The game takes its title from the Lord of Terror, an evil demon whose magical prison (a "soulstone") lies forgotten beneath the town of Tristram. The soulstone has eroded over time, and *Diablo* is able to exert enough influence on the material plane to begin wreaking serious havoc. It's up to the player to put *Diablo* back in the soulstone, though the ending scene of the game is purposefully ambiguous about the success of this mission.

Another aspect of *Diablo* that set it apart was its support for free multiplayer support, which ranged from the by then common LAN party setup to a new Internet server named Battle.net. Although not without its flaws (cheating was rampant), *Diablo*'s multiplayer capability remained a significant factor in the game's long-lasting popularity. Furthermore, Blizzard was able

to turn a profit with online gaming, a feat which other companies had been unable to perform. The company would later use the knowledge they gained from *Diablo* to develop *World of Warcraft*. Finally, no description of *Diablo* would be complete without reference to its masterful musical score, which is surely among the best ever composed for a computer game. Matt Uelmen, the score composer, received the International Game Developer Association's award in 2001.

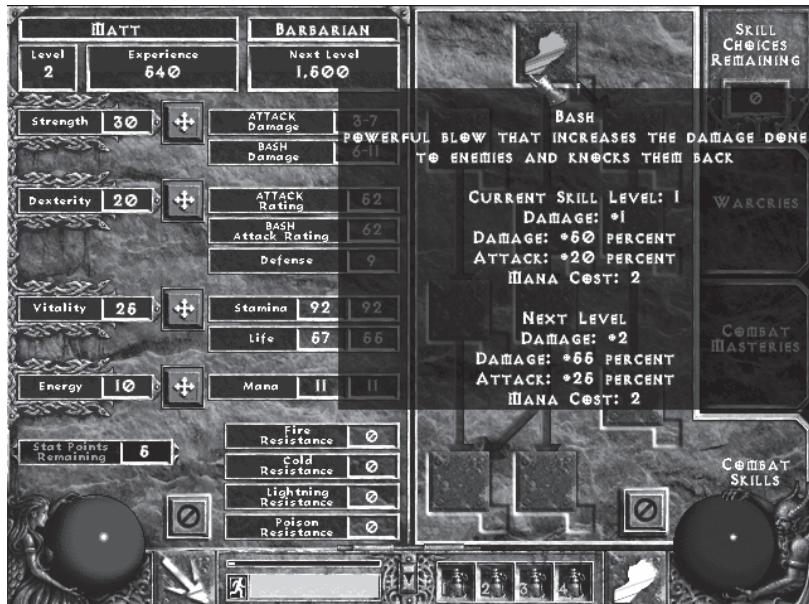
Yet despite strong sales and praise from many prominent reviewers, *Diablo* was not without its naysayers. Not surprisingly, the game's popularity with "virgin" CRPG gamers drew sneers from long-term fans of the genre, particularly those who'd cut their teeth on venerable old titles like *Pool of Radiance* or *The Bard's Tale*. Blizzard reduced the often intimidating CRPG genre to its bare essentials, and oldsters scoffed, dismissing it as a clickfest. Other players complained about the dark graphics, which are occasionally hard to make out. The on-screen automapping tool helps with navigation but frequently obscures the battle sequences. Finally, some players lamented the game's relatively short duration; those accustomed to the hundreds of hours required to slog through an *Ultima* offering weren't happy with a game that could be completed in a mere two days. In spite of these criticisms, however, *Diablo* remains a crucial game in the CRPG canon, introducing the genre to millions of new gamers.

### *Hellfire*

What happened next in the *Diablo* story is quite perplexing. Rather than release a sequel or their own expansion, Blizzard let Sierra On-Line publish an expansion named *Hellfire*, which had been developed by Synergistic Software (the same team responsible for *Birthright: The Gorgon's Alliance*). This expansion, which appeared in 1997, added two new dungeons, new creatures, spells, items, and a monk character class. Reviewers weren't nearly as enthused about *Hellfire* as they had been about *Diablo*, and the lack of multiplayer support vexed many players. Many fans of the series don't consider it an official expansion.

### *Diablo II*

Blizzard knew that fans had great expectations for the first official sequel to the popular *Diablo*. Four years had passed, and graphics technology was fast approaching the level of performance we expect from modern PCs. Blizzard's challenge was to update the engine without ruining the gameplay that had endeared them to so many gamers and critics. However, a problematic pro-



*Diablo II* introduced a brilliant and highly influential branching tree skills system.

Production schedule delayed the game by many years, and when it finally arrived, many critics objected to the dated graphics and layouts. Fortunately for Blizzard, *Diablo II* overcame this limitation and was overwhelmingly successful, soon becoming one of the best-selling CRPGs of all time.

*Diablo II* is significantly larger and more sophisticated than its predecessor. Players can explore outdoor areas as well as multiple dungeons. More important, the randomized quests are replaced with more linear ones, which allows developers to more tightly integrate the storyline and cut scenes. If the engine graphics look dated, the cut scenes are cutting-edge and feature good voice acting and superb animation; they add greatly to the overall coherence of the game.

The class system has also been reworked, with five classes (Paladin, Barbarian, Amazon, Necromancer, Sorceress), each with unique skills and combat strategies. The leveling system is enhanced with a graphical skill tree system that helps sustain a player's long-term interest in developing a character—there's always some amazing new ability just a few levels away. Each time a character levels up, the player receives some points to distribute among the character's attributes, but also a skill point to enhance or develop a skill.

The skills are arranged so that more advanced skills, which can be learned only at high levels, require specific basic skills. For instance, the necromancer's teeth skill is a prerequisite for the sixth level corpse explosion, which is itself a prerequisite for the eighteenth level bone spear. Furthermore, every skill takes on added importance and usefulness with more points. A player can add more points to the necromancer's teeth skill to get extra teeth and have them do more damage. We'll also see this system in *Dungeon Siege II* and *World of Warcraft*.

The weapon and armor system is also extended with a novel socket feature on certain items. These sockets can be filled with gems and jewels found throughout the dungeons, and can greatly increase the power of an otherwise banal item. Then there are the new weapon sets, collections of items that offer substantial bonuses when used in tandem. For example, the Berserker's Garb set consists of a special helmet, hauberk, and hatchet. When all three items are equipped, the character receives a considerable bonus to defense and increased resistance to poison. Other sets are far more powerful, especially those added in the *Lord of Destruction* expansion pack.

Another addition is the option to recruit a hireling to assist in combat. Unfortunately, these hirelings prove rather vulnerable, though the expansion pack increases their life expectancy. A new fatigue system allows the character to run for a set period. When the fatigue bar runs low, the character must rest or walk for awhile to recover. Finally, some of the carpal tunnel-inducing mouse clicking was alleviated. Players could simply hold down the mouse button to have their character repeatedly attack or move around. They could also hold down the ALT key to see treasures lying about dungeons—this change cut back dramatically on the need for “pixel hunting,” or sweeping the mouse pointer about each area to search for rings, coins, and other small items.

Multiplayer mode was better supported, and cheating was rarer. Blizzard's Battle.net server was still prone to lag, but that didn't slow the onslaught of rabid *Diablo II* fans desperate for online play. The big change from the older system was that now character information was stored entirely on Blizzard's own servers, which curtailed cheating sharply. Millions of users logged in to Battle.net to play *Diablo II* with others from around the world, and many are still active today.

### *Lord of Destruction*

Blizzard decided to make their own expansion for *Diablo II*, releasing *Lord of Destruction* in 2001. Besides many new items and quests, the expansion of-

fers heightened screen resolution (800 x 600) and two new character classes (Assassins and Druids). The expansion also added new features and tweaked others, thereby adding significant value to the older game. For instance, characters can now store more items in their stash, and socketed items can hold up to six gems. Reviewers were pleased with the improved graphics, as well as the many improvements to the Battle.net server that improved the online multiplayer experience. In short, *Lord of Destruction* is a must-have expansion that adds considerable functionality to an already excellent game.

If the only criteria we needed to evaluate CRPGs were sales figures and enduring popularity, Blizzard's *Diablo* games would represent two of the best (if not the best) CRPGs ever designed. The games brought new blood to the genre, introducing it to millions of gamers who had never played any of the classic CRPGs, much less a tabletop *AD&D* game. It sent hordes of badly behaved teenagers (and middle-aged men, no doubt) scampering to Battle.net, "pwning" each other and seeking out the latest cheats and hacks to gain an unfair advantage.

*Diablo* and *Diablo II* are truly CRPGs for the masses. At the risk of sounding like a jaded old curmudgeon, I can't help but feel a pang of regret about the overwhelming triumph of this series, since it seems to have come at the expense of the older, more sophisticated CRPGs of past eras. That said, the trend in action CRPGs seems to be towards added complexity rather than further simplicity. It's conceivable that eventually the action CRPG will soon be just as sophisticated as its turn-based predecessors.

## *Diablo's Impact*

Whenever we see a game attract as much attention and as many dollars as *Diablo* did, we can expect to see a gaggle of other developers trailing in its wake. Trent C. Ward of GameSpot predicated in 1997 that *Diablo* was "likely to be the clone maker for the next two years,"<sup>8</sup> but its influence has lasted much longer—indeed, *Diablo* clones are still being developed today. While many *Diablo* clones are probably better off forgotten (*Ancient Evil*, *Hexplore*, *Blade of Darkness*), others innovated substantially from the model, offering gamers many intriguing alternatives. Of particular note is Chris Taylor's *Dungeon Siege* series, which is probably the most successful of all such clones, though there are several worthy contenders.

<sup>8</sup> See Trent C. Ward's review of the game at <http://www.gamespot.com/pc/rpg/diablo/review.html>.

### *Dink Smallwood*

One of the earliest *Diablo* clones is *Dink Smallwood*, a satirical game by Seth Robinson that was published in 1998 by Iridon Interactive. Robinson, who had earned some measure of fame with his BBS door game *Legend of the Red Dragon* (see Chapter 8), infused *Dink Smallwood* with irreverent and provocative humor. The game also features a construction tool named *Dinkedit*, which allows gamers to make their own “Dink Modules” and distribute them. The game was originally a commercial venture, though it was later released as freeware.<sup>9</sup>

What’s interesting about *Dink Smallwood* is that it is one of only a handful of commercially released comedic CRPGs—the only other ones I can think of are the *Quest for Glory* series, Steve Meretzky’s *Superhero League of Hoboken*, and a few obscure Roguelikes. Although many CRPGs (particularly the *Phantasie* and *Fallout* series) contain the occasional pun or joke, most are grimly serious. The reverse seems to be true for many JRPGs as well as for MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*, where humor is far more prevalent, both in the design of the game and in the interaction with other players.

### *Darkstone*

Delphine Software’s *Darkstone*, published in 1999 by Gathering for Sony’s PlayStation and Windows, is often dismissed as a shameless *Diablo* clone, even though it is a substantial departure from the original formula. Most noticeably, *Darkstone* introduces true 3D graphics and the ability to control two characters, though only one at the time (the other is controlled by the computer). The ability to zoom and spin the camera eliminates many of the problems introduced by *Diablo*’s isometric view (such as objects getting lost behind structures). I should point out that this release date puts *Darkstone* a year ahead of *Diablo II*, which offered only a 2D isometric view.

GameSpy declared *Darkstone* the action CRPG of the year for 1999, and other critics were generally favorably disposed towards the game, particularly the graphics. It’s also quite stable and mostly bug free. However, the game suffers from some horrible voice acting, an awkward healing system, and an infuriating need to constantly feed the characters. The characters also age rapidly, and older characters receive far fewer experience points. Although a fountain of youth helps with this problem, many gamers found the aging and feeding features unwelcome distractions. *Darkstone* also offers a multiplayer

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<sup>9</sup> Learn more and download the game at <http://www.dinknetwork.com/>.

option, though there was no equivalent of Blizzard's Battle.net server. Instead, players set up their own servers using IPX (for LAN parties) or TCP/IP.

### *Revenant*

Cinematix Studios' *Revenant*, published in 1999 by Eidos, is in many ways similar to the Black Isle's *Planescape: Torment*, released a month later. Like that game, which we'll discuss later in this chapter, *Revenant* puts the player in the role of an undead being who has no memory of his previous life. This unfortunate soul, Locke D'Averam, has been resurrected to serve a powerful wizard—but he doesn't provide his services willingly. Indeed, Locke is quite resentful of being brought back from the dead and considers his task—rescuing Andria, a damsel in distress—beneath him. In short, what we get with *Revenant* is an antihero, a type of character common enough in literature and film but quite rare in CRPGs.

*Revenant* is quite similar to *Diablo* in terms of graphics and gameplay, but the interface is more complex and, for beginners, even daunting. Many critics complained about the awkward movement controls used to activate the mouse or keyboard commands. However, the game also supports gamepads, which are highly recommended. Combat is more nuanced than in *Diablo*, with more options for attacking (thrust, swing, and chop) and even combos, special sequences of attacks and blocks that result in more powerful moves. Mastering this system requires both careful timing and quick reflexes, making the game far more action-oriented than even *Diablo*. There's also a fatigue system similar to *Diablo II*, though more integral—if the fatigue meter runs too low, Locke will do much less damage and respond more slowly to commands. The leveling system is also somewhat unusual: players determine which two attributes they would like to raise before leveling rather than after.

The game also offers an innovative magic system, based on combining twelve talismans—which are sprinkled throughout the gameworld. The player can find the “recipes” for spells on special scrolls, or “cheat” by relying on trial-and-error, thereby gaining very powerful spells quite early in the game. The spells are accompanied by impressive special effects.

In general, the game suffers from poor pacing: Locke will soon become so powerful that not even the most ferocious of enemies stands a chance. Critics also bemoaned the voice acting, which seems to have been directed by someone very fond of yelling and screeching. The game is stymied by odd loading times, which can halt the game at critical junctures in combat. There are also plenty of other bugs, which led many reviewers to conclude that the game had been rushed through production without proper playtesting. The

multiplayer capabilities are also lacking, with only a simple player vs. player deathmatch mode available.

A later game that borrows *Revenant*'s combo-fighting system is Pixel Studio's *Blade & Sword*, an otherwise uninteresting *Diablo* clone set in ancient China. It was published in 2003 by Whiptail Interactive and met with luke-warm reviews from critics, although its customizable combo system (which includes 36 Kung Fu and 12 super attacks) is quite innovative. Nevertheless, the repetitive levels and outdated graphics seem to have doomed it from the start.

### *Clans*

*Clans*, developed by Computer House and published by Strategy First in 1999, is an attempt to blend *Diablo* with a point-and-click adventure game. It offers puzzles based mostly on the “find object, use object” model, and plenty of combat. It also abandons the experience point-based leveling system. Instead, characters raise their attributes by finding special objects or quaffing magical potions. The main quest is to find the Crown of Peace and destroy an evil demon.

The game features a more comprehensive multiplayer system than *Revenant*, with three options (co-op, deathmatch, and gold rush). However, again there was no attempt to mimic Battle.net, and gamers were left on their own to find others willing to play with them. Critics were not well disposed towards *Clans*, lamenting its poor graphics and wince-inducing voice acting. The game has subsequently faded into oblivion.

### *Nox*

One of the more popular *Diablo*-inspired games is *Nox*, developed by the famed Westwood Studios and published by Electronic Arts in 2000. The game met with good reviews and enjoyed modest success. Westwood wisely took the step of setting up their own free centralized servers (Westwood Online) to support the multiplayer scenarios, offering five different game types for up to 32 simultaneous players. However, Westwood didn't skimp on the single player scenarios, offering a total of 11 different chapters for each of the three character types (warrior, sorcerer, and conjuror).

The game is also notable for its TrueSight technique, which limits the display to the character's field of view. Thus, the player can't see around corners or know what monster may be lurking behind a wall. Another nice feature is the interactivity of the environment; barrels can be smashed, rocks can be moved to block passages, and fires can be doused with water. The tone of the



Westwood's *Nox* is a charming, much-loved *Diablo*-style game.

game is far from serious—the main character is Jack, a trailer park resident who gets sucked into his television set and emerges in Nox, a medieval world threatened by an evil sorceress and her minions. Naturally, Jack's mission is to defeat the sorceress and become a great hero.

Some critics complained about the simplistic role-playing engine, which automatically improves the character's stats after each chapter is completed. Characters receive the same upgrades regardless of the number of monsters slain, a fact that reduces the combat sequences to mere arcade diversions. Overall, though, gamers and critics were pleased with the game, and there are still active message boards and even a wiki dedicated to it.<sup>10</sup> Westwood later offered an expansion called *Nox Quest*, which was made available as a free download.

### *Throne of Darkness*

Click Entertainment's *Throne of Darkness*, published in 2001 by Sierra On-Line, is a *Diablo* clone set in a medieval Japanese setting. The player's task is

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.noxforum.net> and <http://www.noxhub.net/wiki/tiki-index.php>.

to guide seven samurai in their quest to defeat a wily demon named Zanshin, who has been terrorizing the land of Yamato.

*Throne of Darkness* did bring some welcome innovations to the *Diablo* model. The most obvious is the ability to control four characters in combat, swapping them in and out of a pool of seven. Although the player can control only one character at a time in combat, the others can be set to one of twelve preset tactics. Another nice touch is that a blacksmith and priest are always on hand to serve the party, repairing equipment and healing (even resurrecting) fallen characters. The blacksmith can also make new items from otherwise useless equipment. Multiplayer capability was available via Sierra's servers, which allowed up to seven players to compete or cooperate in a "king of the hill" type game.

Although some of the original *Diablo* developers worked on the game, *Throne of Darkness* did not meet with universal praise. Indeed, critics were sharply divided over the quality of the game, with some touting it as a "*Diablo* killer" and others dismissing it as a boring and repetitive clone. In any case, it hasn't fared nearly as well as Blizzard's game.

### *Divine Divinity*

Developed by the Belgian developer Larian Studios and published in 2002 by CDV Software, *Divine Divinity* is an oddly named *Diablo* clone on steroids, with a huge gameworld and a massive number of skills. While in many ways it is a blatant rip-off of *Diablo* and *Diablo II*, it still impressed critics with its sheer immensity and attention to detail.

Each of the six character classes has up to 32 skills that can be developed during the course of the game. As in *Diablo II*, players can either learn new skills or pump points into acquired skills, and most skills have prerequisites. However, one key difference is that any character can learn any skill, regardless of class. The environment is more interactive than *Diablo*'s. The character can push crates to reveal hidden items or even build a bed out of bales of hay. The gameworld is also rife with tensions and political intrigue, and the player has considerable freedom in deciding which groups to champion. The game-world also has realistic weather and day and night cycles, adding further to the realism and immersion.

Another key difference concerns combat. Although combat is set in real-time, the player can pause the action to issue orders to the character. This is a very useful feature that shows up in several games of this era. The character also has a reputation score that goes up or down depending on the player's



The oddly named *Divine Divinity* is a fairly straightforward but well-crafted *Diablo* clone.

choices. Characters with low reputations will pay more at shops, and other characters may refuse to speak to them.

The only real problem critics had with the game was the spotty voice acting, which is unfortunately all too common in games imported from other countries. Thankfully, the musical score is superb, more than compensating for the occasional misspoken line or grammatical error in the in-game text. Most critics had nothing but praise for the award-winning game, but it seems to have lacked the publicity and marketing support necessary to propel it into the mainstream.

### *Beyond Divinity*

Larian Studios followed up their sleeper hit *Divine Divinity* with *Beyond Divinity*, published by Hip Interactive in 2004. Although it shares much with its predecessor, it offers one novel innovation: the main character has been “soul forged” with an evil Death Knight, and the player must work with the character to unravel the curse. It’s certainly one of the more original plots in the CRPG canon and leads to plenty of opportunities for humor.

There are also some improvements to the engine, such as an option for the characters to automatically attack any enemies they encounter. This op-

tion dramatically reduces the mouse clicking required by most other *Diablo*-inspired games. Another interesting innovation are battlefields, or randomly generated levels. These battlefields, which offer mindless “hack ‘n slash” gameplay, can provide a nice distraction from the main quest.

The changes Larian made to the skills system are more controversial. In *Beyond Divinity*, the characters must seek out teachers to learn new skills, and the skills offered by any individual teacher are randomized. Furthermore, the descriptions of the skills lack detail. Several critics complained about the resulting confusion and frustration. They also complained about the miserable voice acting, particularly that of the Death Knight, whose staccato voice can get quite irritating, especially after hours and hours of gameplay.

Despite their innovations and mostly glowing reviews from prominent critics, *Divine Divinity* and *Beyond Divinity* have remained mostly below the radar of most CRPG fans. This fact is probably owed more to a lack of marketing than a lack of quality, though recruiting suitable voice talent has remained a problem for the Belgian developer. There have been rumors of a planned *Divine Divinity II* for some years now, though Larian Studios has not announced when it might become available.

### *Freedom Force*

Irrational Games’ *Freedom Force*, published in 2002 by Electronic Arts, introduced comic book-style superheroes to the *Diablo* formula. Many fans of the action CRPG rank it among the best of the genre, and I tend to agree. Although we’ve discussed several *Diablo*-inspired games that offer alternatives to conventional fantasy settings, *Freedom Force* goes much further. Its style is based on the Silver Age comics of the 1960s, when camp was king. Many (or even most) hardcore gamers also enjoy comic books, reveling in the stylized art and aesthetics that *Freedom Force* captures so well. The high quality 3D graphics and (for once) sterling voice acting earned the game praise, but it’s really the superb engine that makes it so fun to play.

The player takes on the role of Frank Stiles, a man who gains his superpowers (and his new alter ego) from a statue of a Minuteman. Like so many other heroes of the Silver Age of comics, Stiles decides that with great power comes great responsibility, dons an outlandish costume, and sets out to vanquish evil. Along the way, Minuteman will recruit other heroes to his cause, swapping them in and out of a four-character party.

The CRPG aspects are similar to those of many games we’ve discussed previously. Besides the usual stats, there’s a stamina system which controls how many actions the characters can perform without resting, and a prestige



*Freedom Force* brought the comic style of the Silver Age to CRPGs.

stat that fluctuates depending on the characters' ethical choices. Combat is fast, but can be paused to allow the player to issue orders to the party. It's also important to note here that the 3D environment is fully interactive (and destructible), and Minuteman and the other heroes can use many objects they find (such as lampposts) as weapons or projectiles. Furthermore, they can leap atop buildings and tear through walls. The characters can also learn new skills and gain new abilities as they level up, keeping gameplay fresh and engaging.

The only real issue critics had with the game was with the multiplayer capability, which offers only deathmatch gameplay. After such an excellent single player campaign, most gamers probably expected the multiplayer gameplay to open up new possibilities for co-op play; one envisions groups of heroes forming their own Justice Leagues and embarking on epic-length campaigns.

Vivendi published the sequel in 2005, *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich*. Unfortunately, this game hasn't fared as well as its predecessor. The main complaints concern the limited artificial intelligence of the enemies and a lackluster storyline that borrowed too heavily from the first game. Still, the game is not without its defenders, and it's too early to tell what lasting effects it may have on the genre.

### *Sacred*

*Sacred* is a *Diablo*-inspired game from Ascaron Entertainment, a German company whose CRPGs share the immense size and attention to detail that characterized the older German games we've discussed. *Sacred*, published by Encore in 2004, offers full 3D views and a world that takes players hours to cross, even if their characters travel on horseback. The game is also quite open-ended, and players can embark on over 500 side-quests as they see fit. The game is also loaded with self-referential humor reminiscent of a *Monty Python* movie.

Each time characters gain a level, the player is given bonus points to boost their attributes—standard procedure in *Diablo*-inspired games. However, learning skills is not automatic or a matter of training; rather, players are granted skills when they read runes found throughout the game. Any character, regardless of class, can learn any of the 26 skills, which resulted in less distinctive characters, according to some critics—in most CRPGs, characters are clearly differentiated by which skills they can master. One of the boldest and most exciting innovations in the game—the ability to ride and attack from horseback—was mired by a sloppy interface. Most players found it much better to dismount before attack, though the horses are still convenient for faster overland travel.

Multiplayer support was offered on private servers and based on Blizzard's Battle.net. Gamers could team up with three others and cooperate during the main campaign or join in massive player versus player duels. Unfor-



Like the priestess pictured here, we might well wonder what this scantily clad seraph is doing in a house of worship.

tunately, the servers were constantly busy, and many gamers gave up trying to connect after hours of unsuccessful attempts.

This game met with plenty of praise from critics, who applauded its more open-ended structure, but its many bugs haven't gone unnoticed. The worst bugs would prevent gamers from completing the campaign, and many gave up in frustration. Ascaron released *Sacred Plus* in 2004, a revision that addressed many of the worst problems and added new functionality. 2005 saw the release of the first expansion, *Sacred Underworld*. The expansion adds two new characters and extends the story established in the main game.

### *Heretic Kingdoms: The Inquisition*

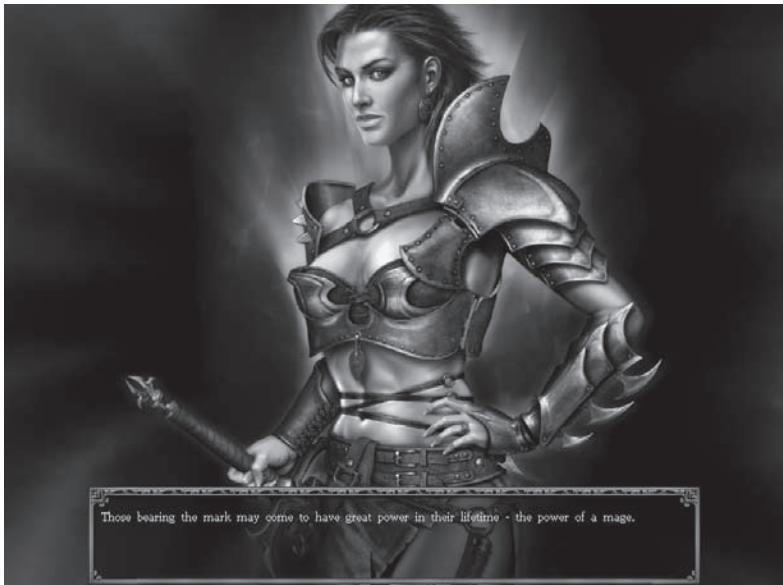
One of the latest *Diablo*-inspired games is *Heretic Kingdoms: The Inquisition*, developed by the Slovakian-based 3D People and published in 2005 by Got Game Entertainment.<sup>11</sup> It's notable for several reasons, beginning with its almost unique choice of a female protagonist. The backstory is also intriguing, set in a world where those practicing religion are savagely persecuted by the Inquisitors. The player's character is one of these inquisitors, but the player must decide whether she follows her mission or deviates from the path. She's also the bearer of a God Symbol, a mark that appears on babies who may be capable of using magic.

The symbol grants the character the ability to enter the Dreamworld, an alternate plane of existence populated by supernatural creatures. Entering the Dreamworld can also be a means of escaping danger, but it's an intriguing place worth exploring on its own. However, the player isn't required to visit the Dreamworld to reach the game's six possible endings. Which ending occurs depends on the player's choices throughout the game, which also have a strong effect on dialogs with other characters.

While the leveling system is fairly conventional (though with school letter grades instead of hit dice), the skills system is novel. In short, the character gains attunements by using certain types of weapons or items. Since each of these types has unique advantages and disadvantages, it's worthwhile to get attuned to all of them. However, only so many attunements can be active at any given time, though the player can select which ones to activate by resting the character. Since there are 100 attunements, gameplay is quite varied and refreshing compared to that of most other CRPGs.

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<sup>11</sup> The game was released internationally as *Kult: Heretic Kingdoms* in 2004 by Project Three Interactive.



*Heretic Kingdoms* is the only major modern CRPG to feature a female main character.

Unfortunately, though *Heretic Kingdoms* has much to recommend it, its code is full of glitches, many of which will crash the game. The last patch, version 1.5, may fix the majority of these bugs, so it's well worth applying the patches before investing time in this game. Still, the game is still very young and may still manage to rise above its rather lukewarm reception in the U.S.

## *Dungeon Siege*

By far the most successful of all *Diablo*-inspired games is Gas Powered Games' *Dungeon Siege*, published by Microsoft in 2002. The game was conceived by Chris Taylor, whose earlier *Total Annihilation* game won many awards in the real-time strategy market. Despite the success and promise of that franchise, Taylor left Cavedog Entertainment in 1998 to found his own company, called Gas Powered Games.

Taylor's *Dungeon Siege* features a large, diverse gameworld rendered in real-time 3D. The game's custom engine allows the gameworld to stream rather than pre-load, which helps make the setting feel more like a coherent whole than a collection of discrete levels. The game's camera allows the player



Chris Taylor's *Dungeon Siege* is probably the best known *Diablo*-inspired game.

to control the angle of perspective, zooming and rotating, but not free roaming. The graphics are some of the best in the industry and wowed many gamers as well as critics. The gameworld is exactingly detailed, with convincing day/night cycles and even weather effects (rain and snow).

Like most action CRPGs, *Dungeon Siege* is designed with the novice gamer in mind: "We are all too busy, and have too many things going in our lives to sit and study a game manual, or be subject to long in-game tutorials," says Taylor. According to Taylor, a successful CRPG must be "way less riddled with complex rule systems, and far more forgiving to the player and just an all-around easier game to play."<sup>12</sup> However, ever Taylor acknowledges that a CRPG must "expose enough of the guts of the game to make it compelling for those old-school gamers who like to see numbers." Thus, we're back to that old debate between "roll-play" and "role-play."

*Dungeon Siege*'s leveling system is determined by the character's actions rather than a preselected class, an innovation also seen in the *Elder Scrolls* series among others. Although the player creates only a single character, eight other prerendered adventurers or loot-carrying mules can be added to the party. The mules, which can fight as well as carry extra equipment, seem to have become one of the franchise's signature features. Even though at later levels it probably makes more sense to swap the mule for a more powerful

<sup>12</sup> These comments are from a private email interview I had with Taylor on July 9, 2007.

character, I'm sure I'm not alone in becoming far too attached to the brave animal to do so.

The story pits a single, humble farmer (the player's character) against the evil hordes of Krug. The Krug have, among other foul deeds, sacked the character's farm. Naturally, he (or she) can't abide such acts and sets out for vengeance—launching a “hack'n slash” campaign of epic proportions. Combat is a more hands-off affair than in *Diablo*; the characters can be programmed to automatically attack, though the player can pause the action to issue orders as necessary. Critical reactions to this feature are varied; some gamers are grateful to avoid the relentless mouse clicking necessary to get through *Diablo*, but others felt they weren't sufficiently involved in the action.

Like most modern CRPGs, *Dungeon Siege* offers considerable multiplayer options, including LAN and online support for up to eight players. The online option uses Microsoft's Zone, a matchmaking system that helps players find and connect to like-minded gamers. Once connected, gamers can either replay the original campaign in cooperative mode or embark on a special multiplayer quest. Still, *Dungeon Siege* does not seem to have triumphed as fully as *Diablo II* in the online arena. Gas Powered Games also released a level editor named the *Dungeon Siege Tool Kit*, which allows players to create their own campaigns (or “siegelets”) for the game, and a *Fan Site Kit* to help players build fan pages without violating copyright or trademark laws.<sup>13</sup>

Although critics appreciated the lack of loading times and open-ended leveling system, they chided the simplistic “hands off” gameplay and straight-jacket plot. An expansion called *Legends of Aranna* followed the next year, introducing a new campaign and several improvements, such as a global map tool, but it was greeted with lukewarm reviews.

### *Dungeon Siege II*

The first full sequel to the series was published by Microsoft Game Studios in 2005. The game's *Diablo II* heritage is unmistakable, particularly in the “new” skill tree system and item sets. *Dungeon Siege II* duplicates *Diablo II*'s socketed items as well, though most players discover that the items they find or receive as rewards are superior to any they can enchant themselves. Probably the most intriguing innovation is the option to feed unwanted items to pack mules and other pets. With enough food, the pet will gain a level and new stats or bonuses depending on its diet. If players feed pets lots of weapons, for

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<sup>13</sup> See <http://ds.heavengames.com/community/links/siegelets.html> for a list of downloadable siegelets, including two based on classic *Ultima* games.



The next *Dungeon Siege* has an abundance of new features, including a skill tree system based on *Diablo II*.

instance, they'll gain in strength. This system helps declutter the other characters' inventories as well as make the animal companions more interesting.

The multiplayer options are pretty basic considering the recent release date; games are limited to four players (with two sidekicks apiece). Furthermore, the graphics are better than the first game but not substantially enhanced, and some critics complained that the game gets repetitive despite the great variety of settings and abundance of side-quests. The voice acting and dialog range from mediocre to poor. The biggest complaint is that the game is simply too easy. The game does score points, however, for its fine interface, much of which is based on color codes and distinctive sounds. For instance, when a special set item drops from a fallen adversary, a special sound is played, and the item's name is labeled in gold. Although seemingly trivial, such techniques greatly reduce tedium.

*Broken World*, the first expansion pack for the game, was published in 2006 by 2K Games. The expansion adds two new character classes, a new race, and several minor improvements to the interface. Many critics were unimpressed, noting sarcastically that the title was appropriate. 2K Games released the *Dungeon II: Deluxe Edition* in October of 2006, which includes the original game and the expansion, as well as a "making of" DVD and other collectibles. It's probably the best value for anyone wanting to purchase this game today.

All in all, it's fair to describe the *Dungeon Siege* games as graphically enhanced *Diablo* clones, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. Games such as this keep the *Diablo* style of gameplay alive, and there are still plenty of gamers who will gladly pillage and plunder their way through many more like it. Likewise, there is still plenty of room left to innovate within the model, and it will be interesting to see what new ideas Gas Powered Games will bring to the table should they release a third installment. Still, if the unparalleled success of *Diablo II* has taught us anything, it's that sequels don't have to be revolutionary to be exemplary. Exquisite crafting, attention to detail, and smooth gameplay will always prevail over the latest graphical wizardry. Phong-style lighting, lens effects, and real-time hair and fur shading do not a *Diablo* make.

## Interplay Goes Platinum

After *Daggerfall* and *Diablo*, the typical CRPG fan probably assumed that real-time gameplay, whether 3D or isometric, was the way of the future. However, as we saw in Chapter 8 after the publication of FTL's *Dungeon Master*, the evolution of CRPGs is anything but linear. Ultimately, craft trumps innovation, and even though *Dungeon Master* demonstrated as early as 1987 the feasibility of first-person perspective in real time, SSI's turn-based "Gold Box" games sold well into the 1990s. Therefore, there's really nothing surprising about Interplay's breakthrough success with *Fallout*, a turn-based isometric game set in a postapocalyptic wasteland.

### Wasteland Revisited: *Fallout*

*Fallout* (1997) and its sequel, *Fallout 2* (1998), are two of the finest CRPGs ever made, and if the era that produced them isn't worthy of the name Platinum Age, none will ever be. Like Interplay's previous masterpieces *The Bard's Tale* and *Wasteland*, *Fallout* is one of those preciously rare games that is more than the sum of its parts. *Fallout* is one of my favorite games, and my love for it has no doubt blinded me to at least some of its flaws. However, my advice is to seek out the game and try it yourself. The *Fallout* series are wonderfully creative games that continue to win over new players nearly a decade after they first appeared on the shelf.

But what makes *Fallout* so great? Haven't there been plenty of other postapocalyptic games, such as the *Wasteland*, Origin's *Autoduel*, and even Interstel's *Scavengers of the Mutant World*? Doesn't *Fallout* rip its leveling-up



Interplay's *Fallout* games are among the finest CRPGs ever designed.

system from games like *Mandate of Heaven* and *Daggerfall*? Maybe. But one of my contentions throughout this book has been that the greatest games are not necessarily the most technically innovative. In many cases, the industry's obsession with "the bleeding edge" has led to some of the genre's worst disasters, such as Interplay's unplayable *Descent to Undermountain*. Wiser developers know that a great game begins with a great vision, and the technology is always only a means to achieving that vision, never an end in itself.

We can sum up *Fallout*'s appeal in a word: style. The governing aesthetic is a surreal mix of cheerfully morbid 1950s Cold War imagery and movies like *Mad Max*, *Planet of the Apes*, and *Dr. Strangelove*. There are even hints of *The Evil Dead* tossed in for good measure. This juxtaposition makes for some of the most compelling moments in gaming history, and most gamers will get goose bumps the first time they see the introductory cut scenes. Furthermore, the aesthetic runs all the way through the game, including the interface. Most games switch to boring menu screens full of numbers when it comes time to level up. *Fallout* presents skills on "information cards," complete with fitting illustrations to keep up the disturbing ambiance. Even the game's manual stays in character, presenting itself as a "survival guide" designed to look like a government publication. Indeed, the manual refers to the game as a "simula-

tion” to help long-term Vault-Dwellers more comfortably prepare themselves for a return to the outside world. It even includes some “survival recipes” for “Mushroom Clouds” and “Desert Salad.” It’s obvious that the development team had a blast creating *Fallout*, and their enthusiasm radiates throughout the project.

Combat in *Fallout* is turn-based and tactical, with a wide array of melee and ranged weapons at the character’s disposal. The ranged weapons, such as the pistol, take the lighting conditions into effect—so that it’s harder to hit a rat in a dim corridor than in broad daylight. It’s also possible to take damage to the eyes, arms, and legs, which in each case can dramatically reduce the character’s combat abilities. For instance, eye damage makes ranged combat much more difficult.

The character also has access to eight active skills, which run the gamut of RPG activities (i.e., lock-picking, first aid, repair, disarming traps, stealing). Other skills are passive, such as “small guns,” which boosts the character’s ability to hit targets with pistols, rifles, and shotguns. Characters can also have two optional traits, each with a good and bad effect (one is reminded again of the *Traveller* games). For instance, “Chem Reliant” makes the character more susceptible to chemical addiction, but allows him or her to recover much faster from a chemical’s side effects. “Bloody Mess” ensures that every death in the game will be portrayed with as much gore as possible. In addition, the character will receive a perk every three levels. Perks are new abilities that can have drastic effects on gameplay, and some can be selected multiple times for even stronger effects. They also have prerequisites. For instance, the level nine perk “Animal Friend” will prevent animals from attacking the character, but requires five intelligence and an outdoorsman skill of 25%. The “Flower Child” perk makes the character 50% less likely to suffer chemical addiction and reduces withdrawal times, but requires five endurance points and a level nine character. There are over 50 perks available, and since players will likely select only a dozen or so during a complete run of the game, perks add significant replay value.

The story is an intriguing blend of alternate history, dystopia, and science fiction, and is good enough to keep the wheels of players’ imaginations spinning long after they’ve completed the game. Some 80 years ago, a nuclear holocaust wiped out most of the civilized world, but people survived by moving into a giant underground vault, where they eventually developed their own society and culture (think *Logan’s Run*). However, now the vault’s water purification chip has worn out, and it’s the player’s job to find a new one before it’s too late. This means that the characters must leave behind everything

they've ever known and enter a war-torn world full of mutants, bandits, and gangs. What seems like a fairly straightforward fetch quest soon becomes much more, and I'm not going to ruin the story here by giving away any of the many twists and turns. I will say that no one who has played this game will have trouble remembering what happens when the mission is completed.

## *Fallout 2*

*Fallout 2* was developed by Black Isle Studios, Interplay's new division that specialized in CRPGs. It's set 80 years after the conclusion of the first game and echoes the movie *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. The avatar's tribe is on the verge of extinction and has been assigned the task of hunting down the G.E.C.K. (Garden of Eden Creation Kit). Once again, players quickly find themselves immersed in a moving and captivating story, and it's hard not to get personally invested in its outcome. The game culminates in one of the most heart-pounding (and difficult) climaxes of any game I've ever played and, like the original, boils over with black humor and political overtones.

*Fallout 2* also offered better dialog options and plenty of new items and characters. However, the bulk of the game's engine was left intact. Perhaps the biggest change is the better handling of nonplayer characters, who can now be trained and equipped with better weapons and armor. The box advertises a controversial option to "fall in love, get married, and then pimp your spouse for a little extra chump-change." Still, even with these new options, some critics thought the game didn't depart enough from the prequel and was more an expansion pack than a true sequel.

Although both *Fallout* games were critically acclaimed and loved by many fans, Interplay did not produce a third game. *Fallout Tactics: Brotherhood of Steel* (2001) is a strategy game based on *Fallout*'s combat mode, though it does have some CRPG elements. A *Diablo* clone called *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* appeared for the PS2 and Xbox in 2004, but many fans of the first two games fail to acknowledge it. Bethesda is currently developing *Fallout 3*, and there many fans waiting eagerly to see if Bethesda can successfully revive the best radioactive CRPG ever made.

## *Arcanum: Steampunk and Magick*

Black Isle wasn't the only company releasing brave new CRPGs that eschewed the old swords and sorcery formula. A new company named Troika, founded by former members of *Fallout*'s development team, scored a triumph with *Ar-*

*canum: Of Steamworks & Magick Obscure*, published by Sierra in 2001. It certainly wasn't the first CRPG to try to marry magic and technology; many of the early *Ultima* and *Might and Magic* games blended the two quite freely, but SSI's *Spelljammer: Pirates of Realmspace* and Paragon's *Space 1889* are probably more direct precursors. However, *Arcanum* is the game people think of when they hear the term "steampunk,"<sup>14</sup> and deservedly so.

*Arcanum* is most often praised for its open-ended gameplay and intriguing game world, which is best described as an industrial revolution taking place in a high fantasy setting. Usually, magic and technology are strange bedfellows, but when done right, the result is magical realism, in which objects that would ordinarily look familiar are placed in settings that make them seem strange and exotic. It can be quite exhilarating, for instance, when a dwarf draws a flintlock pistol rather than the clichéd old axe or war hammer. The outcome of the game depends on whether players follow the magical or the technological path; the choice is left to the player.

*Fallout* fans will recognize many of the game's conventions, particularly the lack of classes and emphasis on skills. *Arcanum* expands the skill set to cover three types of skills: basic, technological, and magickal, and the player has tremendous freedom in selecting diverse skills for the character. Furthermore, each skill has a level and training, much like in the *Mandate of Heaven*. Adding skill points will raise the skill level, but training confers much larger benefits—however, the character must find someone willing and able to offer the training. As with *Mandate of Heaven*, it's fairly easy to find basic trainers, but masters" are much rarer and may ask a heavy price for the service. There are 16 colleges of magick and 56 technological degrees available in eight different disciplines. In fact, there are so many skills that it's unlikely the character will learn more than ten percent of them before completing the game—a fact that may improve the replay value for many players.

There are many other reasons to recommend *Arcanum*. It offers an immense gameworld that would take some 30 real-time hours to travel across, and hundreds of side-quests if the player gets bored with the main plotline. There's even a scenario editor for gamers with a creative streak. Finally, unlike *Fallout*, there was a free multiplayer option that allowed four players to work through the Vormantown scenario. Unlike Blizzard's Battle.net, *Arcanum* requires at least one player to set up a server for the other players to join. How-

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<sup>14</sup> The term "steampunk" is applied to a gameworld that blends early industrial technology (especially steam-powered machinery) with conventional fantasy or sci-fi elements.



Arcanum has much in common with the earlier *Fallout* but is set in a steampunk campaign setting.

ever, it's obvious the developers were more concerned with the single-player campaign, probably grafting the multiplayer option on as an afterthought. The multiplayer campaign is much smaller and, since it's impossible to use the turn-based combat mode, quite cumbersome.

In general, combat is where *Arcanum* fails to live up to most gamers' expectations. As we've seen countless times, the combat system is often enough to make or break an otherwise promising CRPG. Although the game offers three different modes (real-time, turn-based, and fast turn-based), none of them is perfect, though the third comes the closest. The key problem is the way experience points are doled out: the player wins them only by hitting, rather than defeating, enemies. This system makes strength and dexterity all-important, thus ruling out many of the more interesting possibilities. The difficulty also seems a bit skewed towards the magical path; technologists have difficulty finding equipment and surviving long enough to use it. Thankfully, there are usually alternatives to brute force combat. Although the leveling up process can be daunting with so many skills in play, there is an option to let the game manage it automatically.

*Arcanum* has much in common with the *Fallout* series, no doubt due in part to sharing some key members on the development team. Both games also share the same wonderful sense of irony and humor, and the aesthetics are guided by a coherent and refreshing style that helps balance out the bugs and difficulty issues. While not as polished and playable as *Fallout*, *Arcanum* nevertheless stands out as a viable alternative to the standard formula. Sadly, it's very difficult to find today, though, and buying a used copy (even one without the original box and manual) can easily cost \$20, with collectible versions starting at \$50.

## BioWare: The New SSI

We've seen how TSR's valuable license had lost credibility after SSI's last "Black Box" games, the *Eye of the Beholder* series created by Westwood Studios. SSI's own efforts went from bad to worse, ultimately costing them their exclusive license with TSR, and other companies' products flopped despite plastering *AD&D* trademarks all over their boxes. Nevertheless, cherished *AD&D* franchises like the *Forgotten Realms* were just too promising to remain unvisited for long, and many CRPG fans pined for a return to the glory days of *Pool of Radiance* and *Eye of the Beholder*.

The problem was how to update these hallowed games for the next generation. Two possible models existed in *Elder Scrolls* and *Diablo*, but these action-oriented games seemed to have little to offer fans of tabletop *AD&D* and the hardcore, tactical CRPGs of yesteryear. The development team that finally succeeded in discovering the right formula was not SSI, Interplay, or Sierra, but rather a trio of Canadian medical doctors-turned-game developers: BioWare. They created what is perhaps the greatest CRPG engine ever designed: the famed isometric Infinity Engine. Although the Infinity Engine was not 3D and lacked a free-roaming camera, these limitations were more than compensated for by an intuitive interface, detailed scenery, turn-based combat, and convincing character animation. Gone were the old tile-based graphics that defined an era; now, every location is fully rendered in exacting detail by professional artists.

### *Baldur's Gate*

Like Blizzard, BioWare's first foray into CRPGs, *Baldur's Gate*, was an instant success, and not just among CRPG fans. Like Blizzard's *Diablo*, released two years earlier, *Baldur's Gate* won over critics and gamers by the millions, and it's



The epic *Baldur's Gate* returned gamers to the *Forgotten Realms*, proving once again that the official *AD&D* rules could make for enjoyable and engrossing gameplay.

still both praised and played today, a decade after its release. And what game since then has surpassed it? Indeed, were it not for the even more impressive sequel, *Baldur's Gate* would stand without equal.

First published by Interplay in 1998, *Baldur's Gate* shares much in common with *Diablo*. Like that game, it features isometric perspective and allows players to create only a single character. Both games have real-time gameplay, but with one key difference: *Baldur's Gate* switches to a hybrid turn-based mode for combat, which allows for more tactics than *Diablo*. The engine is designed to allow most battles to be fought by a highly configurable artificial intelligence system; the player can just sit back and watch. However, players can always hit the space bar to pause the game and manually assign actions, then resume the game to see them carried out. This compromise between real-time and turn-based combat resulted in very compelling gameplay and has much to offer both novices and aficionados of the genre.

*Baldur's Gate* turns what fans of SSI's "Gold Box" and "Black Box" players might see as a limitation—creation of only a single character rather than

a party—into a key story-telling asset. Although players can only create and directly control one character, they can allow up to five other characters to join the party. Not only do these characters have greatly varied skills, but each has a unique personality with implications for the plot. Characters of different political and ethical outlook may not get along; a few characters may actually betray the party at critical junctures. Few gamers will complete *Baldur's Gate* without finding themselves quite attached to Imoen, a cheerful young teenager, and Minsc, a Schwarzenegger-style ranger who offers not only effective warrior skills but also comic relief. The player isn't required to include either of these characters in the party and in fact can build an entirely different party with evil characters, and even neutral characters will complain if the party strays too far into "goody good" territory. In short, the gameplay changes considerably depending on which characters the player adds (or doesn't add) to the party. Furthermore, although the game is divided into chapters that can be advanced only by performing predefined actions, there is still considerable room in each chapter for variation, especially in the many side-quests.

*Baldur's Gate* also offers much more strategy than *Diablo*. Rather than simplify or dumb down battle tactics, the real-time aspect adds a new dimension—the time it takes to perform an action (casting a spell, quaffing a potion, switching weapons, etc.) may leave a character more vulnerable, and magic-users can be interrupted if they take damage while casting. Many reviewers praised the game for staying so faithful to the official *AD&D* rules without baffling novices with the details. The math is kept mostly in the background, but it is there for those players who enjoy numbers. BioWare also introduced many *AD&D* rules that had been sorely lacking in the "Gold Box" and "Black Box" classics, such as the effect of the party leader's charisma on character morale.

BioWare offered a multiplayer option which let players trade the non-player characters in their party for up to five friends. While the game still revolved around the main character, the others were free to roam about, though success depended on developing cooperative combat strategies. As with tabletop *AD&D*, the multiplayer experience depended largely on the personalities and camaraderie of the actual group. Although somewhat buggy and not perfectly integrated, this option helped the game compete against *Diablo*, whose Battle.net servers had become a swirling vortex for Daddy's money.

*Baldur's Gate* features a rich, nuanced storyline that resists easy summary (and, indeed, reading such a summary would ruin much of the fun of the game; the point is to learn what's happening as you play). The basic gist is that something (or someone) has been causing a serious iron shortage, which has led to widespread banditry across the countryside. Meanwhile, two

young wards of a mage named Gorion (the beautiful rogue Imoen and the player's character) have been separated from their guardian and left to fend for themselves. Gradually, the player learns of a large conspiracy involving a secretive organization named the Iron Throne. By the end of the game, the player learns that both the avatar and Imoen are much more than what they seem. It's a complex but plausible story of political intrigue and offers much more than the standard black and white view of morality that runs through most CRPGs. The characters also benefit from solid writing and exceptional voice talent, a key factor that has proven the downfall of many a lesser game. Few indeed are those who have played *Baldur's Gate* yet do not recognize the line, "Go for the eyes, Boo!"

BioWare released the *Tales of the Sword Coast* expansion one year later. It adds new areas, spells, weapons, and makes some minor improvements to the gameplay and interface. More important, it adds four new quests. The general consensus among reviewers was that the pack offered a little more meat to chew on but was certainly not to be mistaken as a full sequel. Some gamers resented the lack of true story developments, but others were just glad to have a little more *Baldur's Gate* to satiate their appetites.

## *Baldur's Gate II*

The first and only true sequel to BioWare's masterpiece is *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, published in 2000. While the game continued to use the Infinity Engine, the graphics were overhauled (800 x 600 as well as the old 640 x 480) and took advantage of the new 3D accelerators that were popular among Windows gamers. *Shadows of Amn* also adds new classes, specializations, and cool skills such as fighting with two weapons simultaneously. Furthermore, several of the beloved characters are back from the first game, including Imoen, and this time personality (and even romantic) conflicts among party members are even more instrumental to the gameplay. Contemporary reviewers fell over themselves praising the game and giving it the highest possible marks; it didn't take an orb of true seeing to know this game was platinum.

For what it's worth, I consider *Baldur's Gate II* the finest CRPG ever designed, and I'm not alone. The GameSpot editorial team wrote in 2006 that "there's little doubt that *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* deserves to stand among the very best games of the era, or indeed the greatest games of all time."<sup>15</sup> The game has won countless awards, and even the worst review of the

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<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.gamespot.com/features/6146695/index.html>.



*Baldur's Gate II* is, in my opinion, the best CRPG ever made.

game on the *Meta-Critic* website remarks that it's "just too good to pass up." Furthermore, the gameplay has stood the test of time and is still tremendous fun today. If you somehow haven't played it—and I find that unlikely for anyone reading this book—do yourself a favor and get a copy today.

The story picks up where the first *Baldur's Gate* leaves off (which is all the more reason for new players to start with the first game). Unfortunately, it's a bit difficult to talk about the story of *Shadows of Amn* without giving away the shocking ending to the first game, so I'll briefly state that it's mostly concerned with the magical (and sinister) blood running through the avatar's veins. Unfortunately, the avatar's quest for answers is rudely halted by Jon Irenicus, a wicked mage who captures the hero (and his or her friends) in an effort to tap the blood's powers for himself. The story quickly gets much more complicated and involved and compels the characters to travel to hell and back.

One of the most-praised aspects of *Shadows of Amn* is the degree of freedom it presents to players. Many quests are optional, and there are many different paths through the game that substantially alter events. Players can either stick to the main plot and ignore these many diversions or get so in-

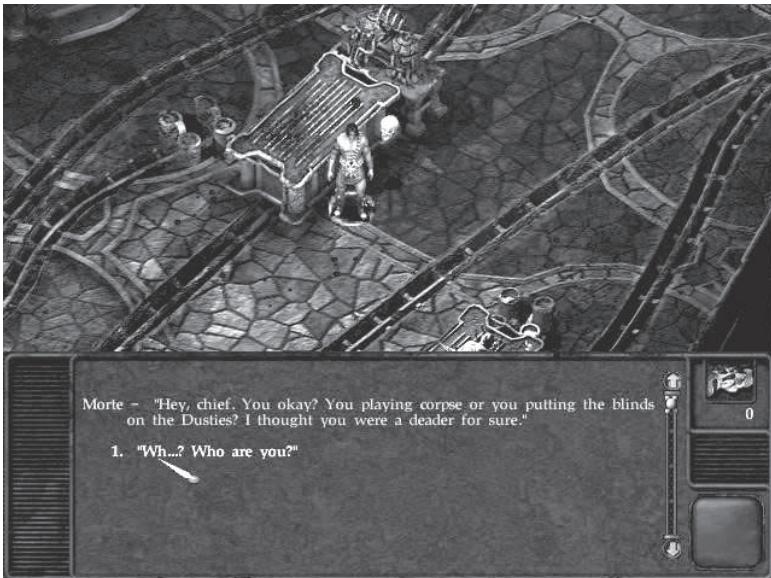
volved in them that they might lose track of the main story altogether. And, as with the original game, party dynamics play a huge role in the gameplay that goes far beyond simple combat tactics. Mixing and matching characters with differing ethics and values can lead to some very interesting drama that everyone should experience at least once—particularly in a game with such good voice acting. As many reviewers have pointed out, the experience is about as close to engaging in tabletop *AD&D* with a group of friends as can occur in a single-player computer game. Multiplayer gameplay is also supported, though little has changed since the first game.

In 2001, BioWare released an expansion for *Baldur's Gate II* called *Throne of Baal*. This important expansion represents the final chapter of the saga and is required playing for any fan of the other games. It adds new items, spells, and even more class abilities. The expansion also adds a dungeon called Watcher's Keep that can be accessed during certain chapters in the *Shadows of Amn* game. However, perhaps the aspect most people remember of this game is the degree of god-like power the avatar has achieved by the game's ending. It's a fine ending for a fine series.

What makes the *Baldur's Gate* games so great? Again, I think it's clear that it's more a question of craft than invention. With *Baldur's Gate* we get good stories, fun characters, meaningful quests, high-stakes combat, and an intuitive interface. The graphics, sound, and music are appealing and add much to the game's subtle ambiance. Perhaps the best testament to the game's lasting appeal is that no single element seems to rise above the others. There are no gimmicks: just solid platinum gameplay.

## Fear and Loathing in *Planescape: Torment*

If there's one thing we can say about the Platinum Age of CRPGs, it's that it has its fair share of cult classics. I doubt you could find any group of CRPG fans that doesn't contain at least a few dyed-in-the-wool fans of *Fallout* and *Planescape: Torment*. Both games are wildly different than the typical high fantasy game like *Baldur's Gate* and offer more introspective gameplay than *Diablo*, *Mandate of Heaven*, or *Daggerfall*. Indeed, although I've played my share of CRPGs, I can think of very few that manage to rise above the status of game and into something approaching art. Like *Fallout*, *Planescape: Torment* pushes the boundaries and reclaims the *AD&D* rule set to serve its own ends. Although *Torment* was not as successful as the more conventional CRPGs available at the time, it's nevertheless a true classic and one more good reason to call this era the Platinum Age.



Black humor and metaphysics come together in *Planescape: Torment*, an undisputed masterpiece based on BioWare's Infinity Engine.

BioWare realized that its Infinity Engine was the best of its kind, and it made sense to license it out to Black Isle, the elite CRPG division of Interplay that made *Fallout 2*. Black Isle wasted no time and in November of 1999 released the cult classic *Planescape: Torment*.

The game is set in the *Planescape* campaign setting, a complex setting with several interlocking planes of existence. The game's strange story and surreal ambiance lend it considerable appeal among gamers ready for a darker and more philosophical CRPG. Indeed, several reviewers have commented that this game is really more of a graphical adventure game than a CRPG, though I find this claim exaggerated. The truth is, *Planescape: Torment* violates so many stale conventions that it's easy to forget about the standard AD&D mechanics undergirding the gameplay.

The majority of *Torment*'s appeal stems from its unique setting, plot, and characters. The game is set in a multiverse, or interconnected planes of existence. The city of Sigil serves as a sort of portal port to these other planes, but the player must find the doors, which can be disguised as any object (much like the "portkeys" in *Harry Potter* stories). Furthermore, the different planes are home to beings who usually belong to the same faction, or political group,

such as the Anarchists or Godsmen. The player may have the character join one of these factions, though doing so will win him enemies as well as friends. There is no clear division between the good guys and the bad guys here; the point is to get the player thinking deeply about morality. It's an interactive *Inferno*, and it doesn't take a Dante scholar to see the many allusions to that famous poem.

The player's character is the Nameless One, a gruesome being who awakens on a slab in a giant mortuary. He's suffering from amnesia, and the plot is concerned mostly with rediscovering his identity. It's a nice contrivance that gives the player considerably leeway in role-playing the character, but it soon becomes obvious that the Nameless One's past deeds have earned him animosity from many of the bizarre characters he meets. Thankfully, the Nameless One can also find new and old friends, including the infamous Morte, a floating head that becomes his wise-cracking sidekick. Then there's Fall-from-Grace, a succubus who's turned from sex to philosophy, opening the "Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lusts." There's even a robot named Nordom, a rather nerdy crossbow on legs. As you can see, *Planescape: Torment* isn't all grim; part of the game's enduring popularity is the mix of serious and comedic themes running throughout. Indeed, one is reminded at times of LucasArts' *Grim Fandango* (1998), a popular graphical adventure game with a comparable mix of grim and grin.

Another feature of *Torment* that sets it apart from most CRPGs is its heavy reliance on dialog not only to build the story, but to offer alternatives to standard combat. Many potential conflicts can be resolved via intelligent conversation. These conversations also help develop the characters into far more than just henchmen. There are plenty of other innovations I could mention, such as a truly unique tattoo system that can boost stats as well as document the player's progress, or the way the world changes according to the Nameless One's actions and beliefs. Suffice it to say, there is no other CRPG like *Planescape: Torment*, and I doubt there ever will be. It's the ideal CRPG for gamers who prefer wit and wisdom to hacking and slashing.

## Fighting for Your Right to Party: *Icewind Dale*

Most of the best games of the Platinum Age allow players to create only a single character. Even though games such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Fallout* let players add characters to the party later on, these are pregenerated, often with their own personalities and agendas. While this system allows for more tightly controlled narrative and story-telling opportunities, some fans of old classics

such as *Pool of Radiance* and *Eye of the Beholder* felt cheated. They wanted to create their own party of adventurers from scratch and control them directly. Black Isle listened and, in 2000, released *Icewind Dale*, another game based on BioWare's Infinity Engine. Set in an arctic region of TSR's *Forgotten Realms*, *Icewind Dale* boasts great graphics, sound, and a score by Jeremy Soule that is one of the finest ever composed for a video game.

*Icewind Dale* lets players create and control six characters, and since the game is so focused on combat, building a properly balanced party is of paramount importance. Furthermore, combat can be a very difficult affair, requiring careful coordination and precise teamwork. For example, one favorite strategy is to have a stealthy thief stride ahead, attract a few enemies, and lure them into an ambush (a technique called "aggro" in modern parlance). As usual, the magic-users function as artillery; they dole out the most damage but are virtually helpless in physical combat and must be protected. Major battles can get quite complex and intense, with a nearly infinite number of variables, especially during the preparation stage (Which potions to give whom? Should the mage learn enhancement or attack spells?). The only serious problem with the interface is keeping the six characters aligned in a sensible formation; it's easy to slip up and have a mage striding forward to a vulnerable position, or to unknowingly leave a character trapped behind an obstacle several rooms back.



*Icewind Dale* allows players to create their entire party from scratch—an important aspect of many old-school CRPGs.

While *Icewind Dale* is certainly a fun game, it's no masterpiece. The heavy emphasis on combat and party dynamics comes at the expense of an intriguing storyline or meaningful interaction with nonplayer characters. This is a linear "hack 'n slash" game set in a somewhat dreary world of snow and ice. Indeed, it reminds me of SSI's forgettable *Secret of the Silver Blades*, one of the weakest of the "Gold Box" games. The general consensus among reviewers was that the game was good but not great, and it certainly didn't help that the game had to compete with mega-hits like *Diablo II* and *Baldur's Gate II*, both released the same year. Black Isle developed an expansion pack called *Heart of Winter* the following year, which adds five new areas and plenty of new items, skills, and spells. It also features higher resolution and better artificial intelligence. It's a quality expansion for fans of the first game, though not of much interest to others.

### *Icewind Dale II* and *AD&D* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition

In 2002, Interplay published *Icewind Dale II*, which differs from the original in several significant ways. Perhaps most noticeable is the switch to *AD&D* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition rules, which greatly affect how characters are created and developed. Gone are the old random dice throws for stats; players instead are given a certain number of points to distribute as they see fit. However, the catch is that pushing a stat above average requires a greater share of points; it's an exponential system that makes a great deal of sense and works quite well.

There's also a new feats system, which is a terrific innovation that will be instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with *Fallout*. As with that game, the feats system makes leveling up a much more interesting and customizable process, and adds greatly to that "just one more level, then I'll stop for the night" kind of thinking that keeps you playing until it's time for work the next morning. There's also a skill system that allows further customization and trade-offs; a thief who puts too many points into "open lock" may be rotten at disabling traps or moving stealthily. Finally, players can multiclass their characters however they wish, even to the point of giving each character a level in fighting or thieving just for kicks. However, again there's a trade-off; really cool abilities are available only to very high-level members of a certain class. Too much hybridization results in a "jack of all trades, master of none" character that is mostly worthless.

*Icewind Dale II* offers other enhancements as well, particularly more meaningful interaction with non-player characters and better diversity in settings. The voice talent is also top-notch, an important aspect that tends to get overlooked by many reviewers (unless it's bad, in which case it becomes the



*Icewind Dale II* made good use of *AD&D 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*'s rules for skills and feats, which make leveling up a much more sophisticated and compelling process.

focus). Although the story is slightly more nuanced than the original, this is still primarily a “hack ‘n slash” game more concerned with combat tactics than dramatic tension. Tellingly, most contemporary reviewers spend far more time talking about the feat and skill system than the story arcs. In any case, *Icewind Dale II* is the last of the great Infinity Engine games that brought so much joy to CRPG fans.

Of course, the other big game of 2002 was BioWare’s *Neverwinter Nights*, a fully 3D game that threatened to make *Icewind Dale II* look old-fashioned before it hit gamers’ hard drives. I’ll have more to say about *Neverwinter Nights* in the next chapter.

## Other *AD&D*-Licensed Games of the Platinum Age

Although by far the most popular TSR-licensed games of this era are based on BioWare’s Infinity Engine, there were other contenders: Stormfront Stu-

dio's *Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor* and Troika's *The Temple of Elemental Evil: A Classic Greyhawk Adventure* (2003). Neither of these games was very successful, though at least the latter achieved some fame for being the first computer game to allow gay characters to marry.

### *Pool of Radiance, Ruined*

Stormfront's *Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor*, published by Ubisoft in 2001, is one of the most disappointing games in CRPG history. As with *Descent to Undermountain* and *Heroes of the Lance*, the game was highly anticipated and over-hyped and soon became the target of vitriolic reviews from critics.

Indeed, its sheer wretchedness is hard to describe to the uninitiated. No doubt, part of my own distaste for this game stems from its title, which represents a brazen attempt to lure unwary fans of the legendary "Gold Box" game to this insipid and unplayable travesty. Like many other gamers, I heard about the "new Pool" months before it was released and counted down the days until I could reenter Phlan and challenge Tyranthraxus once again. After plunking down \$70 and playing the game for several hours, I kept telling myself that eventually it would get better. Just a few more battles with those slow-motion skeletons, and surely my party would emerge from those drab, look-alike dungeons and the game would start getting interesting. Eventually I realized that it wasn't going to get any better and that I had wasted some twelve hours of my life that I would never get back.

What makes *Ruins of Myth Drannor* so terrible? After all, many gamers (me included) assumed that a return to true turn-based combat would,



Stormfront's *Ruins of Myth Drannor* is one of the worst CRPGs ever released upon an unsuspecting public.

if nothing else, satisfy their hardcore cravings for “Gold Box”-style tactical combat. While the game looks promising on paper, in practice *Stormfront*'s product is shoddy, boring, and poorly executed. Besides the utterly boring sameness of all but a tiny fraction of the gameworld, swarms of bugs (the game actually reformatted some gamers' hard drives!), and fatiguing, repetitive battles—this is one of the slowest games ever in a literal sense. The turn-based combats become agonizing as the characters and an endless sea of skeletons lethargically plod into position, one by one. Like many others, I was frustrated enough to download a hack to speed up the combats, which eased my frustration, but I can interpret my willingness to actually complete this game only as evidence of masochistic tendencies.

I hereby grant *Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor* the distinction of being the worst CRPG of all time. More importantly, it's a grave insult to the legacy of its namesake, and I can only hope that any gamers unlucky enough to play this game first will do themselves a favor by playing the original. Even though the older game has obsolete graphics and interface, it has one vital advantage over *Ruins of Myth Drannor*: It's fun.

### *Temple of Elemental Evil*

Troika's *Temple of Elemental Evil* is a much more playable game than *Ruins of Myth Drannor*, even though it's also designed for the hardcore CRPG fan. Troika had distinguished themselves in 2001 with the steampunk masterpiece *Arcanum*, but *Temple* turned out to be too difficult for gamers raised on *Diablo* and *Baldur's Gate*. Like *Ruins of Myth Drannor*, *Temple of Elemental Evil* is a party-based game set in third person, isometric perspective, and features turn-based rather than real-time battles. Although it suffers from an occasionally trying interface, the pace is smooth and the combat is sophisticated and challenging enough to keep players engaged.

*Temple of Elemental Evil* is set in Greyhawk, one of the earliest AD&D campaign settings, and was one of the first CRPGs to offer the new 3.5 version of the official D&D rule set. Like *Icewind Dale II* and the later *Neverwinter Nights* game, it offers skills and feats in addition to the usual character stats. It also features a nice radial menu that pops up around characters, though the sheer number of commands makes it somewhat unwieldy. You'll remember that we observed a comparable technique in the *Secret of Mana* JRPG. The player is allowed to create and control a party of five adventurers, a rare opportunity in an era dominated by single-character CRPGs.

Unfortunately, the game is riddled with bugs, and the lack of a really gripping storyline and interesting characters kept it out of the spotlight.



*Temple of Elemental Evil* uses a branching radial menu, which can quickly get complicated.

Indeed, even the surprising twist of allowing two male characters to marry failed to draw much attention to this title.<sup>16</sup> Critics were quite divided. Some praised the game for so faithfully adapting the tabletop edition rules to the computer medium. The complexity allows for some deeply compelling character development. Others complained about the lack of multiplayer options, sketchy plot, and overall lack of quality assurance. In short, it's a mediocre game that could have been the next big thing had Troika taken more time to polish and play test the product.

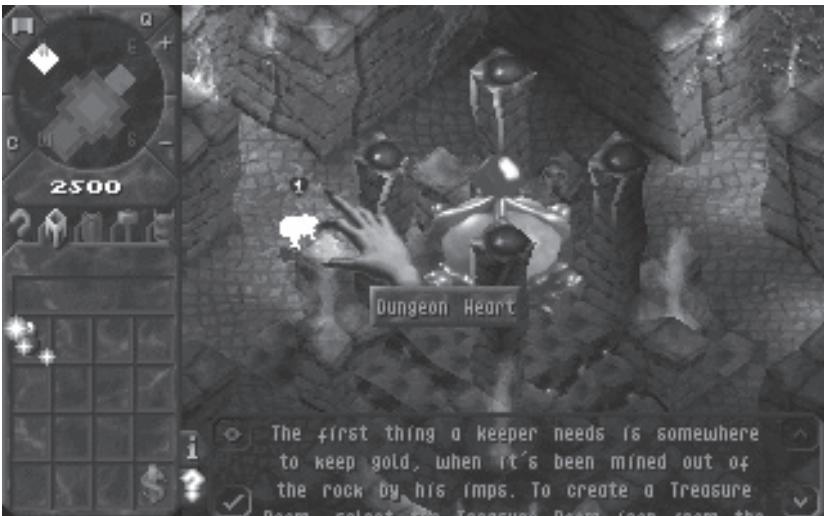
## Other Highlights of the Platinum Age

Many discussions of this age of CRPGs are dominated by hugely popular games such as *Diablo* and *Baldur's Gate*, but there are other, lesser known titles that deserve attention. The two I'd like to mention here are *Dungeon Keeper* and *Krondor*.

### *Dungeon Keeper*

Bullfrog's *Dungeon Keeper* (1997) turns the CRPG on its head by letting players assume the role of dungeon master. It's a rare but startling example of

<sup>16</sup> For more information about this aspect of the game, see my article on the subject at <http://www.armchairarcade.com/aamain/content.php?article.27>.



*Dungeon Keeper* flips the CRPG on its head by putting the player in charge of the dungeons.

a developer making a game out of game development itself. Although *Dungeon Keeper* is probably closer to a strategy game than a conventional CRPG, it still offers an invigorating new perspective on the old dungeon crawler. How do those evil archmages manage to keep so many orcs and dragons fed and under their control?

Like many popular strategy games, *Dungeon Keeper* uses the highly addictive research technique to keep players invested in the game. There's always some new room, spell, or creature type just a few minutes away, but of course the difficulty level increases to compensate for whatever new powers and abilities they put at the player's disposal. There's also a multiplayer option that allows up to four players to battle it out or work together.

The game was highly praised by critics, and Bullfrog wasted little time producing an expansion, *The Deeper Dungeons*, later in 1997. *Dungeon Keeper 2*, released in 1999, borrowed the bulk of its gameplay from its predecessor but was still popular among gamers and reviewers.

## Raymond E. Feist and the *Krondor* Series

Although Sierra is much better known in CRPG circles for their *Quest for Glory* series, they also deserve recognition for the *Krondor* series, which consists of *Betrayal at Krondor*, *Betrayal in Antara*, and *Return to Krondor*. These

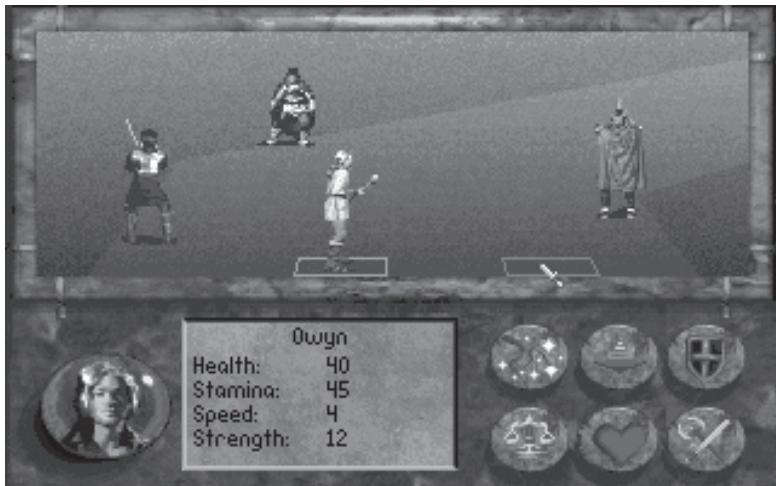
games are noted mostly for their superb stories and characters, though they also offer some innovative combat and magic systems.

### *Betrayal at Krondor*

Sierra published Dynamix's *Betrayal at Krondor* in 1993. It's most noteworthy for being based on Raymond E. Feist's world of Midkemia, made famous by the celebrated *Riftwar* saga. Feist himself even wrote a novelization of the game.

*Betrayal at Krondor* features turn-based combat, a skill-based character system (no levels), clever riddles, and a good deal of Feist-inspired text and cutscenes. It's far more linear than most CRPGs, with a story broken up into nine chapters and a hundred or so hours of gameplay. Much of the story is told via brief, slightly animated cutscenes. Feist wrote in the instruction manual that the game "was to be the first computer game that felt like it was part of a good adventure novel," and to my mind Dynamix succeeded. The writing is probably the best of any CRPG, and the story is both sophisticated and excellently paced. The characters are sharply drawn and convincing, and Feist's rich fantasy world lends depth to the gameworld.

The leveling system is based on twelve basic skills, which run the gamut of RPG activities (combat, stealth, bardic, crafts). What's interesting in this case is that player selects the skills he or she wants the character to focus on



*Betrayal at Krondor* features an intuitive turn-based combat system.

improving, rather than doling out skill points. A sword diagram shows the percentage of mastery reached in each skill. In any case, skills will increase only as the character uses them, and the closer the skill gets to 100%, the harder it is to improve. Weapons and armor are also more abstract than usual. Each armor or weapon has a percentage displayed next to it, indicating the wear and tear on the item. A player with the weaponcraft skill can use a whetstone to repair damaged swords, whereas armor is fixed with a special hammer. In general, there are far fewer weapon and armor types here than in most CRPGs. Players are also regularly challenged by riddles, which are required to open many of the magical treasure chests sprinkled throughout the land.

Navigation is reminiscent of the older *Dungeon Master* game, with the party moving in discrete “steps” through a 3D gameworld. A nice option here is the map view, a top-down display that makes it easier for players to maintain their bearings. Conversation consists of selecting predefined options from a menu. There’s also a handy “follow road” feature that keeps the party on a path, automatically rotating as needed.

Unfortunately, the graphics weren’t up to many gamers’ standards even in 1993, a sad fact that limited the game’s success. Trees and mountains look jagged and polygonal. Nevertheless, it won several awards and is found in several “best of” lists, including *Computer Gaming World*’s 1996 list of the best games of all time, where it ranked 43<sup>rd</sup>, outranking *Ultima VI*, *Dungeon Master*, and *Ultima Underworld*.

### *Betrayal in Antara*

The second game, *Betrayal in Antara* (1997), is not based on Feist’s world at all—Sierra temporarily lost its license and had to create an entirely new campaign setting named Ramar. This game is also plagued with substandard graphics for the time and was roundly dismissed by critics. Sierra released *Betrayal at Krondor* for free distribution in a valiant effort to promote the second game, but it seemed doomed almost from the start. Lackluster writing and poor voice acting certainly didn’t help either, and the photo-realistic portraits have been replaced with cartoonish illustrations. The game engine hadn’t aged well at all, and reviewers chided the blocky scenery and limited color palette: “think muddy Monet,” one contemporary quipped.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, *Betrayal in Antara* does offer some interesting features. My favorite is the spell creation system. Magic-users slowly research new spells,

<sup>17</sup> See Desslock’s review at <http://www.gamespot.com/pc/rpg/betrayalinantara/review.html>.



*Betrayal in Antara's* skill system allows characters to develop many skills simultaneously, but at a proportionately reduced rate.

which they discover by combining various types of magic (touch, electricity, and create are available at the beginning). There are also two skills related to magic: spell casting and spell accuracy. Instead of the swords diagram of the first game, skill development is illustrated here with a pie graph, the slices of which correspond to the various skills being refined by the character. It's a sensible and effective system that I'd like to see in more games.

Combat is again a turn-based affair, though this time based on a hexagonal grid. The player can select among three attack modes for each character (swing, hack, and thrust) or select the autocombat option to resolve battles automatically. While there's not much here to pique the interest of *The Wizard's Crown* fans, it's flexible and detailed enough to keep most gamers engaged.

### *Return to Krondor*

*Return to Krondor*, developed by PyroTechnix and published by Sierra in 1998, brought players back to Midkemia, Raymond E. Feist's fantasy world. It also ended the disjointed saga, but not in a way that satisfied most fans of the original. The biggest change from the previous model was a shift to third

person, reminiscent of *Ultima IX* and *Redguard*. Like those games, *Return to Krondor* failed to rise above the competition (*Baldur's Gate*, *Fallout 2*) in the eyes of most critics, who gave it lukewarm reviews.

Nevertheless, *Return to Krondor* offers a good story and well-developed and likeable characters. Although the gameplay is more linear than in the previous games, players are still given room to develop the characters by deciding which skills to emphasize. The combat system is similar to the turn-based procedure seen in the previous games, though the grids have been omitted.

The storyline concerns the Tear of the Gods, a sacred artifact that has sunk to the bottom of the sea in a shipwreck. A madman named Bear is after it, determined to raise the ship and use the powerful artifact to challenge the gods themselves. The story is told over the course of 11 chapters, with some 180 characters and plenty of high-quality voice acting and over 200 fully-rendered locations. Critics made much of the graphics, though the camera controls, which offer a selection of stationery camera views, can occasionally be baffling.

Unfortunately, the game suffers from a rather repetitive magic system that is poorly represented on screen. A somewhat promising alchemy system is made redundant by a plentitude of premade potions littered about the game world. In short, *Return to Krondor* is a game with a great story and characters marred by a less-than-satisfying game engine.

## Summing up the Platinum Age

As we've seen, the Platinum Age is a time of both innovation and refinement, but also one of increasing consolidation of interfaces and gameplay systems into a few recognizable models. *Ultima Underworld* and *Diablo* are probably the two most successful of such models, though Origin's *The Black Gate* and even *Ascension* have made their marks on the genre.

As we approach the modern age, we'll see the beginning of two very decisive trend in CRPGs and computer games in general. One is the shift from standalone, single-player games to massively multiplayer online games. We'll start the next chapter with a look at the history of this movement, picking up from the discussion of MUDs and MOOs in Chapter 3. The second trend concerns the console and Japanese RPGs, which by the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century had truly begun to dominate the genre. Newer consoles such as Sony's PlayStation and Microsoft's Xbox were finally powerful enough to rival the PC. Furthermore, their cheaper price and lower learning curves meant that

far more people had access to them, and the demand for console games far exceeded that for Windows or Macintosh products. Soon, most big-budget CRPGs would begin life on consoles, ported later to the Windows and occasionally the Macintosh platform. We've seen similar migrations in the past. In the beginning, almost all major CRPGs originated on the Apple II. Then came the Commodore 64, followed by the Atari ST and Amiga, and finally the IBM PC running DOS and then Windows.

In short, what we'll see in the next chapter is the CRPG's slow but steady decline. As we'll see, the future of the grand old genre is far from certain.

# 11

## The Modern Age

Perhaps the key question in this chapter is simply what constitutes a modern game. Is it the year it was released, say, any new game published in the past five years? While such a qualification might simplify the question, I take a broader view, looking more at trends than specific dates. After all, developers may choose to purposefully create a retro game, and there are countless such projects in the shareware and freeware sectors—take any of the recent rogue-likes, for instance. On the other hand, we've already seen how games can be ahead of their time, appearing in retrospect to be more modern than games released years afterward. *Dungeon Master* and *Ultima Underworld* spring to mind here, but there are many others.

On the other hand, there are three noticeable trends that began in the late 1990s and that have come to fruition in the mid-2000s. The first of these is a shift from the standalone, single-player CRPG to massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs. This shift had an important initial stage in the rise of multiplayer options and campaigns in games such as *Diablo* and *Baldur's Gate*, but also in the gradual evolution of online gaming. Before the rise of the Internet and the web, online gaming was limited mostly to college students with access to a mainframe and private users dialing up their local bulletin board systems (BBSs). However, by the late 1980s commercial networks such as America Online, CompuServe, and GEnie had risen in prominence, connecting millions of gamers all over the world. At first the gaming options were limited to text-based offerings, but gradually developers

mastered client-side architecture, which allows the bulk of a game's graphics and other data to be stored on the user's personal computer rather than being transmitted via modem. We saw a striking example of this technology in Chapter 7 with *Neverwinter Nights*, a very early MMORPG built on SSI's "Gold Box" engine. The Internet and the web dropped the bottom out of this market by providing a vastly cheaper public network, which soon had much more to offer than even the best of the private networks. Developers and publishers now had a more direct way to profit from online gaming, since there was no longer a middleman demanding a cut of the profits. It would still take a while before developers stumbled upon a successful economic model for MMORPGs, but few doubted that there were vast fortunes to be made in this new and rapidly expanding market.

The second trend that defines the modern age of CRPGs is the increasing relevance of game consoles. We spoke in Chapter 8 of the early JRPGs, exported to the U.S. for use on Nintendo and Sega's popular game machines. The *Zelda* and *Final Fantasy* series exploded across North America, sweeping up millions upon millions of console gamers in their path. Indeed, far more people have played JRPGs than any of the CRPGs we've discussed in this book. However, for most of their early history, consoles were woefully underpowered compared even to midrange computers, particularly in terms of graphics, memory, and interface. Furthermore, with a few exceptions, most console games were targeted at young children, who were assumed to lack the education and patience necessary to play complex CRPGs. However, with the introduction of Sony's PlayStation in 1995, the paradigm began to shift, and by the turn of the century the PlayStation 2 and Microsoft Xbox had really begun to blur the lines between console and computer gaming. Now, former CRPG developers could offer their games for consoles and PCs without having to make as many compromises. Since the console market is of an order of magnitude larger and more profitable than the computer game market, developers would soon begin focusing on the console experience first and the computer experience second. Finally, JRPGs were quickly becoming just as aesthetically impressive as their computer counterparts, if not more so.

The final trend can be summed up in three words: action, action, and action. Although modern CRPGs may have just as many stats and modifiers as the best of the classic 1980s hardcore games, the bulk of these operations are kept out of sight, tucked under the hood. The idea is to keep the player busy with the gamepad, not the calculator. Long gone are the days when players compiled long tables of numbers or drew painstakingly detailed maps on sheets of graph paper. These contemplative and even artistic delights have

been exchanged for lesser but more frequent bursts of gratification. Indeed, successful CRPGs of modern times often seem more like action adventures or first-person shooters than anything ever released by Origin.

Are these three trends detrimental to the future of the CRPG as a viable genre? This is a question I will explore throughout this chapter. Let's begin, though, with the last few CRPGs that really stand out.

## *Vampire: The Masquerade*

We've already seen several CRPGs based on the vampire mythos, such as Sierra's *Shadows of Darkness* (1993) and SSI's *Ravenloft* games. However, the *Vampire: The Masquerade* games are much more audacious, ratcheting up the gore and making for some truly unsettling gameplay. They are based on the *Vampire: The Masquerade* tabletop RPG by White Wolf Game Studios, a terrifically dark game set in a neo-Gothic setting (the World of Darkness) where vampires (the kindred) and other imaginary horrors (werewolves, wraiths, and so on) live among humans under a careful veil of secrecy. Each member of the kindred belongs to a clan or bloodline, and much of the game is concerned with the dramas and conflict among these disparate groups.

White Wolf's game is most noted for its intuitive handling of the unique qualities of vampire characters. For instance, vampires have a stat called "blood pool" that corresponds to the amount of human blood ("vitae") coursing through their veins, and a "humanity" stat that measures how far the character has strayed from civilized behavior and succumbed to more bestial urges. Since much of the vampires' powers derive from drinking blood, they must constantly feed, both on humans and each other. All in all, it's a very clever and compelling system, and its mature content (this is *not* a game for children) has made it a favorite among the Goth subculture.

## *Redemption*

The first computer game based on *Vampire: The Masquerade* is *Redemption*, developed by the aptly named Nihilistic Software and published by Activision in 2000. It offers spectacular 3D graphics and a rotatable camera, somewhat comparable to the later *Dungeon Siege*. Like all action CRPGs, it has real-time combat, though poor collision detection makes this game even more of a click-fest than *Diablo*.

Nevertheless, *Redemption* is more than just another *Diablo* clone. For one thing, it puts the player in charge of a four-member party. Although only



Nihilistic's *Redemption* introduced gamers to the dark and sophisticated role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade*.

one character can be controlled at a time, it's a simple matter to switch among them (the others are controlled by artificial intelligence routines). Nihilistic also did a good job integrating White Wolf's vampire-centric role playing rules to the new medium, with many skills (called "disciplines") that require blood to perform. What really sets the game apart are its disturbing images and sacrilegious undertones, which go far beyond *Diablo*'s occasional demonic overtones. This is a game that delights in its wickedness. For instance, it's frequently necessary for the characters to suck each other's blood, an act that is shown in gruesome detail and accompanied by sexualized moaning. Indeed, it's hard to imagine what commotion a game like this would have caused back in the 1980s, when so many concerned citizens were hellbent on banning *Dungeons & Dragons*. Compared to *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *D&D* is a G-rated family film!

The story is focused on a vampire named Christof, a twelfth-century warrior who fell in love with a nun, though their love was never consummated. Nevertheless, Christof takes a vow to protect her against the vampires but ends up becoming one himself. Christof decides to take revenge against

the Brujah, the vampires that caused his transformation. Since vampires are immortal, Christof's quest will span some 800 years and four cities. It's a massively ambitious undertaking, and critics praised the diversity of the settings and intimate attention to detail.

The multiplayer options require a player to be a story teller in yet another attempt to foster user-generated content, a technique that would pay off immensely for BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights*. Nihilistic's effort, however, was far from sensible, mostly because they relied on a web portal named WON.NET. The problem was a poor interface, which made story telling difficult and finding a good group of fellow gamers even more so. Most of the multiplayer games degenerated into simple frag fests, or, even worse, traps for the unwary novice, who would enter a game only to be killed and robbed by a devious story teller. Most critics pulled few punches in describing the poorly developed multiplayer game.

Poor multiplayer interaction isn't the game's only problem. It suffers from serious bugs and glitches that critics were eager to bring to the public's attention. The worst of these is wretched collision detection, which inadvertently causes the characters to miss their opponents. Another problem was a rather irksome save game system, which necessitated playing large chunks of the game over and over again. Thankfully, this problem was fixed in a subsequent patch along with several other nuisances, including faulty artificial intelligence and unbalanced boss battles. Even worse are the wince-worthy voice acting and flaccid script, two letdowns that are simply inexcusable in a game that depends so heavily on drama to maintain the player's interest.

The general consensus seems to be that Nihilistic had some good ideas, but their fangs were just too dull to penetrate the jugular.

## *Bloodlines*

The next game based on White Wolf's franchise was not developed by Nihilistic. Instead, Troika, makers of *Temple of Elemental Evil* and *Arcanum*, picked up the franchise, and Activision published their *Bloodlines* in November of 2004. The game was almost universally considered superior to its predecessor, though it too is not without its flaws.

Troika used Valve Corporation's well-established Source 3D graphics engine, which had been put to such effective use in their superb first-person shooter *Half-Life 2*. Although *Bloodlines'* graphics and physics aren't as impressive as those in *Half-Life 2*, they're still some of the best ever seen in a CRPG. The game also boasts a soundtrack with a cut from the well-known



Troika's take on the franchise had its flaws but is generally better regarded than its predecessor.

industrial group Ministry. However, it's really the excellent writing and top-notch voice talent that demand the most attention. The player's character is a freshly sired vampire who was embraced against his or her will. After this rather unpromising beginning and a stay of execution, the character sets off to learn how to survive and thrive as one of the kindred. Naturally, it doesn't take long to get thickly involved in the complex intrigues between the rival clans.

Troika made some significant changes to the model established by *Nihilistic*. Now the player can create his or her own character, then pledge allegiance to one of the seven available clans of kindred. Each clan offers its own set of quests, so there's good potential for replay value here. Replay value is also enhanced by offering distinct scenarios for male and female characters, an important aspect, considering the prevalence of eroticism. Another enhancement is a set of feats that correspond to the character's attributes (e.g., the appearance attribute affects the seduction feat). The character development system is quite involved, and players will need to make many important choices as the game progresses.

The combat mode is much different than *Redemption*'s, with several different moves in melee combat a special first-person mode for firing guns. Melee and unarmed combat both use the same interface, which consists of holding down the attack button while pressing one of the directional buttons. The player can also try a combo sequence, but success depends as much on the character's Melee Combat Feat as the player's own expertise. Unfortunately, the final product didn't live up to most players' expectations, particularly those familiar with first-person shooters, where accuracy isn't affected by as many unseen variables. One reviewer called third-person combat "sluggish

and sloppy” and remarked that gun combat “never feels like a smooth, intuitive experience.”<sup>1</sup> One wonders if Troika might not have been better off with turn-based combat.

Critics were generally pleased with the game, though they lamented the lack of multiplayer options. Others criticized the rather unbalanced artificial intelligence. Enemies easily get stuck behind objects and don’t always notice the character even when he or she is in full view. The biggest problem, though, was a myriad of bugs. Troika quickly released patches to cover most of them, but not before critics had apprised gamers of the situation. The resulting losses exacted a heavy toll on Troika, which went out of business soon after.

Still, the *Vampire: The Masquerade* franchise has much to offer CRPG fans, though the first two developers have stumbled in their efforts to bring White Wolf’s World of Darkness to the computer. I’m hoping that a third developer will someday consolidate Nihilistic and Troika’s gains—and finally do this intriguing game justice.

## *Neverwinter Nights*

For many CRPG aficionados, BioWare’s *Neverwinter Nights*, published in 2002 by Infogrames, is a logical progression from the company’s older but still highly respected *Baldur’s Gate* series. While the games share many common features, however, *Neverwinter Nights* is powered by the Aurora Engine, a fully 3D engine that enables far more advanced graphics than the beloved old Infinity Engine used in BioWare’s older games. Now, players had a free-moving camera with zoom, and the polished graphics gave them a real incentive to take advantage of it. Even better, BioWare included a toolset to let players easily create their own *Neverwinter Nights* modules, a decision that really represents a turning point in the history of the CRPG. It opened the floodgates for user-generated content, and soon BioWare could direct users to hundreds of high-quality modules that added incalculable value to an already superb game. Simply put, *Neverwinter Nights* represents one of the best values in all of CRPG history.

Like *Baldur’s Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights* allows players only to create and control a single character. They can, however, add two henchmen and a famil-

<sup>1</sup> See Allen Rausch’s review of the game at <http://pc.gamespy.com/pc/vampire-the-masquerade-bloodlines/566646p3.html>.



*Neverwinter Nights* introduced BioWare's 3D Aurora Engine.

iar, as well as whatever creatures the character is able to summon via magic. All of these companions are controlled by the computer, though the player can issue basic orders (such as how far to stay back or whether to use magic). *Neverwinter Nights* also follows the 3rd Edition *AD&D* Rules seen in *Icewind Dale II*, with a fun and intuitive leveling system based on skills, feats, and stats. Players have a great deal of freedom in shaping their character, though again there's a danger of spreading the character too thin, resulting in a versatile but ultimately ineffectual character.

There are several significant differences between *Neverwinter Nights* and *Baldur's Gate*, and not everyone was happy with the changes. Perhaps the most important difference is that the player's avatar isn't woven so integrally into the plot. Instead, the character starts off as a blank-slate adventurer who has responded to a call by Lady Aribeth to aid the city of Neverwinter. The city is in the grips of a deadly plague, which turns out to be part of a much larger conspiracy to take over the city. The roots of treachery run deep, and there are quite a few surprises that defy the stereotypes. Though the plot is fairly linear, there is some leeway in directing the avatar's action; he or she

can be a saintly type, a calculating mercenary, or a ruthless sociopath—alignment matters. These choices are mostly played out in dialog options, but also in which side-quests the player accepts or rejects. Although the single player campaign isn't engaging as *Baldur's Gate*, most critics felt that the well-crafted multiplayer and user-generated content more than compensated for it.

Official expansion packs for the highly successful game were not long in coming. The first was *Shadows of Undrentide*, developed by Floodgate Entertainment and published by Atari (Infogrames) in 2003. *Shadows of Undrentide* wasn't what most players expected; rather than extend the original campaign, it adds an entirely new one intended for new characters. It also added five new prestige classes for advanced characters. The expansion met with generally favorable (but not over the top) reviews. The next expansion, *Hordes of the Underdark*, appeared only months later. Thankfully, this trip to the Drow homeland fared much better than Interplay's wretched *Descent to Undermountain*. Besides a few epic battles that no player will likely forget, *Hordes of the Underdark* also adds great new assets, including 50 new feats and 40 new spells. The massive expansion was recognized as a must-have for fans and is widely considered superior to the original campaign. BioWare has been steadily churning out new premium modules for *Neverwinter Nights*. One example is *Wyvern Crown Cormyr*, 234 megabytes of downloadable content available for \$11.99. Besides a new adventure and setting to explore, the module adds "fully ride-able horses," "flowing cloaks and tabards," and a new prestige class—and it's only one of six such modules available at BioWare's store.

*Computer Games Magazine* called *Neverwinter Nights* "the last role-playing game you'll ever desire" and the "fulfillment of a genre."<sup>2</sup> Such high praise may seem overblown, but it's hard to exaggerate BioWare's brilliance in shipping the game with the excellent Aurora Toolset. With such a powerful tool at their disposal, talented Dungeon Masters wasted no time crafting excellent campaigns and making them freely available on the Internet.<sup>3</sup> *Neverwinter Nights* isn't so much a game as a highly expandable do-it-yourself CRPG kit.

## *Neverwinter Nights 2*

For the sequel to its groundbreaking game, Infogrames (now known as Atari) turned to Obsidian Entertainment, a team composed of former Interplay de-

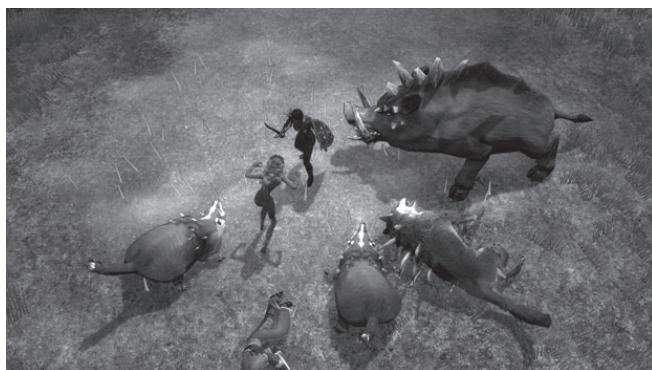
<sup>2</sup> See the Sep. 2002 issue of *Computer Games Magazine*, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> For a huge list of high-quality and freely downloadable modules, see <http://nvwault.ign.com/Files/modules/HallOfFame.shtml>.

velopers. Obsidian had recently created a sequel for BioWare's other modern classic, *Knights of the Old Republic*, which we'll discuss in a moment. Released in 2006, *Neverwinter Nights 2* uses Obsidian's own Electron 3D engine, which is based on BioWare's well-established Aurora. Electron offers some graphical enhancements, such as pixel-based shading technology, but is limited strictly to the Windows platform and has been criticized for sluggish performance on some machines.

Of course, Obsidian knew that gamers' expectations were high regarding the sequel to the megapopular *Neverwinter Nights*, and they seemed to have worked hard to address the criticisms of that game while keeping the bulk of the gameplay intact. One of the biggest changes concerns the single-player campaign, which puts the player smack in the middle of the story, more like in *Baldur's Gate* than the original *Neverwinter Nights*. The player's character begins the game as a young orphan in the tiny village of West Harbor, which is savagely attacked by the Githyanki, mysterious creatures from another plane of existence that now threaten the world. The hero barely manages to escape and is sent off to the city of Neverwinter to find answers. The plot thickens quickly, and soon enough the humble character is embroiled in all manner of intrigues, dealing with a huge variety of characters.

Much was made of the game's influence system, which appears to respond on the fly to the player's dialog choices. Sometimes the result is instantaneous; a savage insult will unsurprisingly lead to combat, but other choices take time to percolate. For instance, disagreeing too often with a comrade may cause him or her to leave the party. It's also possible for another character to fall in love with the hero and even to rashly sacrifice him or herself to prove it. A few



The new *Neverwinter Nights 2* features great graphics, but critics have complained about the awkward camera controls.

choice words with a noble might have long and lasting consequences throughout the campaign. In short, the dialog system is much more relevant than in most CRPGs, where it serves only as a means of securing hints or providing context.

Although the player is again limited to creating only a single character, three others may join the quest. This time, the player can take full control of these companions, switching among them with a simple click of the mouse. This system, which bears some resemblance to Nihilistic's *Redemption*, seems a fair enhancement over the rather limited system seen in the original. The hero's companions have their own personalities and histories, and can even offer optional side-quests if the player takes the time to get to know them. Combat is in real-time, but again the player can halt the action to issue orders (up to five for each character). Another option is to let the computer handle combat, and characters can be told to follow specified strategies (such as whether to cast spells).

Unfortunately, the game suffered from some bugs, several of which were serious enough to crash the game. Critics also complained about the unbalanced artificial intelligence, which often led to characters getting stuck behind objects or just frozen in place. Many of these bugs have now been addressed in post-release patches. The item management system is also unnecessarily tedious. The biggest problem, though, is the awkward camera controls. Though the game offers four different camera modes, none of them are as intuitive as they should be in a modern game. After all, there are countless superb examples out there that demonstrate how it *should* be done.

*Neverwinter Nights 2* features multiplayer options like its predecessor, with a toolset to help would-be dungeon masters create and distribute their own modules. There are already hundreds of such modules freely available for download, as well as tools and other resources for developers.<sup>4</sup>

Obsidian has announced an expansion set called *Mask of the Betrayer*, though it wasn't available at the time of this writing. This will likely be a must-have product, since it fixes the problems with the camera that so plagued the original.

## *Knights of the Old Republic*

It's hard to imagine anyone reading this book who isn't at least nominally familiar with *Star Wars*, George Lucas's extremely successful space opera fran-

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<sup>4</sup> For a huge list of modules and other resources, see <http://nwvault.ign.com/View.php?view=nwn2modulesenglish.HOF>.

chise. However, it's possible that readers may be unfamiliar with Wizards of the Coast's *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*, a tabletop RPG released in 2000. It's based on a similar "d20" system as seen in the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which computer gamers encountered in *Icewind Dale II* and *Neverwinter Nights*. Although the system isn't without its critics, many gamers appreciate its consistency and flexibility.

In 2003, LucasArts published *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, BioWare's computerized adaptation of the Wizard of the Coast game. However, the game was first released exclusively for Microsoft's Xbox game console and was not published for Windows until two months later (a Mac version followed in September of 2004). It is, to my knowledge, the first major Western CRPG to be targeted at consoles, and it's the start of rather distressing trend for many computer gamers, who are accustomed to preferential treatment. My guess is that it signals the beginning of the end for the PC games market, which is rapidly being seen as a mere niche market in the eyes of many publishers. Let's put these issues aside for the moment, though, because *Knights of the Old Republic* is a truly wonderful game.

*Knights of the Old Republic* is a highly ambitious game based on the Odyssey engine, BioWare's effort to enhance its old Aurora engine for modern game platforms. The essential enhancements are 3D backgrounds and facial



*Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* offers a rich combination of role-playing, story, and combat. Shown here is the game's opening sequence.

expressions. Unfortunately, there are only ten or so facial structures for each gender, so there's a good many "clones" running around. It's also rather difficult to tell the aliens apart, since they tend to differ only by skin color. Thankfully, these aspects are compensated for by stunning backgrounds and interiors. It also offers exceptional scripting and voice acting, critical components in any game that emphasizes dialog as much as *Knights of the Old Republic* does.

The game is most noted for its storyline, which is reminiscent of *Baldur's Gate* in that the main character turns out to be much more than the scruffy nerd herder he or she appears to be at first. During the course of the game, the player will get to make many choices regarding good and evil, and unlike most games of this type, the game has substantial rewards for both paths. Of particular interest is the game's surprise ending, which no one who finishes the game is likely to forget.

Although *Knights of the Old Republic* was intended first and foremost for consoles, BioWare chose to make the combat more like *Neverwinter Nights* than *Diablo*. What we get is a hybrid real-time and turn-based system, in which the player can pause the action to issue commands. The player can also instantly take direct control of any of the hero's companions, a popular option we've seen in most games of the era (including *Dungeon Siege II*, *Neverwinter Nights 2*, and *Redemption*). The character development system offers plenty of intriguing skills, feats, and Force Powers, which are essentially this game's equivalent of magical spells.

Surprisingly, *Knights of the Old Republic* does not offer support for multiple players, but this fact hasn't seemed to bother many gamers. The low volume of complaints may be explained by the immersive story and intriguing characters, which are at least as interesting as the mobs of adolescents "pwn-ing" each other on public servers. Critics raved about the excellent writing and dialog, which any CRPG gamer knows are quite rare and worth celebrating. The game won countless awards, including *Computer Gaming World* and *PC Gamer's* Game of the Year award, and is already considered a classic by many aficionados of the genre.

## *The Sith Lords*

LucasArts turned to Obsidian Entertainment for the sequel to the highly successful *Knights of the Old Republic*, and *The Sith Lords* was published in December of 2004 for Xbox and a few months later for Windows. Obsidian decided to play it very safe with the sequel, leaving the vast majority of the game engine intact. The boldest additions are the 30 new Force Powers



*The Sith Lords* makes good use of light sabers and the mystical powers of The Force.

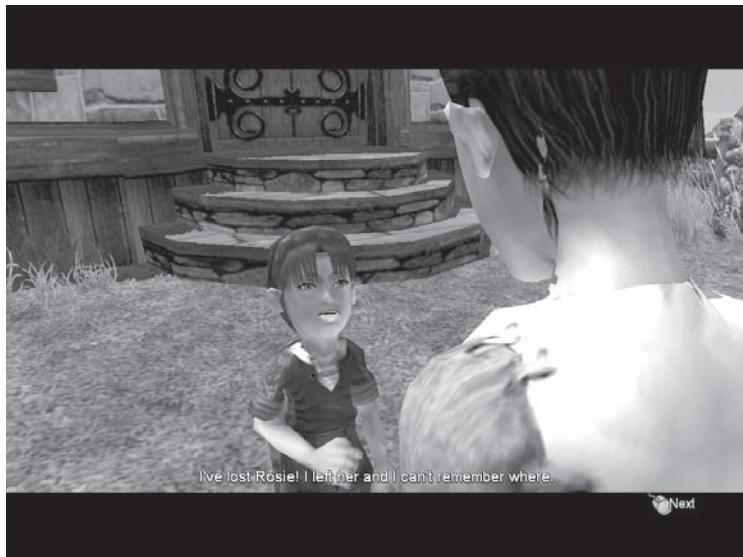
and an ambitious storyline, which picks up five years after the first game. The player is now in control of the last surviving Jedi knight, who awakens on a hospital bed with no memory of recent events. From there, it's a fight across the galaxy in a 45-hour campaign, with plenty of memorable characters and moral dilemmas as well as tons of combat.

*The Sith Lords* is obviously a must-have for fans of the first game, though some critics complained about the lack of innovation and repetitive battles. Most critics, however, have taken very favorably to the game. Whereas most games offer limited support for evil characters, *The Sith Lords* caters to both the righteous and the sociopathic.

The future of this franchise seems brighter than a lightsaber, though neither LucasArts nor Obsidian has made any official announcements concerning a third game. However, given the success of the previous games, a third game seems all but inevitable.

## *Fable*

One of the most ambitious CRPGs of the last few years is *Fable*, an Xbox game developed by the England-based Lionhead Studios. It was first published by Microsoft in September 2004 but was enhanced and re-released a year later for both the Xbox and Windows. This new version was called *Fable: The Lost Chapters*, and it's this game that I want to focus on here.



*Fable* begins with the hero as a child. Will the player follow the path of good or evil?

The game's title is uniquely apt, but not for the reasons you might expect. The game's designer, Peter Molyneux, made all sorts of grandiose claims about what *Fable* would offer, the most infamous being that players would be able to plant an acorn and come back years later to find a fully grown tree. Molyneux had several impressive achievements in his portfolio, such as *Dungeon Keeper* and the "god game" *Black & White*, and many critics and gamers felt he'd be able to deliver what he'd promised. However, Molyneux had overestimated the talents and resources of his team. When the overhyped game finally appeared, critics discovered that Molyneux's comments had contained more fables than facts.

In October of 2004, Molyneux released a statement in which he explained (*apologize* seems too strong a word) that the features had been in development, but simply consumed too much of the Xbox's processor time to be viable.<sup>5</sup> Molyneux's bait and switch gambit might seem irrelevant to a historical understanding of the game, but it did color many of the published reviews and certainly lurks in the background of any discussion of the game or its remake, even though both are impressive in their own right.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://web.archive.org/web/20070404110938/http://allboards.lionhead.com/showthread.php?t=83152>.

One way to think about *Fable* is as a combination of Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* and the more moralistic of Origin's *Ultima* games, with a dash of *Diablo* thrown in for spice. The player's avatar is a young boy who will age over the course of the game, eventually becoming an old man. Furthermore, the character's appearance will change dramatically depending on the player's choices. A player favoring melee combat will see the character becoming more muscular, for instance, as well as accumulating permanent battle scars. Alignment also plays a factor: evil characters sprout horns and limp, whereas good behavior leads to a saintly glow, complete with halo. There are also many types of outfits the character can don, as well as hairstyles and tattoos. The other characters in the game will react differently depending on the hero's appearance, attire, and accomplishments. Although most of these effects are purely cosmetic and do not substantially alter gameplay, they're still fun and the focus of most discussions of the game. It's even possible to get married and divorced, though, again, these features seem thrown in only for the player's own amusement; that is, they don't ultimately have much bearing on the main storyline, which is often quite shallow.

Here's a brief excerpt from an online player's guide that illustrates the point:

Okay, getting married isn't hard at all. It'll cost a wedding ring, though but you'll gain it back.

Wear your most attractive clothes in town, and try to find someone with a heart over their head. Flirt, Sexy Hero Pose, and Manly Arm Pump are the only three things you need to do to make her love you. Once her heart is huge, it will fade in and out. Give her a wedding ring and it turns golden. Buy a house and lead her there. She'll ask to get married. Say yes and a cut scene appears and you'll find that you have a dowry of several thousand. Once married, hit her. You'll be divorced almost immediately and gain 600 Dark points.

You can have unlimited wives.<sup>6</sup>

If this player's behavior is any indication of how gameplay unfolds in *Fable*, then we were surely better off with Garriott than Molyneux! Still, it's interesting that one of *Fable*'s key selling points is that characters react so believably to the player's actions—if the goal is social realism, we might wonder why Lionhead didn't make a MMORPG instead, or even offer mini-

<sup>6</sup> See "Marriage for Cash, Divorce for Dummies" at <http://www.cheatingdome.com/Xbox/8433.htm>.

mal support for multiplayer. Why try to fake human interaction when it's so readily available online? We'll return to this question in our discussion of *Oblivion*.

The leveling system is a hybrid of *The Elder Scrolls* "practice makes perfect" system and the more conventional point-distribution system. Frequently wielding a sword will result in more points to expend on physical abilities, but most points end up in a common pool and can be spent on anything. Most players typically end up with a "jack of all trades," that is, a fighter/archer/wizard. Combat changes depending on what type of weapon the character is wielding. Melee battles involve repeatedly clicking the mouse, whereas ranged weapons involve holding down the mouse button, which draws back the bow and fires an arrow when released. Magic is a more cumbersome affair that requires players to hold down the shift key while scrolling the mouse wheel. As you can probably tell from these descriptions, *Fable* is primarily an action CRPG, hardly surprising given its console heritage.

Although the game was loudly touted for its ability to respond on the fly to the player's decisions, the bulk of these features are limited to aesthetics, and the storyline turns out to be a rather linear quest to avenge the murder of the character's family. Although the player's alignment does change depending on moral choices, at any time alignment can be altered simply by dumping enough cash into the offering bowls of the good or evil gods. For obvious reasons, it's hard to take a game seriously that prides itself on a sophisticated morality system, then reduces the whole matter to coinage—unless, of course, the whole business is meant as satire. Indeed, the game has a habit of inserting humor at inappropriate moments, shattering the dramatic tension.

However, *Fable* does have at least one novel innovation with great potential for future games. In addition to accepting a quest, the player can opt to make a boast, such as a promise to fight without weapons or armor. If the character lives up to the hype, he'll receive extra gold as a reward. Many fans of CRPGs appreciate a good challenge, and *Fable*'s boasting system seems like a great way to capitalize on the desire for glory and the pride that comes with an exceptional performance.

## *Oblivion*

Another game of the modern age that simply cannot be ignored is Bethesda's *Oblivion*, the fourth in their *Elder Scrolls* series of first-person 3D CRPGs. The game was published simultaneously in March of 2006 for Sony's PS3,



*Oblivion* offers some of the best graphics ever seen in a CRPG.

the Xbox 360, and Windows. The game had already won awards even before it hit the shelf, having received the “Best RPG of E3” from nearly every major game publication, and its fame has not ebbed since. *Computer Games Magazine* speculated that it “might be the best role-playing game ever made,”<sup>7</sup> though others are more reserved in their praise.

*Oblivion* is most definitely a sequel to *Morrowind* and is probably best described simply as an audiovisual update. Again we have the open-ended gameplay across a gigantic gameworld, but here the player’s character has a clear mission: find the hidden heir to the throne and close the gates of Oblivion, through which demons have been invading the world of Tamriel. However, the player is still free to ignore this quest, and a great part of the appeal here is wandering Tamriel, soaking up the spectacular scenery and exploring every nook and cranny. As with *Morrowind*, completing the main quest will leave the majority of the world still unexplored, so it pays to take the road less traveled. There are countless optional side-quests and always something interesting to do.

The gameworld is populated by over a thousand characters, each equipped with Bethesda’s “Radiant AI” system. The characters respond to their environment and maintain convincing schedules, though to a much greater scale than we saw in Origin’s *The Black Gate*. The game also boasts convincing facial animation, lip-syncing, and quality voice acting—which includes the talent of Patrick Stewart as the emperor.

Unfortunately, the game was made with consoles in mind, a fact that few Windows players are likely to miss. Bringing up the quest journal, for instance, requires navigating several nested menus rather than just pushing a key on the keyboard. While such an interface is necessary to accommodate

<sup>7</sup> See the June 2006 issue of *Computer Games Magazine*, p. 61.

gamepads, it makes little sense on the PC. The game also suffers from bugs, including many that randomly crash the game to the desktop.

We might be surprised at first that *Oblivion* doesn't offer multiplayer, but as we'll see in a moment, many gamers see this omission as an asset, not a limitation. Indeed, one key selling point of the game is that all the characters players encounter in *Oblivion* are in character, behaving (at least by design) in a manner appropriate to their context. The draw here is that of entering a fictional but fully convincing world—a sort of virtual Renaissance Fair.

Since *Morrowind*'s construction set proved popular among fans, it's not surprising that Bethesda released a similar tool for the Windows version of *Oblivion*, though the program is available as a free download rather than bundled with the program. Although still much less intuitive for novices than the editor included with *Neverwinter Nights*, hundreds of users have contributed mods. Again, most of them consist only of new items, but others alter the interface or graphics. While interesting and potentially useful, compared to the user-generated content available for *Neverwinter Nights*, these are slim pickings. However, the game hasn't been out for long, and we'll likely see much better content with time.

Is *Oblivion* good enough to warrant the praise of "best RPG ever made?" I think not. However, it is likely the best of the *Elder Scrolls* game, and I'll be interested to see just how far Bethesda can push this model, originated with *Arena*, which was itself derived from *Ultima Underworld*. There is obvious room for improvement, most notably in artificial intelligence, the most difficult of all programming feats. Although most critics and gamers spend far more time talking about *Oblivion*'s graphics, what's by far more impressive are the computer-controlled characters. Let's hope the next *Elder Scrolls* will present us with even more dynamic and believable people, people with the power to truly delight and disturb.

## Why the Consoles are Winning

As we've seen, the closer we get to modern times, the more Western CRPG developers focus their energies on consoles rather than computer platforms. There are three reasons for this shift that we ought to explain before moving on to JRPGs (Japanese role-playing games). The first is technological. During most of the 1980s and 1990s, consoles lagged far behind personal computers in terms of graphics, sound, memory, processor speed, input devices, and storage space. A CRPG developer would have to make serious compromises

to port a game for the Nintendo Entertainment System, and even the newer Super NES had its limitations. This fact began to change with the introduction of Sony's PlayStation and Microsoft's Xbox, and by the introduction of the next generation of these devices, the technological gap had narrowed to a point where only bleeding-edge PCs could substantially outperform consoles. Since such machines are exponentially more expensive (\$3,000–\$4,000) than either a console (\$350–\$500) or a typical, mid-range PC (\$1,000–\$1,500), they represent only a niche market. In short, it makes more sense for developers to target a platform such as the Xbox 360, which matches or exceeds the specs of mid-range PCs and represents a larger market for games. It also helps that the 360's internal technology is similar enough to the PC's to make porting much more economical than before.

The second explanation for the shift in development is cultural. Even though many Western CRPGs did find their way onto consoles in the 1990s, they weren't nearly as successful as the JRPGs that dominated that sector of the market, which had always been controlled (at least indirectly) by the Japanese. You'll remember from our discussion in Chapter 8 that JRPGs differ markedly from their Western counterparts, and console gamers had had plenty of time to develop strong expectations of what a role-playing game ought to be like. It certainly didn't help, either, that many Western RPGs for consoles were terrible to begin with, such as SSI's dreadful *Heroes of the Lance*. Compared to the latest *Zelda* or *Final Fantasy*, these offerings were laughable at best.

Microsoft's Xbox (released in 2001) and later Xbox 360 (2005) began to change this situation, offering a viable Western alternative to what had formerly been an overwhelmingly Japanese-dominated market. We still see this situation playing out today: whereas Microsoft's *Halo* series of first-person shooters have practically redefined console gaming in the West, the series is virtually unknown in Japan. Microsoft's game platforms have finally created an opportunity for Western CRPG developers to penetrate the American console market, as the popularity of *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Oblivion* so vividly demonstrate. Sony likewise played a role with its PlayStation platforms, whose 3D graphics abilities wooed game developers such as Core Design, whose *Tomb Raider* (1996) action adventure became one of the original PlayStation's biggest hits. Still, the PlayStation's RPG market was and remains dominated by Japanese games, particularly the *Final Fantasy* series.

The final explanation for the shift is social. Game consoles are no longer looked down upon as toys for children and young teens, a view that Nintendo encouraged throughout the 1980s and 1990s with a vigorous censor-

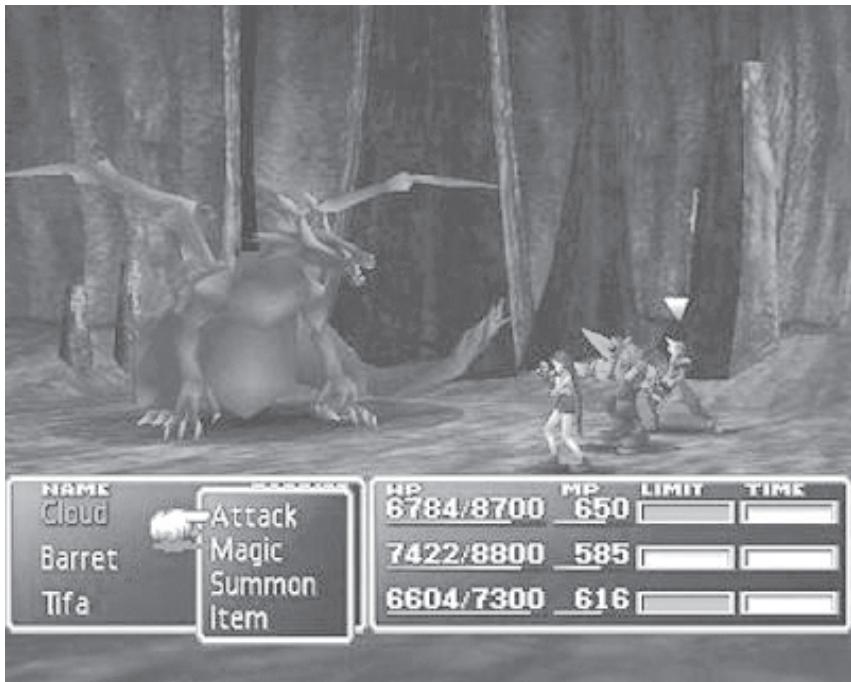
ship campaign. For many gamers, the move from console to computer gaming was literally a coming of age. This all began to change in the late 1990s and 2000s; Sony and Microsoft both took pains to disassociate themselves from the toy market, offering instead a vision of their consoles as a more generalized media device that an adult could own without shame. Instead of Mario and Sonic, we got Lara Croft and Master Chief, and few teens over the age of 12 ever looked back. Even Nintendo has made a mostly successful attempt to redefine its image with the Wii platform, marketing it not as a kid's toy but as a versatile entertainment device for the entire family.

If we wish to understand why so many Western CRPG developers are concentrating ever more intensely on the console market, we need to keep these technological, cultural, and social shifts in mind. But what are the long-term consequences for the genre? These depend very much on whether console gamers will be willing to accept less action and more contemplation, evolving away from the twitch heritage of the console and embracing the type of delayed but more satisfying rewards seen in so many classic CRPGs. If developers and publishers continued to insist that console RPGs must put action above all else, I'd fear the worst. However, as we'll see in a moment, modern console developers have not shied away from complexity.

But let's suspend this discussion for a moment to take a look at the world's most successful JRPG, *Final Fantasy*, whose reach has extended even to the PC market. We'll also catch up with Nintendo's *Zelda* series, which had continued to flourish and exert a powerful influence on American CRPG developers. There are, of course, dozens of other JRPGs we could mention—indeed, one could easily write an entire book on them. Still, limiting ourselves to just these venerated series should provide at least a partial overview of how this genre has evolved between 1997 and the present day.

## *Final Fantasy VII*

One of the best games in the *Final Fantasy* series is the seventh game, which debuted in North America in 1997 for the two-year old Sony PlayStation. The game quickly established itself as the RPG for the platform and remains one of the most celebrated entries in the franchise. It introduced innovations that became standard not only in later JRPGs but also several CRPGs and was one of the first major JRPGs to be ported to the Windows platform. The game also marked an important turning point for its developer, Square, who had decided to abandon its commitment to Nintendo, whose new console, the Nintendo 64, lacked CD-ROM technology, which Square saw (cor-



*Final Fantasy VII* is widely considered the best game in the franchise. Shown here is one of the many combat sequences.

rectly) as the future standard of the industry. In fact, the final release came on three CD-ROMs, making it easily the largest RPG ever released for a game console.

*Final Fantasy VII*, like most JRPGs, is a linear game with an intricate storyline and several prominent, well-developed characters, whose inner and outer struggles play out over the course of the game. It's often likened to an interactive movie, since the player ultimately has little to no control over how the plot unfolds. The settings are diverse but consist mostly of steampunk—robots and mutants live alongside humans and dragons. The player's character is Cloud Strife, an ex-soldier turned mercenary. Strife worked for an evil corporation named Shinra Electronic Power Company, whose patented Mako Energy turns out to be the very life force of the planet. It's up to Cloud and the AVALANCHE group to put a stop to Shinra before it's too late.

The player can have up to three characters in the party at one time, but there are nine that can be swapped in and out as the game progresses. Each

character has a unique personality, fighting style, and related animations. Some of the characters are secret and can only be discovered by particularly observant (or well-informed) gamers. It's even possible for Strife to date other characters, though this requires a high affection rating, which is determined by how the player conducts himself through the game. It's even possible to have a gay relationship.

Much was made of the game's lavish graphics, which feature full 3D modes and an agile and intuitive camera control. In overland mode, the camera can rotate 360 degrees around the party, and in battle mode offers rotation, zoom, and multiple viewing angles. The character and monster models are all 3D, though the backdrops are prerendered and exquisitely detailed. What's even more impressive, however, are the spectacular spell animations, some of which rival the cut scenes of lesser games—even though their length can make them feel repetitive after hours of gameplay.

Combat relies on the famous Active Time Battle (ATB) system we discussed in Chapter 8, which is a hybrid engine with both real-time and turn-based elements. The ATB system is expanded here with limit breaks, which build up as characters are struck in combat. When fully charged, the character can unleash a limit break attack, which does additional damage. Furthermore, the level break becomes more effective with use, though level four limit breaks require the player to first find a secret item.

The magic system resists easy summary, but is largely concerned with Materia, magical orbs that can be inserted into slots on the characters' arms and armor. At first, this system might seem similar to the slotted items in *Diablo II*, but it's actually far more sophisticated. First off, there are several types of Materia, and combining different types often leads to new and more powerful abilities. For instance, combining Restore and All Materia allows a character to cast a cure magic spell on the entire party, whereas Restore by itself will only heal one. The Materia also increases in potency, eventually becoming "mastered" and producing a new copy of itself. Materia can be traded among the characters, who instantly inherit whatever power was pumped into it by the former owner. Obviously, this is a complex system that takes time and patience to learn, a far cry from the simplistic gameplay associated with older console games.

Further separating *Final Fantasy VII* from the stereotypical console game is the abundance of expletives, which earned the game a "Teen" rating for sex and violence. Although many computer gamers may see the cute, cartoonish characters and think the game is meant for children, *Final Fantasy VII* is intended for more mature audiences. Indeed, this is a game where be-

loved characters are brutally murdered, and it's not hard to see the parallels between the game's storyline and contemporary social and political issues.

As if all this weren't enough to recommend the game, Square included seven minigames. Perhaps the most famous of these is the Chocobo, an animal that can be captured, trained, raced, and bred. The min-games are completely optional, yet taking the time to train and breed Chocobos can get the player into otherwise inaccessible areas of the game. The other minigames range from fighting on motorcycles to playing basketball.

Square's effort to convert the game to Windows resulted in a game of uneven quality. While the graphics and loading times were substantially improved, the music was reduced to humble MIDI output. Perhaps this wouldn't have been so disappointing in another game, but *Final Fantasy VII* sports fantastic music composed by the famous Nobuo Uematsu. Fans have made efforts to address the situation, releasing special sound fonts which can dramatically improve the music quality on some PCs.<sup>8</sup>

*Final Fantasy VII* has sold nearly 10 million copies and is widely considered one of the best JRPGs ever made. Although the Windows port's lack of quality sound was upsetting, it didn't stop countless PC owners from jumping on the *Final Fantasy* bandwagon.

## *Final Fantasy VIII*

The next game in the series was released in North America in September of 1999 for the Sony PlayStation and four months later for Windows. This time, the disparity between the PlayStation and Windows versions is even more noticeable, and not in a good way. While the PlayStation version received mostly positive reviews, the PC port fared much worse.

This game makes a number of substantial changes to both the aesthetics and gameplay. The most obvious change is more realistic characters; gone is the "super deformed" look that lent such a cartoonish feel to the earlier games. Most critics applauded this change, noting how it made the rich dramatic interactions among the characters much more convincing. The game also introduces some rather complex innovations to the combat engine: the draw, guardian force, and junction systems. The draw system changes the way magic works; instead of using mana points to cast spells, players "draw" spells from enemies and "draw points." The guardian force is a summoned creature, without which a character cannot cast spells or use items during battles. Once a

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.telusplanet.net/public/sturner/fantasy.htm>.



The eighth game in the series offered wonderful graphics on the PlayStation, but the PC port was much less gratifying.

character is “junctioned” or joined to a guardian force, several important options become available. Guardian forces have their own statistics and abilities and level up along with the character. In short, they’re an indispensable part of the gameplay.

In other ways, *Final Fantasy VIII* is a much simpler game than its predecessors. For instance, here the characters wear no armor and wield the same weapon throughout the game. However, the weapons can be upgraded by combining them with special items at junk shops. Apologists for the series contend that this system makes a great deal of sense—after all, in practice most of the arms and armor found in other CRPGs are really indistinguishable apart from their statistical value. This is painfully obvious in games that designate more powerful items only with integers (longsword +3, longsword +2). Others scoffed, seeing the lack of arms and armor merely as a way to dumb down the gameplay. The monsters in *Final Fantasy VIII* level up along with the player’s characters, gaining new skills and abilities. Fortunately for less skillful players, the characters will stay far ahead of the curve with their own abilities. Indeed, many critics complained that the game is too easy.

Besides the graphics, the best part of the game is (not surprisingly) the story and characters. The player steps into the shoes of Squall Leonhart, a young student in training to become a mercenary. Leonhart isn’t a very like-

able character and finds himself constantly in trouble with his classmates and instructors. Leonhart's real troubles begin, however, when he's pulled into an international conflict brought by the sorceress Edea. It's up to Leonhart and his companions to save the world. All of the characters are sharply drawn, and their dramatic interactions (including the much-talked about romantic involvements) drew much praise from critics.

Unfortunately, the story is constantly interrupted by wave after wave of random encounters, which are made almost unbearable by the lengthy animation sequences that play during battles. While these animations are stunning the first few times, incessant repetition (there's no way to turn them off or skip them) soon becomes hard to endure. Nevertheless, the game earned over 50 million dollars after only thirteen weeks on the shelves, setting a new record for the franchise.

While the PlayStation game is a masterpiece of design and engineering, the Windows port is a travesty. The graphics that looked so impressive on the television screen were uneven and flawed on the monitor, and again the soundtrack was ruined by faulty conversion. Even worse, the developer made little effort to adapt the interface to a keyboard and mouse setup, forcing PC users to wade through unnecessary menus and deal with an abysmal save game system.

## *Final Fantasy IX*

The ninth game in the series is often described as a love letter to fans, a rather sentimental and nostalgic game that reverts to the older graphics and class system of the earlier games. The setting is distinctly medieval, the characters a group of thievish thespians. The troupe kidnaps Princess Garnet but later joins her on a mission to find out why the queen of Alexandria has succumbed to evil. The plot is still quite linear, and the narrative requires switching from one party to another—a technique that is used to heighten the tension. As usual, Square takes pains to make the characters more than just collections of stats and abilities. They show a full range of emotions, responding convincingly to the many dramatic situations. That the characters are able to act so human despite their bizarre appearance (one is literally a rat!) is impressive, and few critics seem to resent the move back to the “super deformed” graphics.

The combat system has been revamped yet again, and the complicated guardian force, draw, and junction systems have been left out. The limit breaks are represented here as a “trance system,” and now the lengthy animations are greatly shortened after playing through once. Weapons and armor are back



*Final Fantasy IX* undid many of the changes to the combat system introduced in the previous game.

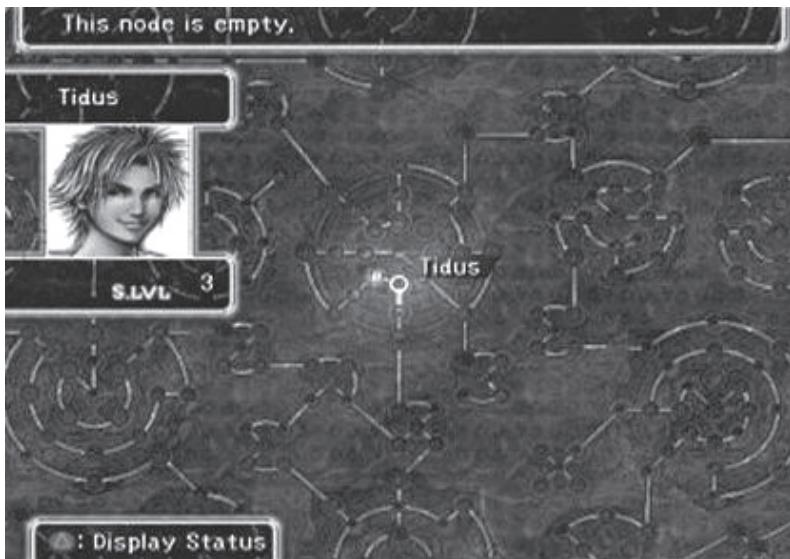
and now have a more intricate connection to the gameplay: equipping with new items lets the characters learn new abilities.

The ninth game again wowed critics, many of whom assigned it high scores and pinned on ribbons. It was the last of the series to be released on the original PlayStation and was never ported to Windows.

## *Final Fantasy X*

By now, it shouldn't come as a surprise that the next installment in the *Final Fantasy* franchise, *Final Fantasy X* (2001), was an instant success, drawing praise from critics and helping Sony sell a few million of its new *PlayStation 2* consoles. It's also not surprising that Square again tinkered with the formula. The changes here include a switch back to purely turn-based combat and a novel level up system. While the characters in the game are more anatomically correct than in the previous game, their fashions are as bizarre as anything ever dreamed up for a 1980s MTV video. Fortunately for Square, it would take far more than bad dress to turn off fans.

Besides the better graphics made possible by the new platform, the most noticeable enhancement was the addition of digital speech and voice acting. While the voice talent was adequate for the task, the lip-syncing routines



The tenth *Final Fantasy* features an unusual Sphere Grid leveling system.

weren't designed for English, and the result is reminiscent of a kung fu movie. The only real complaint critics had about the graphics was the movement of the characters, whose exaggerated body language failed to convincingly convey their emotions.

The game's main character is Tidus, an outlandishly dressed and somewhat cocky youth whose favorite pastime is blitzball. Tidus's troubles begin when his city, a futuristic place called Zanarkand, is invaded by monsters. Somehow, Tidus is transported to a different world and projected a millennium into the future. Tidus's civilization no longer exists, having been destroyed by a being named Sin. Tidus sets off with his new friend Yuna to destroy Sin.

The characters are again assigned to particular classes but now can be instantly switched into and out of the three-character party during battle. This feature is quite useful, since a character who does anything during a battle is given a full share of the experience (or action) points. This helps to balance the characters and keep a single trio from gaining far more power than the rest. Although the combat has become strictly turn-based, the popular limit breaks are back, though renamed the "over drive" system. Another change is that summoned monsters behave more like full-fledged characters and will stick around until they're killed.

Perhaps the most unlooked-for change was a complete revamping of the leveling system, which is now represented by a Sphere Grid. After a victory, the player receives sphere points, which allow the characters to move about the grid. The grid is composed of connected nodes, each of which offers some improvement (new skills, spells, extra hit points, and many more). Thus, characters literally advance in power as the game progresses.

The next game in the series is actually not a JRPG at all, but rather a MMORPG. We'll talk about it in a moment, after we conclude our coverage of other JRPG masterpieces.

## *Ocarina of Time*

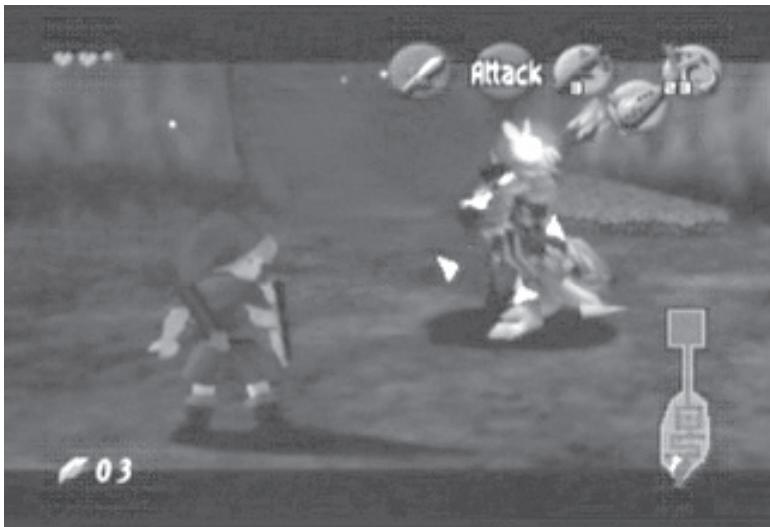
In 1998, Nintendo released what millions of *Zelda* fans consider the best game ever made: *Ocarina of Time*. First released for the Nintendo 64 and subsequently ported to Nintendo's later platforms, the fifth *Zelda* game is an undisputed masterpiece, the pinnacle of Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka's already distinguished careers. But is it a role-playing game?

To say that *Ocarina of Time* impressed critics is a laughable understatement. There were just 39 days left in 1998 when the game was released, yet it still sold 2.5 million copies to become the best-selling game of that year.<sup>9</sup> It received countless awards and earned the first perfect scores ever awarded by IGN and GameSpot, and the "Best Game of All Time" distinction by the long-running *Nintendo Power*. Countless well-informed critics share *Nintendo Power*'s opinion, and it routinely shows up near the top of the perennial "best ever" lists of games. When the game debuted, GameSpot's Jeff Gerstmann declared it to be "the masterpiece that people will still be talking about ten years down the road."<sup>10</sup> While this claim may have seemed bold at the time, it's now clear that Gerstmann should have doubled or even tripled that number.

Although critics praised the game's graphics and soundtrack, what really sets the game apart is its masterfully crafted gameplay. Although Nintendo had pioneered 3D action gaming with their earlier *Super Mario 64* game (1996), *Ocarina of Time* offered further refinements. The most important of these is "Z Targeting," which helps Link automatically lock onto a target, allowing for circular strafing and other advanced maneuvers. The game also makes intelligent use of the rumble pack, which vibrates the controller during certain events, such as when Link senses a hidden door. The player must also

<sup>9</sup> See <http://ign64.ign.com/articles/066/066340p1.html>.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.gamespot.com/n64/adventure/legendofzeldaoott/review.html>.



Nintendo's *Ocarina of Time* is considered by many critics to be one of the finest videogames ever produced.

solve hundreds of clever puzzles, some involving the titular ocarina (a flute-like instrument). Link's mission is to stop the evil Ganondorf from acquiring a powerful magical item (the Triforce), a quest that will take the young hero all across the huge world of Hyrule and even through time. It's a huge game, with an immense gameworld and tremendously varied gameplay.

But again we must ask the question: Is *Ocarina of Time* a role-playing game? Just as we saw in Chapter 8 in our discussion of the older *Zelda* games, this is a contentious question among CRPG and JRPG aficionados. Most professional critics label the game as an action-adventure, even though Link (the player's character) increases in power and gains new skills as the game progresses. As before, the story, setting, quest structure, and characters would all fit nicely into a conventional CRPG. Of course, the RPG elements are woefully simplistic even compared to *Diablo* and other action CRPGs, yet this is a difference in degree, not kind. Furthermore, even if Link doesn't gain levels in a numerical sense, there's no contention that he gains in stature (literally) and increases in prestige during the game. One thing that does seem clear about *Ocarina of Time* is that the bulk of what makes the game fun (e.g., the action sequences) would not translate well (if at all) to tabletop role-playing. But the same complaint could be made about *Diablo* and *Morrowind*. In

short, I see little reason to exclude *Ocarina of Time*, even though it does blur the boundaries between the action adventure and action RPG genres.

### *Majora's Mask*

The sixth game in the *Zelda* series is *Majora's Mask*, first released in October of 2000 for the Nintendo 64. Like *Ocarina of Time*, this game also sold millions of copies, scooped up awards, and dazzled most critics, who appreciated the darker, more sophisticated storyline. As before, a good deal of critical attention was lavished on the graphics, which were sharper and detailed. Indeed, the game requires a four megabyte Expansion Pak to run on the Nintendo 64.

The story picks up after the conclusion of *Ocarina of Time* and concerns Termina, a land that is about to be destroyed by a falling moon. Link must stop the moon as well as discover the identity of a mysterious thief, who has stolen his horse and cursed him. In a conceit reminiscent of the film *Groundhog Day*, Link uses time travel to continuously relive the last three days of Termina, desperately searching for a means of preventing the catastrophe. Many of the game's puzzles concern magical masks, including the one from which the game's name is derived. Three of the masks will allow Link to change his form, not only enabling access to new areas but bestowing new abilities.



*Majora's Mask* features several masks that allow Link to change his form.

Again, more of the gameplay is focused on action and puzzle solving than conventional role-playing. Still, it's possible for Link to upgrade his sword and shield. As usual, Link can increase his maximum hit points by finding Heart Containers.

### *The Wind Waker*

*The Wind Waker*, the tenth installment in the *Zelda* series, was released in 2000 for Nintendo's GameCube console. Like most of the *Zelda* games, *The Wind Waker* met with high praise from critics and won numerous awards, even though the gameplay hadn't evolved much from the previous two games. I won't go into detail about the game here, except to say that the cell-shaded graphics style now looks distinctly like a cartoon. Some gamers objected to the new style; others embraced it. There were also complaints about the large amount of dull sailing sequences. In any case, *The Wind Waker* is a must-have game for any fan of the series.

### *Twilight Princess*

*Twilight Princess*, released in 2006, is the first of the *Zelda* games for the Nintendo Wii, though it was initially designed for the older GameCube. The Wii version, not surprisingly, is distinguished mostly by its control scheme, which integrates the Wii's unusual Wii remote and Nunchuck devices. These controls are designed to offer more direct correspondences between the actions represented on the screen and those performed by the player. For instance, Link swings his sword when the player swings the Nunchuck. Although the scheme is imprecise, many critics find the experience intuitive and compelling. The RPG elements are extended by Link's ability to uncover hidden skills, or new sword fighting techniques. Still, with *Twilight Princess* we are far, far from the type of gameplay embodied in games such as *Neverwinter Nights* and *Oblivion*.

The game's story has Link (now a young man) out to save the Hyrule from the Twilight Realm, an alternate world that is slowly engulfing the land. When Link enters the Twilight Realm, he becomes a wolf and is joined by an imp named Midna who rides on his back and offers advice. There's a great deal for Link to do before he can save Hyrule.

This is the first game in the series to receive a "T" rating, bestowed by the ESRB for the animated violence. That Nintendo was willing to release a *Zelda* game with this rating may be a sign that the company realizes that many of the series' fans are no longer small children. It will no doubt be interesting



The latest *Zelda* is one of the most popular games available for Nintendo's GameCube and Wii.

to see what the next *Zelda* game looks like. With an older, more sophisticated audience at its disposal, perhaps we'll see more conventional RPG elements. On the other hand, perhaps *Twilight Princess* represents the opposite trajectory, towards more concrete rather than abstract role-playing.

What's a more fun way to simulate a sword fight: rolling some dice, clicking a button, or waving a Nunchuck? Of these options, the last seems to correspond best with actual swordplay, yet we could point out that although gun-style controllers have been around for some time, they haven't revolutionized the first-person shooter genre. In any case, many critics insist that part of the essence of a true CRPG or JRPG is the abstract nature of the combat and skill development. A player wins a CRPG or JRPG not with agility with a mouse or gamepad, but with facility with strategy and tactics. Furthermore, no matter what the initial skill and knowledge of the player, the player's characters should themselves start off fragile and inexperienced. A character in these games learns from experience, gaining new powers and strengths. The characters in most action adventures, conversely, are only as effective as the player's own finesse.

These are issues we've been struggling with throughout this book, and there's really no outside authority we can appeal to for resolution. My opinion is that it's the games that should define the genre, not the other way round. A fixed genre is a dead genre. If *Twilight Princess* is the future of fantasy role-

playing, insisting that it's actually something else won't make a damn bit of difference.

## The Rise of the MMORPG

Now, at last we reach the end of our discussion and what is quite possibly the end of the era: the rise to dominance of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game, or MMORPG for short. This long and ungainly acronym is a good indication of just how unsettled we'll find this bold new frontier—there hasn't even been time to come up with a decent name for it.

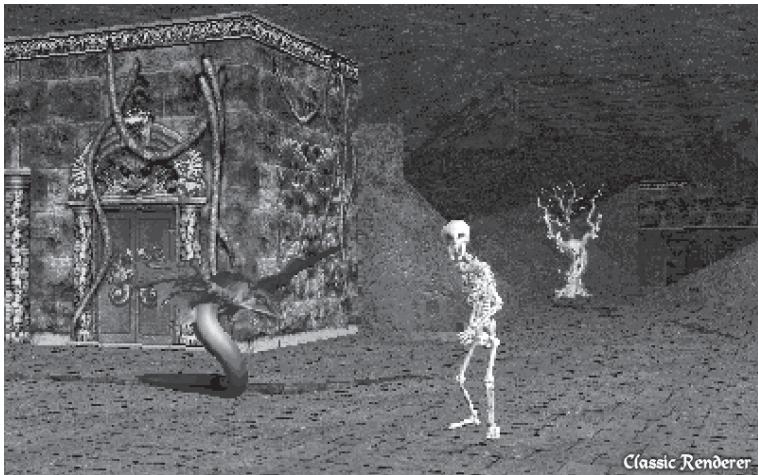
We saw the roots of MMORPGs in Chapter 3, when we discussed PLATO, MUDs, and MOOs. These early games were also multiplayer, allowing dozens to hundreds of players to coexist in coherent and persistent gameworlds. Each time players revisit a MUD, they find that time has passed there. Life has gone on without them, and many important events may have occurred in their absence. Furthermore, their own activities can have a real and lasting effect on the gameworld. If they build a new dungeon, for instance, it'll still be there when they get back—assuming it hasn't been destroyed or deleted. Although most of these early games offered only text or character-based graphics (ASCII or ANSI), others were more ambitious, particularly the games developed for PLATO. In Chapter 7 we talked about the first *Neverwinter Nights*, an early multiplayer CRPG based on SSI's "Gold Box" engine. This game ran on America Online, which at first charged by the hour but then shifted to a flat rate.

For most gamers in the days before the Internet and the web, online gaming was prohibitively expensive. Besides the fees charged by the private, commercial networks, they might also pay substantial long-distance charges. Relatively few gamers in the early 1990s even had modems; all of their games were bought at the store and played at home, usually by themselves. This situation began to change in 1993 with the introduction of the *Mosaic* web browser. It's difficult to exaggerate the impact this single program had on the computer and communications industry. Suddenly, it was easier than ever to access a vastly expanding network of free multimedia content and nearly as easy to build one's own websites. As the web grew from a motley collection of government and academic publications to a million- and then a billion-dollar bazaar, the general public finally had a compelling reason to get connected. The commercial networks faded into insignificance, and the age of the Internet began.

The Internet allowed game developers to offer cheap and even free multiplayer options. In Chapter 10 we encountered *Diablo*, a game that established the action CRPG but also revolutionized online gaming with its free multiplayer. For uncounted legions of gamers, Blizzard's Battle.net server was their first taste of online gaming, and they were instantly hooked. Throughout the latter half of 1990s and early 2000s, almost every major CRPG featured a multiplayer mode, though the quality of these experiences varied widely from game to game. Some were obviously tacked on at the last moment merely for the sake of an extra bullet point on the box. Even in the case of *Diablo*, multiplayer gameplay wasn't the sole concern of the developers, and I suspect that many gamers were quite content with the single-player campaign. There was another breed of online RPG, though, a new type of game designed exclusively for play on the Internet, and it's to this type we turn now.

### *Meridian 59*

Although not the first such game, 3DO's *Meridian 59* is usually credited as the first modern MMORPG. Most critics prefer to limit the term "MMORPG" strictly to Internet-based games, which disqualifies the earlier online multiplayer games designed for commercial networks. They also tend to exclude text-based or character-set games, such as MUDs and MOOs, as well



*Meridian 59* was the first MMORPG, at least as we think of them today. The game has subsequently undergone a graphical overhaul.

as *Diablo*, *Neverwinter Nights*, and other games for which online multiplayer is an option, not a requirement. The last requirement is that the game needs to have a massive gameworld, capable of supporting thousands or even hundreds of thousands of concurrent users. *Meridian 59*, released commercially in September 1996, is probably the first game to meet all of these criteria, even though its box declared it the “first-ever internet-based 3D MUD” and it was limited to 250 concurrent players.

The game was developed by a small, unassuming company named Archetype Interactive. Graphically, it resembled *DOOM*, id’s ubiquitous first-person shooter. Though critics considered the graphics and audio were dated, they acknowledged that the appeal of these games depends more on the caliber of the community than the eye candy. *Meridian 59* offers a standard high fantasy setting and an emphasis on monster bashing, and players are limited to human characters—though they can choose among three political factions, each with their own bonuses, as well as player-created guilds. Players were charged a \$10 flat fee per month.

3DO shut down the game on August 31 of 2000, but it was bought and re-released two years later by Near Death Studios, a company cofounded by *Meridian 59* developers. The company has subsequently enhanced the graphics and made other improvements to the gameplay.<sup>11</sup>

## *The Realm*

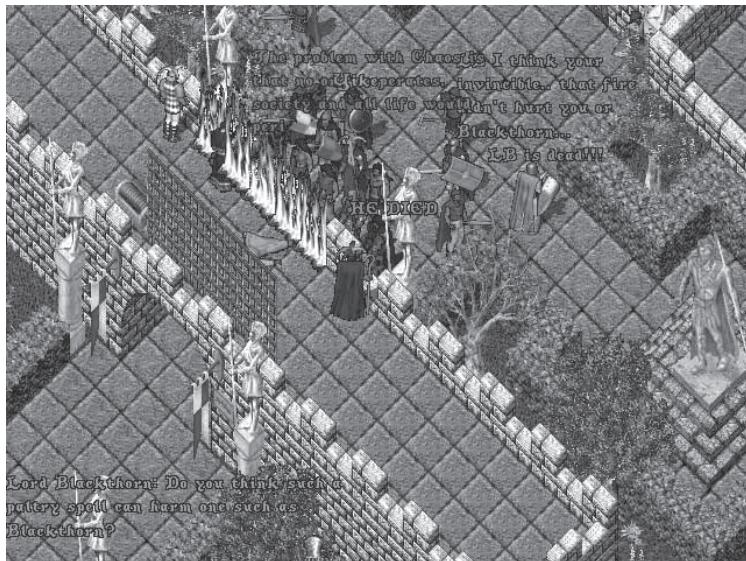
Another early and rather obscure MMORPG is Sierra’s *The Realm*, a game released in May 1997. Unlike *Meridian 59*, *The Realm* is a 2D, side-scrolling game, with graphics reminiscent of Sierra’s many point-and-click adventure games (*King’s Quest*). It offers turn-based combat, four classes, and skills for each. While quite simplistic compared to other MMORPGs, it’s quite accessible even to very young players. The game is now operated by Norseman Games and is still playable today.<sup>12</sup>

## *Ultima Online*

The MMORPG that really got the genre off the ground is *Ultima Online*, launched in September 1997. Unlike *Meridian 59* and *The Realm*, this game offers 3D isometric graphics in third-person perspective. It’s also more so-

<sup>11</sup> See <http://meridian59.neardeathstudios.com/>.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.realmserver.com/index.php>.



This screenshot shows the famous “assassination” of Lord British, a supposedly invulnerable character who was killed during a beta test.

phisticated, set in the well-known setting of *Ultima*'s Britannia. The game proved enormously successful for Origin and Electronic Arts and was the first such game to have 100,000 subscribers. It's safe to say that it's the game that established most of the conventions of the genre.

*Ultima Online* seems to have borrowed much from *Ultima VII: The Black Gate*, particularly regarding the high level of world interaction. There are plenty of opportunities for players to do more than just find monsters to kill; they can easily spend their time peacefully gathering up and processing resources and contributing to the game's highly developed economy. As one contemporary critic put it, “You can really live out the life of a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker.”<sup>13</sup>

As the publishers of the first truly successful MMORPG, the game's developers soon found themselves dealing with all sorts of unexpected problems—even catastrophes. First of all, the high frequency of users caused terrible lag on the game's servers, or intermittent interruptions in the information flowing between the server and the players' computers. These could have di-

<sup>13</sup> See Desslock's review of the game at <http://www.gamespot.com/pc/rpg/ultima-online/review.html>.

sastrous consequences, particularly during combat sequences. Another problem was that the chat system placed the dialog directly above the characters' heads rather than in a separate window. This frequently resulted in one set of text overlapping another, rendering both unreadable. The leveling process was also quite slow and tedious, designed to keep players from getting too powerful too quickly (and, of course, to keep them renewing those monthly subscriptions).

Other problems were more social in nature. At first the game suffered from mobs of anarchic "pkillers," homicidal maniacs and marauders who roamed the world, preying on the weak. The pkillers were paying customers who were apparently getting their money's worth out of the game, but their behavior was annoying (to say the least) to new players, and Origin feared it might lead to declining populations. They experimented with different means of handling the problem but eventually settled on a bounty system. If players engaged in notorious behavior, they would automatically receive bounty on their heads, and all other players would be free to murder them with impunity. The system seemed to work well enough, though sometimes players accidentally committed a notorious act and were unfairly persecuted by zealous players.

Of course, for an MMORPG to be any fun, the player has to like the other players. To that end, Origin tried hard to introduce novices to proper



*Ultima Online* has evolved over the years. This official screenshot shows the *Kingdom Reborn* client introduced in 2007.

etiquette and encourage them to get into the role-playing aspect of the game. I'll quote a bit from the *Ultima Online Renaissance* manual to show what I mean: "Don't name a character something foolish. People who see a character named 'Chucky D' are less likely to help that character or even associate with them." A little later: "Use proper greetings. While 'Sup' may be completely appropriate among your friends in the game, when speaking to strangers a nice 'Hello' or even a 'Hail' will go a long way to improving the opinion others have of you." I can't help but chuckle at these admonitions, and I doubt ol' Chucky D would bother to read a manual in the first place. Still, they do provide insight into the kind of experience Origin wanted to offer players: an online Renaissance Fair.

Although *Ultima Online* was not without its problems, it has remained in a constant state of development, and many of the worst issues have long since been addressed. Dozens of expansions were offered between 1998 and 2007, which introduced new areas to explore, classes, quests, and loads of new weapons and magical items. In June 2007, *Kingdom Reborn* was introduced, a new client with better graphics and enhanced interface.

## *EverQuest*

Even more successful than *Ultima Underworld* was *EverQuest*, developed by Verant Interactive and published by 989 Studios in March 1999 (later editions were published by Sony Online Entertainment). Indeed, it was the first MMORPG to really catch the mainstream media's attention, which was fascinated by the game's addictive power and economic impact (which included players' selling their characters and equipment for real money on eBay). The game soon earned the nicknames "EverCrack" and "NeverRest," and, like the old *Dungeons & Dragons* game, was blamed for corrupting the youth, breaking up marriages, and even causing suicides. Nevertheless, the game won many awards and impressed critics, several of whom admitted to being addicted to the game themselves.

Part of *EverQuest*'s appeal was its superb graphics, which required a 3D accelerator. The gameworld had a day/night cycle and weather effects, and the spell animations drew praise from critics. The game's servers averaged some 24,000 concurrent players, yet was mostly lag free—a huge advantage over *Ultima Online*. While *EverQuest*'s gameworld (Narrath) wasn't as fully interactive as that game's, it did offer five continents and some 400 zones to explore.

Another aspect that distinguished *EverQuest* is a strong emphasis on cooperative rather than PvP (player versus player) gameplay. In fact, the code



This screenshot is from the 1999 version of *EverQuest*.

simply didn't allow players to attack each other except under very special (and mutual) conditions. Instead, players were encouraged to join together in groups (up to six players) and "raids" (50 to 200 players), working together to overcome otherwise unbeatable foes. The strategy paid off, and soon players were collaborating as never before, forming guilds and even coining their own argot ("buffs" for spell enhancements or "twinkling" for taking advantage of a flaw in the game's code). By far, the most fun aspect of any MMORPG is meeting new friends and adventuring together; this is exactly what made the original *Dungeons & Dragons* so successful in the first place.

In February 2003, Sony released *EverQuest Online Adventures*, which introduced the game to PlayStation 2 owners. Though it wasn't the first online multiplayer game for consoles, it was the first true MMORPG—unlike, say, *Phantasy Star Online*, there are no options here for playing the game offline. Why had it taken so long for game developers to introduce the MMORPG to the bursting console market? The reason is rather mundane: these games derive much of their appeal from social interaction, particularly in the form of chatting, and that's hard to do without a keyboard. Sony got around this



This official screenshot shows the *Gates of Discord* expansion.

problem in two ways, first by ensuring that all other operations could be handled easily with the standard game controller, and secondly by encouraging console owners to spring for a USB keyboard (which, by 2003, was quite easy to come by). The new game also made some tweaks to the gameplay, such as a much lighter penalty for allowing a character to die. Formerly, a dead character would simply lose experience points and even levels, negating hours of hard work. The new system used a debt system, which would let the player keep the benefits of his or her current level but have to gain more experience than usual to reach the next.

*EverQuest* reigned supreme for many years, topped only by the Korean game *Lineage* in terms of subscribers. The developers have released fourteen expansions, each of which must be purchased separately (in addition to the monthly fee). In November 2004, Sony published *EverQuest II*, which offers updated 3D graphics and lots of new gameplay abilities. Players can now ride horses, sail ships, and own real estate, but player versus player combat is no longer allowed. Though *EverQuest*'s popularity has waned in recent years, it's still in operation today.<sup>14</sup>

### *Phantasy Star Online*

*Phantasy Star Online* is the heir to Sega's flagship JRPG series *Phantasy Star*, which we discussed in Chapter 8. The original games had practically defined role-playing on the Sega Master System and Genesis, but *Phantasy Star On-*

<sup>14</sup> See <http://everquest.station.sony.com/>.

*line*, released in January 2001, was too little, too late. Sega announced that very month that they were discontinuing the Dreamcast, whose sales had dropped sharply after Sony introduced its PlayStation 2. Fortunately for *Phantasy Star* fans, this did not end the series—later episodes were released for Nintendo's GameCube and Microsoft's Xbox, and eventually it was even available for Windows. The latest entry in the series, *Phantasy Star Universe*, was published in August 2006 for PlayStation 2, Xbox 360, and Windows.

MMORPG aficionados are quick to point out that *Phantasy Star Online* is not a true MMORPG, since it can be played off-line. This puts it in the same category as games such as *Diablo*, which treat online multiplayer as an option, not a requirement. Indeed, the game is often referred to as a “*Diablo* clone in space.” This *Diablo* comparison seems a bit hasty, since *Phantasy Star Online* is obviously designed for online play; the single-player mode is simply a stop-gap measure for players lacking access to the Internet. In any case, the servers allow up to only 1,000 concurrent players, a quite humble number given the tens of thousands available in other online games.

As with most games of its type, *Phantasy Star Online* encourages players to work together, this time in teams of four. One obvious question is how players interact with each other without a keyboard, and the developers (Sonic Team) came up with an interesting solution. Firstly, there are several preset dialog strings to choose from; the advantage here is that the dialog is automatically translated into English, French, German, Spanish, and Japanese—an important and useful feature. There is also a symbol chat system that uses mostly universal symbols to help players understand one another, such as hearts and smiley faces. Probably the best option, though, was to spring for a Dreamcast keyboard, even though there's no automatic translation of user-entered text.

Another often touted feature is the MAG, a type of pet that tags along with the character. The MAG can be fed items to increase its power and abilities, and ends up becoming a very valuable asset. For many *Phantasy Star Online* players, taking care of their MAG was one of the highlights of the game.

The game features a 3D engine set in third-person perspective. While the graphics and audio are certainly commendable, many gamers found the camera control awkward and frustrating. The game lacks the handy Z-targeting system of the later *Zelda* games, and a glitch makes it easy for the player's character to end up with his back turned to the enemy. Another problem was lack of broadband support: broadband play was possible, but only after a great deal of trouble. Fortunately, even with the Dreamcast's built-in 56 K modem, lag was barely noticeable. The Sonic Team developed *Phantasy Star*



*Phantasy Star Universe* met with condemnation from critics, who bemoaned its lack of innovation.

Online Version 2 in September 2001, just a month before the Dreamcast went out of production.

The first non-Dreamcast version was *Phantasy Star Online Episode I & II*, released for the GameCube in October 2002 and the Xbox in April 2003. It's an interesting game for several reasons. First, up to four players can play on a single GameCube using a split screen reminiscent of the much earlier *Hired Guns*. The graphics were improved and the interface tweaked, but there are more similarities than differences between this and the earlier game. Unfortunately for GameCube owners, acquiring a keyboard for their console wasn't nearly as cheap and easy as it had been for the Dreamcast. The Xbox version was superior in this regard.

*Phantasy Star Universe*, released in August 2006, continues the tradition of offering both online and offline gameplay, and there's now more support for squad-based multiplayer action. So far, it has not been a big hit with critics, one of whom called it "one of the biggest disappointments in years."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See <http://ps2.gamespy.com/playstation-2/phantasy-star-universe/746414p1.html>.

The problem was that Sonic Team and Total Entertainment Software simply hadn't done enough to distinguish the game from its older incarnations.

## *Asheron's Call*

By the time Microsoft published Turbine Entertainment's *Asheron's Call* in November 1999, the MMORPG had been around long enough for the novelty to wear off. Turbine knew it need to compete with the incredibly popular *EverQuest* and attempted to do so with a suite of intriguing innovations and a self-conscious desire to be different. The end result was something of a mixed bag, and most critics concluded that the innovations, while intriguing in concept, didn't live up to their expectations.

Firstly, Turbine distinguished its gameworld by refusing to draw (at least directly) on existing fantasy models, which continue to be dominated by the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and the original *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop game. Elves were out; Olthoi (cat-creatures) and Sclavus (reptilians) were in. The race and class systems had also been revamped. As with *Ultima Online*, all characters would be human, though they could choose one of three heritage groups (Aluvian, Sho, and Gharu'ndim). However, the choice of heritage affected little besides a character's starting location. Other innovations concern experience points and combat. Character development is based on a flexible skills-system, which avoids the rigid specializations of other games, such as wizards who cannot wear armor. Combat is slightly more sophisticated than



*Asheron's Call* tried to avoid being just another fantasy MMORPG but didn't quite succeed.

in other MMORPGs; in this game, the player controls the speed and height of the attack. Unfortunately, at least in early versions, combat was mired by occasional stutters, freezing the character in place for a few moments. The magic system relies on an interesting inflation system, where any particular spell loses its effectiveness as more and more people cast it. This system encourages a constant search for new spells, as well as a desire not to share them with the rest of the magic-using population.

Perhaps the most startling innovation is the allegiance system, which is more or less a pyramid scheme for experience points. The idea here is that new players will swear fealty to a more powerful character, becoming his or her vassal. A lord receives experience point bonuses from these vassals but has an incentive to reciprocate, since more powerful vassals grant better bonuses. Eventually the vassals will recruit their own vassals, putting the original lord in an even more enviable position. Fortunately, players could opt out of the system at any time, escaping the service of abusive lords. At its best, though, this system encouraged experienced players to help out novices.

A final very promising aspect of *Asheran's Call* was the regular addition of new, free content on a monthly basis. These expansions wouldn't be limited to new items and the like, but would actually constitute a narrative that would be determined by the players' own actions. In other words, the players themselves would have a direct impact on the narrative as it evolved, much like what happens during most tabletop RPG campaigns.

Turbine developed a sequel, *Asheran's Call 2: Fallen Kings*, which was published by Microsoft in November 2002. This game offers a newer graphics engine and combat system. Now, players can choose to be one of three different races, and the skill system has been reworked into the familiar branching tree system we saw in *Diablo II*. The combat system now has a critical hit system, which gives characters the chance to deal extra damage at random intervals. Still, most critics wrote lukewarm reviews, and neither *Asheran's Call* nor its sequel has been able to rise above the competition.

*Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, and *Asheran's Call* are usually referred to as the "Big Three" MMORPGs of the early era. Later MMORPG developers would study their successes and failures very closely, building on what worked and striving to find ways to improve on their models.

## *Anarchy Online*

FunCom's *Anarchy Online* was the first sci-fi themed MMORPG on the market and had much to offer any gamer fed up with *EverQuest* and *Ultima On-*



FunCom's *Anarchy Online* was the first sci-fi MMORPG.

line. Unfortunately, its launch in June 2001 was horribly bungled, and gamers were soon flooding online message boards with complaints about the insecure registration procedure, faulty copy protection, and a myriad of game-crashing bugs. These grave problems were enough to turn most gamers away, and the game has never recovered from the initial burst of highly negative publicity.

Those willing to endure these problems (most of which were resolved in patches and later releases) were treated to an original and highly detailed campaign setting, based, apparently, on the works of Frank Herbert (*Dune*) and William Gibson (*Neuromancer*). The game is set on a remote mining colony called Rubi-Ka, the only known source of the mysterious "notum," a mineral that plays an indispensable role in nanotechnology. Notum, like the "spice" in Herbert's novels, is so powerful that its effects seem like magic, providing a suitable justification for spell-like abilities in an otherwise realistic setting.

The gameworld is dominated by two main factions—the Omni-Tek corporation and the rebel Clans, who object to Omni-Tek's shoddy treatment of workers. The player can choose among four breeds, or races, and fourteen professions, each with a set of skills to learn.

*Anarchy Online's* expansions have greatly expanded the gameplay of the core engine. The first of these, 2001's *Notum Wars*, added control towers and ground-based vehicles. The *Shadowlands* expansion, released in September 2003, added a perk system, which is comparable to the perks we saw in the *Fallout* games. However, in this game perks can be removed and new ones selected, a useful feature if players find they have made a bad choice. *Lost Eden*, the latest expansion, offers a new research system, which allows play-

ers to channel some of their experience points into uncovering new skills and upgrades. This fascinating system is broken into two types, Personal and Global. Personal research only unlocks special abilities for the character, whereas global is a faction-wide project to unlock or upgrade vehicles. All in all, *Anarchy Online* is a surprisingly ambitious and original game with much to offer sci-fi fans.

### *Dark Age of Camelot*

On October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Abandon Entertainment and Vivendi Universal launched Mythic's *Dark Age of Camelot*, a Windows MMORPG set in the days just after the death of the legendary King Arthur. "Dark Age of Camelot surpasses any such game to date and promises to remain the finest in its class for a long time," wrote Greg Kasavin of *GameSpot*. Yet despite such glowing reviews from critics and some promising innovations, *Dark Age of Camelot* was never able to rise above the competition.

The game is broken into three competing realms, each based on a mythology: Albion (Arthurian), Midgard (Norse), and Hibernia (Celtic). Players can either spend time in these realms, or venture into frontiers where players from different realms can battle each other. These realms also serve to differentiate character abilities. Celts, for instance, excel at magic, whereas heroes from Midgard excel at melee combat.

The game also offers interesting trade skills, such as the ability to build siege weapons (catapults and ballistae). Players uninterested in combat can



*Dark Age of Camelot* offers many ways to alter a character's appearance.

focus on developing these skills, playing the game as merchants or other professions. Items eventually decay and must be repaired and eventually replaced—a sensible, if perhaps annoying, technique to counter item inflation. The game also has techniques for discouraging camping, or hanging out in areas where monsters respawn after being defeated. Some players will camp out in these spots, defeating the same monster over and over to lazily build up experience points—and preventing other players from testing their mettle against the beast. *Dark Age of Camelot*'s answer to this problem is to give players additional experience if they fight a variety of monsters.

Critics were impressed that *Dark Age of Camelot* was so stable and bug-free when it was released. Other games, as we've seen, suffered substantially from growing pains, irritating gamers with lag and a host of other problems. So why didn't it triumph over *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*?

Although there are likely many possible explanations, the one I favor is social. Players who had invested months (or even years!) of their lives in the older games simply didn't want to start all over in a new game. Many had built up extensive social networks, and, as we saw with MUDs, there's a point in all these games at which chatting with one's friends is more important than monster bashing. *Dark Age of Camelot* did offer some important innovations that would be incorporated into other MMORPGs, but it simply wasn't worth leaving one's friends behind.

## *Final Fantasy XI Online*

As we noted above and in previous chapters, the *Final Fantasy* JRPGs are really in a class of their own, practically defining console gaming in North America. Critics hailed every game in the series as a masterpiece, giving them incredible scores and recommending them without qualification. Needless to say, when Square Enix announced they were developing a MMORPG based on the franchise, critics and gamers took notice. Would *Final Fantasy XI Online* revolutionize MMORPGs the way the older games had JRPGs? Not really.

The game was first released in Japan in May 2002. It wasn't until October of 2003 that the highly anticipated game finally made it across the Pacific, first for Windows (October 2003), then for the PlayStation 2 (March 2004) and Xbox 360 (April 2006). That the game was released first in Japan proved a boon for American gamers, since enough time had passed for most of the growing pains to have been remedied, though critics complained about the lengthy and demanding install procedure.



*Final Fantasy XI* has some incredible graphics, but the beloved franchise hasn't made a smooth transition to the MMORPG format.

Naturally, the game is set in real-time, and combat is (at least at first) little different than that of rival games, consisting of clicking on an enemy and standing by as the two exchange blows. Thankfully, combat gets more interesting later on, as the player's character learns special moves, which can be performed whenever the tactical-point meter charges up. One nice innovation here is a claim system that inhibits other players from rushing in right before a kill and either finishing the creature off (thus reaping the experience points) or making off with the loot before the player can respond. In *Final Fantasy XI*, a monster is claimed by the character who initiates combat, and only others in the player's own party or alliance can join the battle. Originally, the game offered no mechanism for player versus player combat, though expansions included a conflict system.

The bulk of the gameplay concerns an ongoing conflict among the three nations of Vana'diel, who wrestle with each other for dominance. Players must select a home nation, from which they will receive missions. There are five available races and some eighteen jobs, though not all are available to new players. As we might expect from any game bearing the *Final Fantasy* label, there are several high-quality minigames, such as fishing, gardening, clamming, and digging with the ever-popular Chocobos. There's also a mechanism for combining items, using elemental crystals to synthesize new equipment.

*Final Fantasy XI* grew quickly after its release, eventually surpassing *EverQuest* in January 2004. The game's population now seems to be in decline,

though it (along with every other MMORPG) has been dwarfed by *World of Warcraft*.<sup>16</sup> It's a bit unclear why the game hasn't fared somewhat better, especially given the overwhelmingly positive reputation enjoyed by the franchise. However, as we saw earlier in this chapter, much of the earlier games' appeal was based on the storylines and richly developed characters. The relatively open-ended, sandbox style play of the online incarnation simply doesn't have much to offer gamers accustomed to more sophisticated online games.

## *Eve Online*

Although *Anarchy Online* was the first MMORPG out the gate with a sci-fi setting, its gameplay was not radically different than the competition. *Eve Online*, developed by the Icelandic company CCP Games, takes up the slack, offering gamers an experience more comparable to a space sim (*Starflight*, *Elite*, and *Privateer*). Space sims are typically open-ended games that put players behind the controls of starships, which they can use to transport goods, mine asteroids, and battle other ships for loot or bounties. It's a concept that worked well in single-player games, but it's not hard to see how superbly it recommends itself to the MMORPG format, where the galaxy could be populated by other human beings rather than by computer-controlled, algorithmically-generated ships and planets.

*Eve Online* debuted on May 6, 2003, but initial reactions were mixed. Like many new MMORPGs, it suffered from a series of mild to serious bugs and server issues. Critics complained about poor customer service as well, and most gave the game only lukewarm reviews. However, one of the main advantages of an online game is that the developers can continuously address bugs, releasing patches and updates quickly and effectively. Still, this initial wave of bad press certainly didn't help this ambitious space MMORPG lift off.

*Eve Online* is a unique MMORPG for several reasons. Most importantly, although the player creates and works to improve a character, these characters never leave their spaceships. Instead, the bulk of the gameplay consists of piloting these vessels and navigating menus. Nevertheless, the characters can develop a large number of skills useful in the many trades, which include mining, piracy, security, soldiering, and even corporate management. Another big difference here is that the servers are not broken up into shards. Most MMORPGs don't have all the players populating the same persistent

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.mmogchart.com> and <http://mmogdata.voig.com> for data about trends in MMORPGs.



*Eve Online* finally brought the space sim to the MMORPG.

universe; instead, players are distributed among several clones, each running on its own servers. *Eve Online*, however, bucks this trend, with a single shared universe. This is quite a feat, and the company boasts that it's only possible because their servers are the most advanced in the world. A final innovation here concerns how experience points are handled. Rather than dole out these points as rewards for actions, they are earned over time, even if the player doesn't bother to log in for a while. This system tends to lend a powerful advantage to those gamers who've played the game the longest, though a system of diminishing returns ensures that these gains are kept in check (characters gain fewer and fewer points as they reach higher levels).

The premise of *Eve Online* is that humanity has long ago consumed all of Earth's resources and has spread out to colonize the rest of the Milky Way. Even with the entire galaxy at their disposal, humans eventually discovered themselves running out of resources yet again. Thankfully, a stable wormhole allowed the desperate humans to flee to an unknown sector of space, where there were many more solar systems (some inhabited) to exploit. Unfortunately, though, the wormhole collapsed behind them, leaving those who had fled to the other side to their own devices. These exiles eventually formed five empires. One is reminded here, of course, of *Deep Space Nine*, though such tales are common enough in science fiction. Indeed, we noticed a similar contrivance in Omnitrend's *Universe*, a 1983 game we discussed in Chapter 5.

Combat in *Eve Online* is mostly uninspired, consisting merely of swapping blows with an attacking ship until one or the other is destroyed. Success

very much depends on the quality of one's weaponry and defenses, but gamers should not expect the adrenaline-soaked space combat of the best single-player space sims. The game is open to player versus player combat, with a bounty system in place to reduce abuses (players can receive handsome rewards for tracking down the most vicious pirates and outlaws).

In February 2007, news leaked that some of *Eve Online*'s developers were themselves engaged in questionable behavior, abusing their powers with an in-game spy network. While such a network is arguably necessary to ensure that players aren't breaking service agreements, these developers were using it to access confidential account information. To put it simply, they were cheating their own system and violating their own service agreements.<sup>17</sup> The incident hurt CCP's credibility, but the subscriber base seems to be holding steady at around 125,000 users.

## *Star Wars Galaxies*

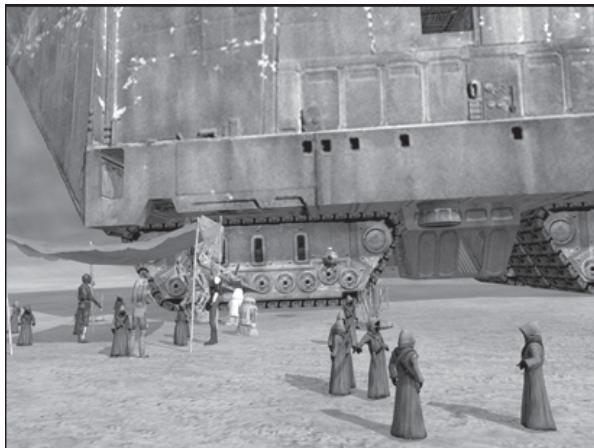
In June 25, 2003, LucasArts released *Star Wars Galaxies*, a MMORPG developed by Sony Online Entertainment (publishers of *EverQuest*). Given the success of BioWare's *Knights of the Old Republic* series, as well as terrific name recognition of LucasArts' most famous franchise, *Star Wars Galaxies* was one of the most highly anticipated MMORPGs ever produced. Unfortunately, the game has failed to live up to most gamers' expectations and has not attracted the massive audiences of its competitors.

Many of the game's most promising features turned out to be much less satisfying than gamers had hoped. The biggest disappointment concerned noncombat character professions, which allowed players to build everything from dancers to shopkeepers. However, critics complained about the boring and repetitive gameplay necessary to gain experience and hone skills. Furthermore the massive gameworld had a desolate, unfinished feel. Finally, like most other MMORPGs, the initial release suffered from serious bugs and server problems, and critics bemoaned the poor customer service. It wasn't a very promising beginning.

Perhaps the best part of the game was the fine combat animations, which made battles much more visually exciting than the repetitive sequences in other games. Players can sign up with either the Rebel Alliance or the evil

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<sup>17</sup> For details, see Joe Blancato's "Jumpgate: EVE's Devs and the Friends They Keep" at <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/editorials/op-ed/847-Jumpgate-EVE-s-Devs-and-the-Friends-They-Keep>.



*Star Wars Galaxies* had terrific potential but suffered a lukewarm critical reception and a highly controversial combat upgrade patch.

Empire, and well-known characters from the movies (Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader) make appearances in the game. On a side note, players are not allowed to name their characters after those in the movies.

Sony Online released several patches and updates, some of which were highly controversial. One of the best new features introduced in *Jump to Light Speed* (October 2004) was new space vehicles that enabled players to fight real-time battles in space. Later expansions incorporated multipassenger ground vehicles, an addition that delighted most players. However, other changes were much less welcome. The most infamous of these is the Combat Upgrade Patch, which was designed to deal with the many balancing issues that had allowed players to build characters who were far too powerful. However, for many players, the patch literally erased weeks if not months of tedious work leveling their characters up, and some quit the game in protest. Fortunately for LucasArts, new players seem much less bothered by the changes, which really do help balance the gameplay.

LucasArts has continued to release expansions and compilations. The latest is *Star Wars Galaxies: The Complete Online Adventures*, released in November 2006. This compilation contains all three releases and a bonus DVD. However, the subscriber base has been declining sharply since February of 2005, when it held 295,000 subscribers, and has sunk to a miserable 49,000 in recent months.

## *City of Heroes*

Cryptic Studios' *City of Heroes*, launched on April 28, 2004, is a fairly straightforward (though unacknowledged) effort to bring the gameplay of the older *Freedom Force* games to MMORPG. Again we have classic comic book aesthetics and characters, but there are other aspects that distinguish the game from the competition.

Perhaps most importantly, *City of Heroes* is deliberately intended to be simpler and more accessible than other offerings. The gameplay here consists almost entirely on completing missions and engaging in battle after battle, with none of the trade skills possibilities seen in other games. The game also lacks an inventory system and thus a need for loot, though victories still yield rewards in the form of experience points and influence, which can be traded for enhancements and inspirations, or temporary enhancements ("buffs").

Perhaps the game's main appeal is the entertaining character creation process, which is flexible enough to allow players to create characters that look virtually indistinguishable from the best of Marvel and DC—though the all-important cape accessory is mysteriously unavailable. Unfortunately for the publisher, Marvel felt that the game violated their copyrights and trademarks, and sued in November 2004. The claims were finally settled in December 2005, without any changes being made to the character creation process.



NCsoft's *City of Heroes* did for MMORPGs what the earlier *Freedom Force* did for CRPGs.

NCsoft published Cryptic's *City of Villains* in October 2005, an expansion that, as the name suggests, puts players in the role of villains rather than heroes. The expansion also allows players to build strongholds, quintessential real estate for any aspiring master of villainy.

Although *City of Heroes* and *City of Villains* are certainly distinct from the typical swords and sorcery we see in other games, the subscriber base seems to have peaked at 194,000 and is now leveling off at 153,000. In a surprising twist, Marvel announced in 2006 that it has signed up with Cryptic and Microsoft Game Studios to create a new MMORPG based on the official *Marvel Comics Universe*. Given Marvel's dominance in the comic book industry, perhaps this new product will spin a larger web than its predecessor.

## *World of Warcraft*

When it comes to MMORPGs, *World of Warcraft* stands in a class by itself. It is by far the most successful of all such games, not only soaring above other MMORPGs but above other videogames. In August 2007, the game boasted nine million subscribers. The game long attracted mainstream attention, even serving as the basis of an uproarious episode of *South Park*. As with *EverQuest* before it, concerned citizens around the nation have attempted to liken its addictive gameplay to substance abuse. As usual, these dire warnings serve only as free publicity, vaulting "World of Warcrack" to even greater fame. As of this writing, *World of Warcraft* is the MMORPG *par excellence*, the king of the computer games industry.

First released on November 23, 2004, for Windows and Macintosh, Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* had little trouble garnering publicity. As you'll recall, Blizzard had distinguished itself in 1996 and 2000 with the *Diablo* series, which revolutionized the genre and introduced the action CRPG to millions of mainstream gamers. The company had also achieved great fame with its *Warcraft* and *Starcraft* real-time strategy games, which are still considered among the finest such games ever made. In short, Blizzard had achieved an absolutely stellar reputation for making outrageously successful games, and few doubted that their foray into the MMORPG market would, in so many words, not only wow the competition, but smash them into tiny bits. Furthermore, *World of Warcraft* has proven influential on single-player, standalone CRPGs, a point we'll address later.

What makes *World of Warcraft* so good? The answer, it seems, brings us back to Blizzard's design strategy with *Diablo*: take an established genre that is appealing only to the few, isolate the elements with universal appeal,

and make up the difference with superior graphics and gameplay. The result is a slimmed down but far more accessible product. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, Blizzard borrowed content from its already well-established *Diablo* and *Warcraft* games—a sensible plan given their terrific brand recognition. In short, what makes *World of Warcraft* so appealing isn't that it's different from all that came before, but that it's better.

That said, Blizzard did address many of the major problems faced by other MMORPGs, such as the often tedious waiting associated with healing and traveling. Although gamers frequently took these delays as opportunities for socializing, Blizzard opted for a more quest-driven structure. These quests, many of which can be completed solo, feel quite natural to gamers familiar with single-player CRPGs. Fulfilling a quest is rewarded either with money, experience points, items, or some combination of the three, and many quests are strung together in linear chains. Although still far from the carefully planned narratives of JRPGs or CRPGs such as *Baldur's Gate*, there's far more to do here than just build stats and chat with friends.

One reviewer compared the experience to Disneyland, noting how “almost every location in the game’s world is purpose-built, and as such, is home to a constant stream of players running around trying to fulfill some goal.”<sup>18</sup> This isn’t to say that players don’t get to know one another; indeed, with *World of Warcraft* we see collaboration on a grand scale. Many players join guilds and participate in giant raids, either invading enemy territories or participating in “instances.” The instance is an interesting but somewhat difficult concept to explain. Essentially, the instance allows multiple groups of players to fulfill quests without fear of interfering with one another. What’s useful about this structure is that the groups don’t have to wait in line to participate in the quest. The monsters in instances tend to be more difficult to defeat than those found elsewhere in the game, but they drop more treasure and rarer items.

The game is set on Azeroth, a world whose constantly warring occupants are divided into the Alliance and the Horde. Each player must join one of these factions, which have their own unique races and classes (and cannot team up or communicate directly with members of the opposing faction). As with other games, characters have combat skills as well as professional skills. There are many professions to choose from, such as herbalism, tailoring, and enchanting. The sophisticated guild system puts these professions to good

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<sup>18</sup> See Allen Rausch’s review at <http://pc.gamespy.com/pc/world-of-warcraft/571585p1.html>.

use, since every player can find some way to actively contribute to his or her guild besides combat. My character, for instance, is a “skinner,” or someone who is trained to remove and tan the skins from fallen beasts and cure hides. The character can either sell the leather or hides to other players or use them to make leather goods (which requires another profession called leatherworking). Items made by characters are marked as such—a fact that fosters a pride in one’s work. I have sold several helms and boots on the auction house, and it’s always nice to see these items worn by other guild members and players. Furthermore, the most advanced leatherworking recipes (or patterns) require items manufactured by other professions, such as a magical potion from an alchemist or a special tool from an engineer. Guilds exist, at least in part, to organize the labor force, ensuring that each player has access to the resources he or she needs to help other members.

I don’t want to place too much emphasis here on the guilds, though, since it’s entirely possible to enjoy the game without ever joining one. Gamers can stubbornly refuse to group at all, choosing only those quests that are easy enough to complete without assistance. Another option is the pick-up group, or an impromptu party composed of other players who just happen to want to explore the same dungeon at the same time. A pick-up group can be formed either by asking other players in the surrounding area to join, or via an automated system. In my experience, this latter option is far more preferable. For one thing, you don’t risk annoying a gamer who has no interest in being in a group. Secondly, the system finds other group members who are close in level, thereby avoiding the problem of a lopsided group dominated by a high-level character.

This last problem is worth elaborating on for a moment. Many *World of Warcraft* gamers spend their time running instances, an activity that makes sense given the rich rewards one receives in them. What makes less sense (at least to me) is why so many gamers run instances with other players who far outrank them. For example, I have often seen characters in the level 20 range running an instance with a level 70 (the highest currently allowed in the game). The level 70 runs ahead of the rest of the party, obliterating all the monsters with an AOE, or area-of-effect ability. The others tag along behind, safely out of harm’s way, looting treasures from the slain monsters. Although such tactics might be an easy way of gaining wealth and better equipment, I find the experience excruciatingly boring and, in a word, dishonorable. Alas, I have encountered few others on *World of Warcraft* who seem to share my sensibilities, but of course one can always refuse to be part of such groups.



Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* isn't just popular—it's populated. Can nine million subscribers possibly be wrong?

Blizzard's first expansion was *The Burning Crusade*, released on January 16, 2007. The expansion adds two new races, several new instances, a higher level cap, and much more. It's certainly a recommended purchase for all fans of the original game.

*World of Warcraft*'s influence on CRPGs has been substantial. This is obvious for anyone who has played *Dungeon Siege II*, which not only looks very much like Blizzard's game, but often plays like its standalone version. Indeed, when one of my friends (a big *World of Warcraft* fan) saw me playing *Dungeon Siege II*, his first reaction was that I'd finally taken his advice and signed up for the MMORPG. While I'd never suggest that the two games are identical, it's hard to ignore the blatant similarities. I suspect that future CRPGs will strive to adapt the *World of Warcraft* model, and it's hard to fault them, given Blizzard's own proclivity for taking from the best.

## *Guild Wars*

Considering just how enormous *World of Warcraft* has become since its release, it may seem almost foolhardy for a lesser company to enter the struggle. Yet that's precisely what happened on April 26, 2005, when NCsoft published ArenaNet's *Guild Wars*. Arena Net was originally founded as Triforge and composed of several ex-Blizzard employees. No doubt, many critics were thinking that if anyone could dethrone Blizzard, it'd be a team that understood their secret formula.



*Guild Wars* is a fairly successful MMORPG that's even more action-focused than *World of Warcraft*.

*Guild Wars* promised to be an action-oriented MMORPG with a major emphasis on player versus player combat. However, the game's key selling point was that there were no monthly fees. Rather than imitate the established MMORPG model, ArenaNet distributes the bandwidth costs associated with running a server across all gamers on the system. In short, everyone who plays the game helps shoulder the burden, though the process is all but transparent to them. Indeed, like *Eve Online*, all players participate in the same persistent universe rather than being segregated into shards.

ArenaNet pushed Blizzard's "nip and tuck" as far as possible, trying to reduce tedium as much as possible. For instance, a teleportation system allows players to zap instantly to areas they've previously unlocked, saving a great deal of boring travel overland. The game borrows the instance structure, which allows players to perform quests at any time without waiting for other groups to clear off. There's even an option for new players to receive a high-level character right from the start, though these characters are only usable in player versus player modes.

The game features six different classes, each of which has 150 unique skills. Furthermore, the characters and skills are carefully balanced for the massive campaign. Characters travel all over the world of Tyria in an adventure which culminates in a spectacular endgame.

NCsoft has released several expansions since 2005, as well as multiple collectors' editions. A true sequel has been announced. Although no release date has been set yet, it will offer enhanced graphics and the ability to move in three dimensions—the lack of this ability in the first release is one of the few aspects denounced by critics. *Guild Wars* has managed to do pretty well for itself, with some 3.2 million users as of March 2007.

## *Dungeons & Dragons Online*

Although there are certainly other prominent MMORPGs we could discuss, let's finish up with Turbine's *Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach*, published by Atari on February 28, 2006. This game brings us back to where we started: Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's classic tabletop game. At its very core, tabletop role-playing is a social activity. With the right group of friends gathered round the table, *Dungeons & Dragons* becomes far more than just a game, a frivolous diversion for idle youths. Rather, it becomes an exhilarating opportunity for exploring not just the lairs of dragons, but the hearts and imaginations of one's closest friends. It's hard to put into words just how stimulating and beneficial these sessions can become, offering even the most frustrated and introverted person a chance to know what it feels like to be powerful and influential, successful and accomplished. It is a game that gives mastery to the meek and glory to the geek. To call it just a game is as silly as calling *Hamlet* just a play or the *Iliad* just a poem.

Yet, as we've seen, almost every attempt to bring *Dungeons & Dragons* to the computer has ignored, either by choice or design, the eminently social aspect of the game. In most cases, these games have compensated with nonplayer characters (NPCs), who, generally in a very crude and contrived fashion, offer the player advice or some service or another. In better games, the NPCs may be as well-developed as those in films or novels, though this depth usually comes at the cost of rigid linearity and predetermined conclusions. Other games, such as *The Black Gate*, *Fable*, or *Oblivion* attempt to create large networks of NPCs, who are shown (as much as possible) to live their own lives according to their own agendas. Yet even in the best such cases, one needn't strain to see the wires animating these puppets.

There would seem to be at least two solutions to this problem. One is to continue developing the artificial intelligence of the NPCs. Scientists who concern themselves with such matters are generally of two opinions: convincing artificial intelligence is either (a) inevitable or (b) impossible. Although I'm far from an expert on the subject, my belief is that while simulating the

real thing may be far beyond our current capacities, it seems more than plausible that we'll someday have replicants who can fake a blush response—or least ace the Turing Test. Indeed, current research into data mining and analysis seems to be making rapid gains in this direction. If a computer can one day know that I want a chicken sandwich and onion rings before I do, it seems a trivial enough matter to make an entertaining NPC.

However, a much easier and immediate solution is simply to replace those NPCs with other humans, and that's precisely the draw of the MMORPG. In the best case scenario, every player will do his or her part to create and maintain the fantasy. However, as anyone knows who has spent time with a MMORPG, the best case scenario is rarer than dragon daycare. Even the best MMORPGs are overflowing with nincompoops, delinquents, and people whose only idea of fun is to make sure nobody else has any. As I hinted above, *Dungeons & Dragons* is an intimate experience. MMORPGs, on the other hand, tend to be about as intimate as Grand Central Station.

The answer to this dilemma would seem obvious. If the official *Dungeons & Dragons* rules worked with small groups, perhaps they'd work with larger ones. We've already seen countless times how applying the official rules led to some of the best games in the CRPG canon, such as *Pool of Radiance* (1988), *Eye of the Beholder* (1991), *Baldur's Gate* (1998), and *Neverwinter Nights* (2002). Would history repeat itself?



*Dungeons & Dragons Online* is the first attempt to adapt the official AD&D rules to the MMORPG format.

To adapt *Dungeons & Dragons* for the MMORPG market, Wizards of the Coast and Atari turned to Turbine Entertainment. We've already seen their work with the aforementioned *Asheron's Call*, a promising but ultimately unsuccessful game. Sure, that game had flopped, but perhaps they had learned from the experience. To their credit, Turbine seemed determined to preserve the hardcore nature of the game, no doubt turning away much of the riffraff from the start. The game's box boasted of "unforgiving danger in private dungeons with fiendish traps and foes that punish the foolish." Furthermore, integrated voice chat would bring the experience even closer to the tabletop ideal; why type when you can speak? Perhaps players would even mimic the high-strung tones of the elves, or render their dwarf's speech in a suitably Scottish accent. It all sounded too good to be true.

And, unfortunately, it was. The finished game was buggy and lacked polish, and many critics complained about the lackluster dungeons and poorly balanced gameplay. The sophisticated turn-based combat of the tabletop game is reduced, predictably, to a frantic real-time click-fest, and although ostensibly the engine is keeping track of rolls and critical hits, everything happens too rapidly for these sequences to be very fun or interesting. Furthermore, the game was surprisingly short—indeed, many players had already maxed out two or more characters a few months after the game's launch.

Perhaps the biggest problem, though, was the difficulty of gathering together a good group of fellow players to share in the adventure. Players lucky enough to have friends willing to join their quest had the most fun; others were left scrambling to find someone, anyone, willing to let them into a party. Even when they did gain admittance, these groups were often composed of experience point-obsessed gamers with little interest in role-playing. Furthermore, many players were either too shy or lacked the equipment to use voice chat, and the few who did were often as annoying as they were garrulous. Reviewers spoke of shrill, overexcited boys who wouldn't have known a real d20 had one struck them in the jaw, hurled there by any number of consenting adults.

Yet, for all these criticisms, it seems unfair to blame Turbine for what is ultimately not their fault. What is their fault is creating a lackluster game that shares more in common with the dreadful *Ruins of Myth Drannor* than *Neverwinter Nights*. Still, there's always the possibility that future expansions might alleviate the worst of the game's problems, applying liberal amounts of polish and added detail to flesh out this rather skeletal dungeon crawler.

# 12

## The Future of a Genre

The time has come to bring our story to an end. But have we also come to the end of the CRPG itself? If not, what is the future of the genre?

In the last chapter we saw how three trends are emerging that will likely remain influential for at least the next few years: online gaming, console gaming, and, perhaps as a result of these first two, an emphasis on action over the more strategic gameplay of earlier CRPGs. I could add a fourth trend: the tendency to announce the death of the standalone, single-player CRPG.

These trends seem to be taking the genre away from its roots in the tabletop RPG, an inherently social, contemplative, and intimate cultural phenomenon. Over the years, we've seen generations of game developers try to adapt *Dungeons & Dragons* to the desktop, a goal that has proven extremely difficult to accomplish. Early pioneers, such as Richard Garriott (*Ultima*) and Andrew C. Greenberg and Robert Woodhead (*Wizardry*), focused on exploration and combat. The joy of their games consists mostly in watching characters or parties grow from ninety-pound weaklings into ferocious engines of destruction. Storylines and characters were as sketchy as the graphics, and a good imagination was essential. Most of these early games were inherently "hack 'n slash," focused on stats and combat, ignoring the social dimension of the tabletop game.

At about the same time Garriott was at work on *Ultima*, Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw played the classic *Colossal Cave Adventure* and thought it'd

be pretty cool to do something like it with *Dungeons & Dragons*. Gamers have been wallowing in their MUD ever since. The key difference between MUDs and CRPGs is social, a point we'll discuss further in a moment. Another difference, though, is the goal of the game. With a few notable exceptions, most CRPGs have a pre-defined goal, usually something along the lines of "kill the wizard" or "find the orb." Once this goal is attained, there is little reason to continue playing—unless, of course, the player wants to restart the game with a new character or party. Part of the satisfaction of these games comes simply from finishing them, knowing that you had the right stuff. MUDs, on the other hand, never really end. Even if a gamer has attained the highest level and best equipment possible, there are still compelling reasons to continue playing: staying in touch with the friends one has made, helping out novices, or, in some cases, building new content. Fortunately for CRPG developers, even the best MUDs were graphically inept, usually consisting only of text or crude character-set graphics. Furthermore, few gamers had access to a mainframe or could afford the high costs of private networks. Thus, the CRPG market was sheltered from online competition.

As computer technology gradually improved, and CRPG developers accumulated established models to draw on, the genre diversified. Garriott, tired of what he saw as simplistic "hack'n slash" games that taught poor values, sought redemption in focusing more on character building in the old-fashioned sense: the goal was to become a virtuous hero, not just a strong one. Other programmers went in the opposite direction, building game engines that would generate whole dungeons by algorithm, reveling in the sheer joys of unending combat and steadily climbing stats (*Telengard*, *Rogue*). Developers Paul Murray and Keith Brors offered *Wizard's Crown* in 1985, a game with so much tactical combat that it could easily be confused with a wargame.

Other paths lay open. Sierra emerged with *Quest for Glory* in 1989, which was far more story- and character-driven than CRPGs that came before it. Meanwhile, the Japanese were discovering new ways to bring the CRPG to game consoles. The finest of these games offered a compelling mix of action and linear narratives, always providing a clear context and purpose for the waves of fast-paced combat. When newer and more powerful consoles arrived, JRPGs swelled in both size and quality, rivaling and even surpassing their computer counterparts. In *Quest for Glory* and many JRPGs, the "hack 'n slash" elements are not an end unto themselves but only a means of allowing the player to make meaningful decisions as the story unfolds. Who would care about *Quest for Glory* or *Chrono Trigger* if they lacked charming dialog, balanced plots, and memorable characters?

Other late 1980s CRPG developers were experimenting with new settings and role-playing systems, such as we see in Origin's *Autoduel*, Interplay's *Wasteland*, and FTL's *Dungeon Master*. Yet perhaps the most important games of the late 1980s were *Pool of Radiance* and *The Bard's Tale*, beautifully crafted games that weren't so much groundbreaking as painstaking. In most of these cases, the emphasis was still on "hack 'n slash," though the underlying mechanics were becoming more diverse and sophisticated.

The early 1990s were a bad time for CRPG fans and developers. Gamers found more bugs crawling out of their game boxes than inhabited the pizza boxes they hadn't bothered to throw away since *The Magic Candle*. Some lived with the pain. Others tossed both stacks into the dumpster and played DOOM instead. The computer games industry was in a tough transition, and programmers strove to keep up with the latest object-oriented programming techniques, which allowed developers to outsource coding tasks to outfits all over the world. Somehow, this patchwork of programming still needed to be cobbled together, a job that was greatly complicated by the morass of incompatible graphics, sound, and 3D accelerator cards. The industry's growing pains eventually subsided, aided by Microsoft's DirectX and self-imposed industry standards.

Later in the 1990s, change came rapidly and decisively. Origin's *Ultima Online* established a new frontier, but so had Blizzard's *Diablo* a year earlier. Both games offered online multiplayer options, but each went about it in very different ways. Whereas *Ultima Online* stressed role-playing, *Diablo* emphasized roll-playing. BioWare took a middle road with its *Baldur's Gate* in 1998, scooping the *Dungeons & Dragons* box out of the bargain bin and finding platinum inside. It was a time of masterpieces, when gamers were faced with such tough choices as whether to buy *Fallout* or *Planescape: Torment*. The more fortunate among us bought both. Almost every modern CRPG and MMORPG can trace most of its origins to this period.

Although critics raved about BioWare and later Interplay's superb CRPGs, MMORPGs were steadily gaining market share. *EverQuest* made headlines, wooing millions of avid gamers to the Internet. These and other persistent worlds grew ever more rich and sophisticated, as the developers churned out expansions and evolved along with the players. Meanwhile, Bethesda seemed to think hell was other people. They worked harder to make single-player games so realistic and detailed that no one would notice that they weren't persistent (and many of us are still oblivious). Indeed, one way to describe *Oblivion* is as a single-player MMORPG. Everything is there but the other players.

In 2002 BioWare emerged from the gloom with *Neverwinter Nights*, powered by their new Aurora engine—but graphics weren’t the game’s most promising feature. Instead, it was the free editor that proved decisive. Gamers were becoming Dungeon Masters again, and the industry hasn’t ignored them since. User-generated content is now far more than just an industry buzzword; it’s an industry standard. For many *AD&D* fans across the globe, *Neverwinter Nights* and now its sequel are the ultimate Dungeon Master’s tools.

Our history of the CRPG has been neither linear nor in any way predictable. We’ve seen well-established developers churn out unplayable garbage and bold newcomers stun the industry with best-selling masterpieces. We’ve seen games that seemed old-fashioned even before they were released, yet went on to sell millions of copies and remain popular years or even decades later. There is simply no way to tell what incredible new CRPG might lie just around the next corner of the dungeon.

I imagine that many readers, paging through this book and reading about so many of the great CRPGs of the past, might feel saddened by the scarcity of such games on the shelves today. How many former CRPG fans have long ago left the genre to pursue adventures in persistent worlds? Why play a single-player CRPG when you can log on to *World of Warcraft*, a game so popular and influential that it has changed the very nature of the industry? It is certainly no exaggeration to call *World of Warcraft* a true cultural phenomenon, and it’s becoming increasingly rare to find any major developer willing to entertain alternatives to the economic model it represents. After a few weeks spent in *World of Warcraft*, a single-player game like *Pool of Radiance* can seem downright desolate. Is there no escape from Blizzard’s monstrous MMORPG?

I had some hopes that Richard Garriott, father of the CRPG, would save us from *World of Warcraft* with his much-touted *Tabula Rasa*, another MMORPG. Garriott claims its “fast-paced” combat will set it apart from other MMORPGs.<sup>1</sup> He also claims the game will “present the player with choices they must make that are not easily defined as good or bad choices.” An MMORPG with all the dramatic intensity of a good CRPG? Is this the Lord British of *Ascension* or *The Black Gate*? Although of course it’s too early to tell whether *Tabula Rasa* will indeed threaten Blizzard’s market share, Garriott does seem to have pinpointed two of the areas where *World of Warcraft* fails to triumph: action and drama.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://riottt.com/user.do?uid=63&pid=2753>.

## MMORPGs vs. CRPGs

I've talked to several people who firmly believe the MMORPG is the inevitable next stage of CRPG development. These arguments are supported with data concerning the high profitability of the MMORPG compared to most CRPGs—why make a one-time sale when you can collect millions in monthly fees? Why cater to a single player when you can amuse millions simultaneously in a shared environment?

What incentives, if any, are left for a developer to create a single-player, standalone CRPG?

There is a good answer to this question, but it'll take some time to unpack. First of all, though, let me state that I don't believe there's anything inevitable about the future of the CRPG. The future will depend on the quality of what developers produce and the willingness of gamers to buy it. One thing that is certain, though, is that CRPGs will never become MMORPGs, simply because the two are entirely separate types of games with their unique appeals for gamers and developers. But are MMORPGs simply better than CRPGs?

If our criterion is based on proximity to conventional role-playing games, the answer is yes. In many ways, the MMORPG has more in common with tabletop RPGs than the CRPG ever had or ever will have. If MMORPGs and tabletop RPGs are fun to play, it's because we enjoy playing them with other people. Any *D&D* or MMORPG gamer who has suffered through a session with a bad group will know precisely what I am talking about here. On the other hand, with the right people, these activities are so much fun and fulfilling that it's hard to imagine a finer way to spend one's hours. It's precisely these moments that make "hardcore" gamers out of novices; once they've tasted those delights, they will always hunger for more. I don't know how many times I've heard fans of one or another MMORPG tell me, "Well, the game itself sucks, but the gameplay is awesome." Such comments make little sense unless we factor in the social dimension; these games are fun because the people you play them with are fun. I know countless people who still prefer the so-called obsolete MUDs and MMORPGs to *World of Warcraft* simply because their friends still play these older games.

Conversely, a single-player CRPG is only fun if the game itself is fun. Many factors that would be mostly overlooked in a MUD or MMORPG (shoddy graphics, cheesy storylines, dull NPCs, simplistic gameplay, interface glitches) are deadly criticism when applied to a CRPG. A MUD or MMORPG developer can count (to some extent, hopefully) on interaction

with other players to keep a gamer involved. A CRPG developer must rely on other techniques, and it's to the nature of these techniques that we now turn.

As we've seen, many CRPGs are focused on what we've been calling "hack 'n slash" gameplay; that is, an emphasis on battling wave after wave of monsters and being rewarded with experience points and treasure (which is exchanged for better items, and so on). The best of these games are highly sophisticated, offering players a wide range of options at every stage. Winning requires careful attention to tactics and long-term planning. The joy of these games comes from watching a party become increasingly more competent and powerful, a development made possible only by the player's own choices and persistence.

This kind of CRPG is on the way out, and for a simple reason: MMORPGs can do it better. Even though it's great fun creating a party and hacking one's way through *Wizard's Crown*, few other people will appreciate the accomplishment. Who will care if your party overcame all the obstacles to attain high levels and the best equipment? On the other hand, a skillful and persistent MMORPG gamer is constantly rewarded with praise or envy from other players. For instance, my character on *World of Warcraft* is constantly told that he had a very nice axe, which was a rare and very valuable item. At level forty, my character had at last reached the level required to purchase a mount, in my case a chestnut horse. Riding a horse is 60% faster than running, and I must admit that blazing past a group of running novices makes me even more proud of my accomplishments. I could list a dozen such examples, but the point is that if "hack 'n slash" gameplay is fun in a solo game, it is far more rewarding in a MMORPG, where thousands of other people can be aware of your achievements. Receiving recognition for one's prowess is a powerful incentive to continue playing any game (or sport, for that matter).

On the other hand, there are some things that a MMORPG can't do as well a CRPG. The most important of these limitations concerns story and plot. Although *World of Warcraft* and other MMORPGs offer quests, sometimes strung together in long sequences, the nature of the persistent game-world inhibits the carefully contrived plot structuring we see in *Baldur's Gate* or *Betrayal at Krondor*. An MMORPG or MUD developer simply cannot tell a story the way a CRPG developer can.

Unlike MMORPGs with their teeming persistent worlds, the game-world of a single-player CRPG should be totally focused on the individual player, who has an all-important role to play. The characters one meets, the places one visits, and the events that unfold in a CRPG should all contribute to creating and sustaining a dramatic intensity. A modern CRPG, if it is to

be successful, should not be about “hack ‘n slash” or exploring a huge interactive gameworld, because MMORPGs can do these things much better. Instead, a CRPG must focus on story, characters, and above all else, keeping the player emotionally invested in the outcome. CRPG gamers should routinely be asked to make tactical and logistical decisions, but there should never be anything routine about their moral decisions.

This is precisely the formula we’ve encountered in our discussions of the JRPG, but Western developers are now applying it more and more. Indeed, BioWare’s new *Mass Effect* CRPG is probably the most touted game on the Internet. This game puts players directly in the role of a well-defined character named Commander Shepard, and much of the early criticism (which is overwhelmingly positive) is focused on the advanced dialog and facial expressions of the characters, as well as a captivating storyline. Although there is certainly combat and stats in *Mass Effect*, they are not what sets the game apart from its online competition. My money is on BioWare.

Another avenue open to modern CRPG developers is turn-based combat. By necessity, MMORPGs are limited to real-time combat; it’s not practical to freeze the gameworld to let an individual player contemplate a move. Combat in MUDs or MMORPGs tends to be fast and intense. In *World of Warcraft*, for instance, combat consists mostly of monitoring the character’s status and activating special powers and abilities as they become available (many of them have defined “cooling off” periods and require a certain number of spell points). I’m not saying that there isn’t strategy and tactics here; indeed, players are known to spend hours or even weeks planning and preparing for major raids. However, once battle is joined, there is little time to reconsider one’s plan.

A turn-based CRPG, such as *Knights of the Old Republic* or *Fallout*, offers a much different experience. Turn-based combat allows players to not only plan in advance but to carefully consider and coordinate each maneuver. A major battle in *Pool of Radiance*, for instance, can easily take up to an hour or more, with most of the time spent surveying the battlefield and weighing each possible move. It’s rather like playing chess as opposed to badminton. Since players of turn-based games do have more time at their disposal to think during combat, the developer can offer them a far more complex interface and a myriad of options. Consider the relative complexity of *Wizard’s Crown* or *Temple of Elemental Evil* versus *The Legend of Zelda* or *Diablo*.

In short, the real-time *Diablo* and *Morrowind*-style CRPGs that were so popular throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s seem fated to extinction, usurped by *World of Warcraft* and other MMORPGs. There is still a great

deal of room, however, for more story- and character-driven CRPGs, ones that privilege role-playing over roll-playing, dramatics over statistics. I'm not saying the latter will fade away entirely, of course—without some degree of strategy, tactics, and planning, a game could no longer be considered a CRPG, and developers would be wise to take advantage of the fact that turn-based combat is impractical in an MMORPG. CRPG developers hoping to flourish in an MMORPG-dominated era should focus on making turn-based CRPGs with great stories and sharply developed characters.

What will the next masterpiece be like? It won't be easy and it won't be simple. It will take time and patience, and it will often seem more like work than play. You will make decisions knowing that the consequences could be bad either way. You will save those in need, but your friends may have died to make you a hero. You will laugh, but you may also cry. Who will care to pick up such a burden, to take on such a challenge? You will. And don't worry.

You won't go to bed after that one last level then, either.

## A Guide for the Novice

As I wrote this book, I often thought about readers who would want to do more than just *read* about so many excellent yet now sadly inaccessible games. What does a modern gamer have to do to play great but out-of-print masterpieces such as *Pool of Radiance*, *Wasteland*, or *The Black Gate*? Even if novices are able to find used copies of these games, they may find themselves wondering how to insert a 5¼" floppy disk intended for the Apple II into a modern PC.

There are three major obstacles the novice will face when trying to find and play all but a trickle of classic CRPGs. The first major hurdle is incompatibility. Many of the best CRPGs were intended for computers that have long passed out of production, such as the Apple II, Commodore 64, and Atari ST. A gamer committed to recreating the authentic experience will have to find a working model of one of these machines, and setting it up will not be easy. Even if the game is intended for MS-DOS, it is very unlikely that such a game will run flawlessly on a modern PC. Assuming it runs at all, it's likely to be far too fast to control.

Thankfully, there is a convenient solution to the incompatibility issue: emulation. These programs enable modern PCs to emulate a vintage platform. The most comprehensive solution is a free program called *MESS*, which stands for “multiple emulator super system.” *MESS* allows you to emulate

hundreds of different platforms, all from one convenient graphical user interface. There are also platform-specific emulators that are free, easy, and loaded with features, such as *AppleWin* (Apple IIe), *Win-VICE* (Commodore 64), and *DOSBox* (early IBM compatibles).<sup>2</sup> Some of these programs come ready-to-run, but others require you to first find a system ROM. Usually, instructions for downloading or purchasing these files are available on the emulator's homepage.

Once the user has one of these emulators up and running, the next task is finding ROMs, or special versions of the software that have been specially prepared for emulation. Unfortunately, here's where we encounter the second major obstacle: legality. Modern copyright law is, to put it mildly, inexcusably complex and counter-intuitive. While I won't go into the details here, what's important to know is that just about every piece of software ever made is copyrighted and thus protected by copyright law. What this means is that even though an old game may be out of publication for decades, incompatible with modern PCs, and unavailable even from collectors, it's still against the law to download it from a ROM website. Nevertheless, plenty of people still want to play these games, and many well-meaning individuals have made these files available online despite the law. Abandonware sites generally operate under the principle that they will offer a file for download until they are notified by the copyright holders to take it down. Under no circumstances, however, should anyone try to illegally download a ROM when the program is still being sold commercially.

The third obstacle may very well be the most formidable yet: obsolescence. It's not just the hardware that has changed since the days of *Wizard's Crown* but also the software. Novices will struggle to learn these outmoded interfaces, which were made long before mice and GUIs (graphical user interfaces) became standard. It's easy to forget just how awkward and inconvenient a game can be when it relies totally on arbitrary keyboard inputs to control. Likewise, gamers accustomed to today's high-end 3D graphics and surround sound will have to overcome the prejudice that any game lacking these qualities is inherently inferior.

When I hear gamers make such claims, I point out that it makes no more sense to reject an old game for having "bad" graphics than it does to refuse to play chess because one does not like the design of the pieces. Indeed, such an arrogant and simple-minded person would be laughed out of any

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<sup>2</sup> A great place to learn about emulation is *Zophar's Domain*, a huge resource for Windows emulation. See <http://www.zophar.net>.

chess tournament. Don't get me wrong—I don't doubt that anyone would rather play with an exquisite chess set than a shoddy one, yet such details are quickly forgotten once the game begins.

My advice to anyone who really wants to learn the history of CRPGs is to start with the newer classics and gradually work backwards. It's still relatively easy, for instance, to find copies of *Baldur's Gate* or *Mandate of Heaven* and get them running on a modern PC. Indeed, *Diablo* is still being sold as part of the *Diablo Battle Chest* and runs flawlessly even on Vista. I would recommend skipping the early Windows 95 or Windows 3.1 games, though—these can be excruciatingly difficult to get running even for emulation experts. If you go a little further back, though, to the DOS era, things get much easier thanks to *DOSBox*, though you need a very powerful computer to run some DOS games (particularly Bethesda's early *Elder Scrolls* games).

The final games on anyone's list should be the great eight-bit classics, and these are thankfully quite easy to find and get running via emulation. I must say with some chagrin that many of these games are actually far more playable under such circumstances than they were originally. This is particularly true when it comes to loading games. A game that would take half an hour to load on a Commodore 64 now takes seconds. Another feature is the option to save the game instantly, whenever you want, regardless of how the game was originally designed. It's also usually possible to speed up or slow down a game. I admit to relying on such features to get through the original *Final Fantasy*.

On the other hand, emulation will never be as authentic as playing the game on the original hardware—maybe those long loading times or frustrating save-game schemes are all part of the fun. While I have some sympathy for these arguments and agree that these aspects are intriguing from a historical perspective, I put my fist though my beloved Commodore 1541 during my first sojourn through *Pool of Radiance*. The thing had eaten my save-game disk and, in effect, killed my entire party—with whom I'd been adventuring for weeks. It's probably an experience that everyone should endure at least once, if for no other reason than to better appreciate the benefits of modern emulation.

Obviously, however you choose to go about playing these grand old games, it won't be easy. But those who'd flee rather than ride to such a challenge have nothing to gain from it. As for you, foolish mortal, beware. You trespass in the land of Akalabeth—world of doom!