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8 Sephiroth

Llanowar Elves

yrexian Crusader

Steve JACKSON AND LIVINGSTONE

1

Secret Warlock of Firetop Mountain

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO FANTASY GAMING

Fantasy gaming has been with us for decades. If you were a child of the Seventies you'll be well-versed with *Dungeons & Dragons*, as it was a chance to relive the classic adventures found in books like *The Lord Of The Rings* or *The Sword Of Shannara*. The Eighties introduced the likes of *Fighting Fantasy*, *HeroQuest*, *Warhammer: Fantasy Battles* and videogame classics like *Final Fantasy* and *The Legend Of Zelda*, while the Nineties delighted us with collectible card games such as *Magic: The Gathering* and *Planescape: Torment*.

It didn't matter what decade you grew up in, there were always new experiments to enjoy, new adventures to go on and new monsters to fight. Even now fantasy gaming remains alive and well thanks to more recent franchises like *World Of Warcraft* and a continual rise in tabletop games and board games in general. There's never been a better time to embrace this amazing genre and discover everything it has to offer.

With that in mind we've created this delightful tome to not only be a fascinating resource on all things retro, but an excellent gateway to some of the best videogames and board games that are currently available to play. If you've ever had an interest in *Magic* or know your Zeldas from your Clouds, you'll find *The Ultimate Guide To Fantasy Gaming* to be an essential read.

FUTURE

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO FANTASY GAMING

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It may be several decades old, but that doesn't stop this adventure game from being amazing fun

THE HIS

FINAL F



HISTORY OF HEROES

FIRION

FINAL FANTASY II

■ Our very first named hero is the archetypical holder of the role – loyal to his family and country, with a strong desire to do what is necessary to protect them. Supposedly, he's got a bit of a weakness for women.

ONION KNIGHT

FINAL FANTASY III

■ Better known as Luneth to those who have played *Final Fantasy III*'s remake, this chap has courage in spades but is just a bit too eager to act at times. As the first character spoken to by the crystals, he becomes his party's de facto leader.

CECIL HARVEY

FINAL FANTASY IV

■ This brave Dark Knight is neither arrogant nor outspoken, despite his role as one of the king's elite soldiers. He's a much better fit for his role once he questions his loyalties and becomes a paladin.

BARTZ KLAUSER

FINAL FANTASY V

■ Without much purpose other than wandering the world, Bartz is an easygoing soul whose life changes after his encounter with a crashed meteor. This multitalented hero has a notable fear of heights due to a childhood fall.

TERRA BRANFORD

FINAL FANTASY VI

■ *Final Fantasy*'s first female protagonist is a powerful esper whose abilities are hijacked for harm by the Empire. During her quest, she struggles to regain her memories and reconcile her humanity with her magical abilities.

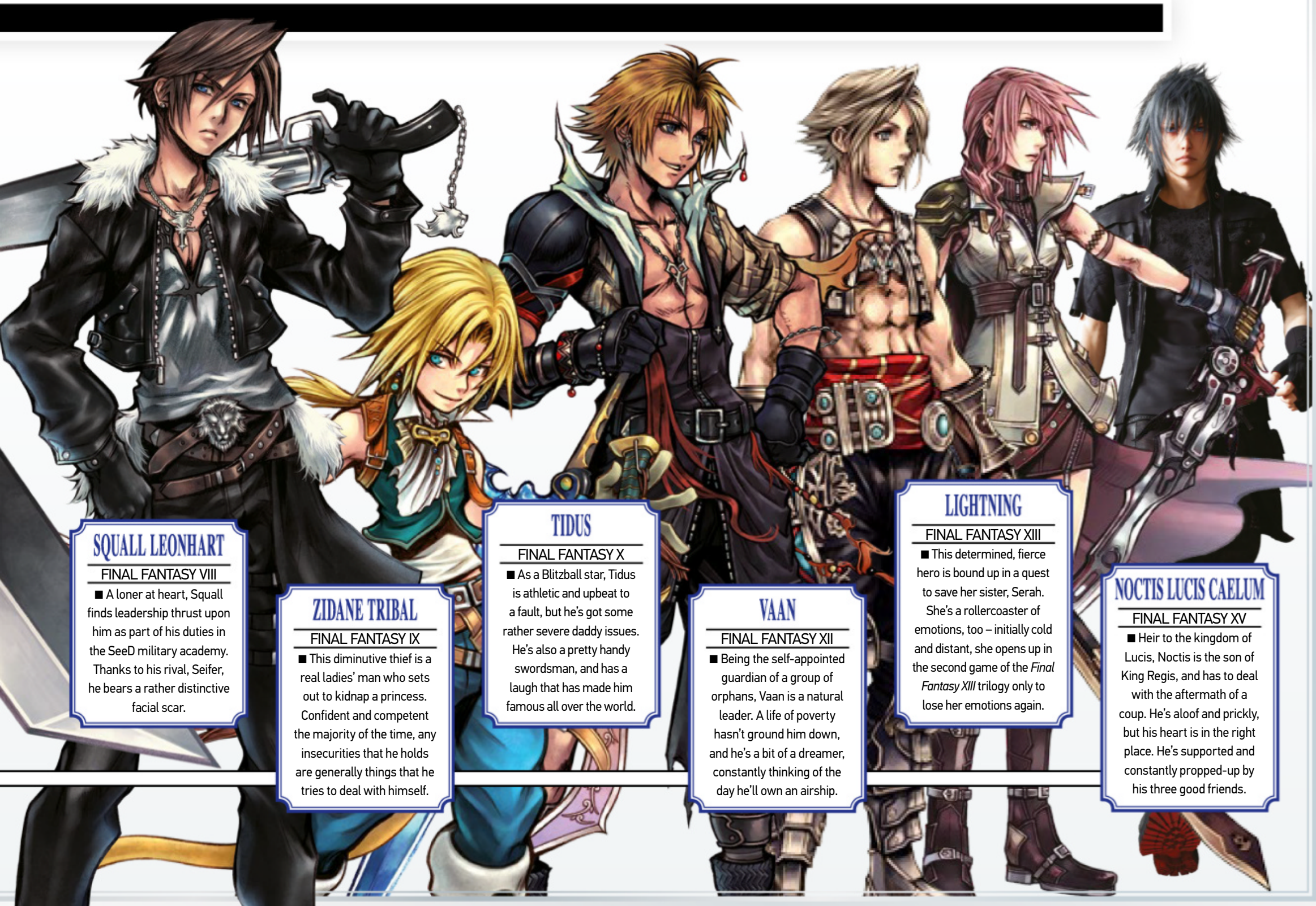
CLOUD STRIFE

FINAL FANTASY VII

■ This mercenary isn't interested in much other than getting paid, until he hooks up with the environmentalist resistance group AVALANCHE and discovers that his past might not be what he thought it was.

TORY OF

ANTASY



SQUALL LEONHART

FINAL FANTASY VIII

■ A loner at heart, Squall finds leadership thrust upon him as part of his duties in the SeeD military academy. Thanks to his rival, Seifer, he bears a rather distinctive facial scar.

ZIDANE TRIBAL

FINAL FANTASY IX

■ This diminutive thief is a real ladies' man who sets out to kidnap a princess. Confident and competent the majority of the time, any insecurities that he holds are generally things that he tries to deal with himself.

TIDUS

FINAL FANTASY X

■ As a Blitzball star, Tidus is athletic and upbeat to a fault, but he's got some rather severe daddy issues. He's also a pretty handy swordsman, and has a laugh that has made him famous all over the world.

VAAN

FINAL FANTASY XII

■ Being the self-appointed guardian of a group of orphans, Vaan is a natural leader. A life of poverty hasn't ground him down, and he's a bit of a dreamer, constantly thinking of the day he'll own an airship.

LIGHTNING

FINAL FANTASY XIII

■ This determined, fierce hero is bound up in a quest to save her sister, Serah. She's a rollercoaster of emotions, too – initially cold and distant, she opens up in the second game of the *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy only to lose her emotions again.

NOCTIS LUCIS CAELUM

FINAL FANTASY XV

■ Heir to the kingdom of Lucis, Noctis is the son of King Regis, and has to deal with the aftermath of a coup. He's aloof and prickly, but his heart is in the right place. He's supported and constantly propped-up by his three good friends.



FANTASY ON FILM

There's more to Final Fantasy than videogames – check out these excursions into the world of cinema

With *Final Fantasy* games offering more plot depth than the typical videogame, particularly during the early years of the series' history, there's some sense to adapting them to film – but straight adaptations have actually been few and far between.

Final Fantasy's first foray into the movie market came with the 1994 release of *Final Fantasy: Legend Of The Crystals*, a four-part anime video series that followed the events of *Final Fantasy V*, albeit 200 years in the future with mostly new characters. This one's not very easy to find anymore – the only English language release was a North American VHS run back in the late Nineties. An even more tenuous connection is found in the anime series *Final Fantasy Unlimited*, a 2001 series that borrows some elements, such as Moogles, without relating to any particular game.



Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within wasn't based on a game, and was far more ambitious. Directed by Hironobu Sakaguchi and released by in-house group Square Pictures, the tale of a future Earth ravaged by aliens was one of the first films to attempt photorealistic CGI depiction of humans. Despite impressive scenes and an A-list voice cast, it only made $85 million at the box office in 2001 – not nearly enough to recoup the film's production budget of $137 million.

A more modest CGI effort followed in the form of *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, a direct follow-up to the videogame that arrived in 2005. Released straight to DVD, this features many of the characters from the original in a world now ravaged by the mysterious Geostigma. This was a big seller, leading to a special extended Blu-Ray edition in 2010. In 2016, another CGI movie titled *Kingsglaive: Final Fantasy XV* and a free anime series titled *Brotherhood: Final Fantasy XV* served to expand the universe of the new game.

WITH OVER 100 MILLION GAMES SOLD, FINAL FANTASY IS A PILLAR OF THE JAPANESE RPG SCENE. NICK THORPE LOOKS BACK OVER THREE DECADES OF THE ICONIC SERIES WITH SHINJI HASHIMOTO

There are few series of games that are unavoidably big, but *Final Fantasy* is definitely one of them. Even if you've somehow missed all of the main entries in the series, there are the spinoffs, the cameos, and even films to talk about. With over 100 million games sold, discussing Japanese RPGs without including *Final Fantasy* is like excluding *Mario* from a conversation about platform games, or ignoring *Street Fighter* in a chat about fighting games.

In 1987, Squaresoft was anything but unavoidably big. It was struggling to make headway as a publisher on Nintendo's market-conquering Famicom, during a time when the platform was at its most lucrative. With little money, the company was in a jam – but then, so was game designer Hironobu Sakaguchi. His previous games hadn't hit major commercial success, and he was contemplating leaving the games industry to return to university. He had wanted to create a role-playing game, and met resistance from management. External events would break down barriers for Sakaguchi, as the success of Enix's Famicom RPG *Dragon Quest* proved that the market for a console RPG existed.

Even then, putting the game together was no simple task. Sakaguchi has confided that his internal reputation hampered his initial attempts to form a team for the '*Fighting Fantasy*' project – he was considered a rough boss, and as his games struggled to sell, staff opted for other teams. Just three people joined his team initially, and he had to put out feelers before gaining key members of the team, such as game designers Koichi Ishii and Akitoshi Kawazu. Programming was handled by new hire Nasir Gebelli, who had taken the Apple II scene by storm with his action games. Yoshitaka Amano, who provided character designs, had been a freelancer before joining Square for *Final Fantasy*; Sakaguchi has said that he had dismissed Ishii's suggestion to use Amano due to failing to recognise the name, only to be told that the magazine clippings he'd been using for inspiration were Amano's work.

When the resulting game finally made it to market in December 1987, it was known as *Final Fantasy* – a name change necessitated by the existence of the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks, with the word 'Final' chosen due to the precarious position of both Sakaguchi and Squaresoft. However, the market was ready for a new RPG, and *Final Fantasy* had key advantages over the likes of *Dragon Quest*, particularly when it came to its more elaborately told plot, which involved the Warriors Of Light banding together to battle the evil knight Garland. Instead of playing as a single hero, *Final Fantasy* allowed the player to form a four-character party from six character classes with unique attributes and abilities – Warrior, Thief, Monk, Black Mage, White Mage and Red Mage. The game was a swift success, selling 400,000 copies on the Famicom, paving the way for an MSX2 conversion in 1989 and an English translation for the NES in 1990.

When the time came for a sequel, Squaresoft took some unusual steps that would come to be recognised as part of the *Final Fantasy* design philosophy.



» The Warriors Of Light do battle against a sparse backdrop in the very first *Final Fantasy*.

> "FINAL FANTASY DOES NOT SIMPLY TRY TO EMULATE AND BUILD ON THE PREVIOUS TITLES IN THE SERIES"
>
> SHINJI HASHIMOTO



» Work started on a translation of *Final Fantasy II*, but was abandoned due to concerns over release timing.



» *Final Fantasy III* holds the record for longest time between release and English translation, at 16 years.

"*Final Fantasy* does not simply try to emulate and build on the previous titles in the series, but to exceed and reach beyond them with every possible effort, so in that sense developing each and every game in the series is a very big challenge in itself," explains Shinji Hashimoto, *Final Fantasy* brand manager at Square Enix. The first major change was that the game did away with the experience points system from the original (and many other RPGs). Instead, characters developed their attributes through practical use – a character could increase its magic statistic by casting many spells, for example.

The more radical change was the decision to omit all of the characters and settings from the original game, in favour of a new setting in which the characters were named and had defined histories. This followed Firion and his party, who find themselves attacked by the forces of Palamecia. This decision would set a precedent for the series – each subsequent game would also start afresh, leading to a series of disconnected stories bound together by an evolving role-playing game design. This would turn out to be one of the series' greatest strengths, as the designers have had the freedom to adapt to changing market trends with their characters and settings.

This disconnect between the games has also given rise to an interesting phenomenon – while most other series of games include their fan favourites and black sheep, *Final Fantasy* fans are



» Your entire party starts off as Onion Knights in *Final Fantasy III*, but can soon change jobs.

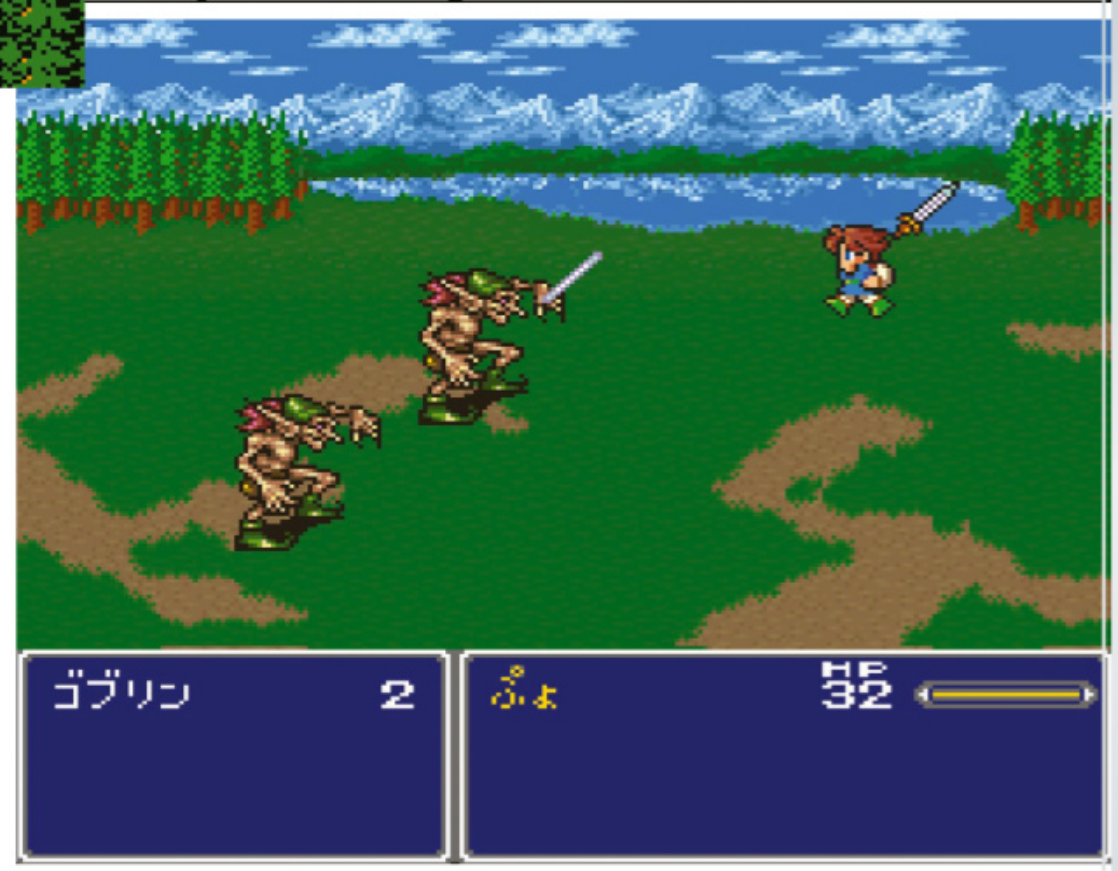
incredibly passionate about their particular favourites within the series. In fact, this is something that Hashimoto agrees with. When asked about the series' key rivals, he responds: "I think it is very difficult to compare *Final Fantasy* to other games. If I had to give one then I would say that the other numbered *Final Fantasy* games are all each other's rivals!"

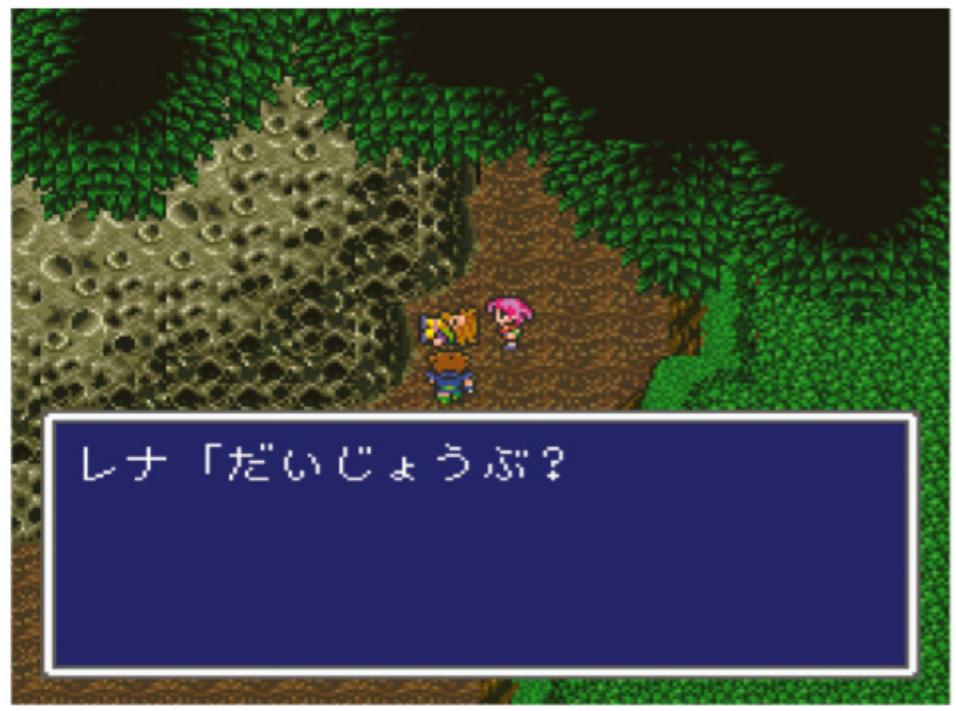
Final Fantasy II was an even bigger hit than its predecessor in Japan, shifting 800,000 copies following its December 1988 release. Unfortunately, *Final Fantasy II* didn't make it to the West. Though Square Enix had started work on a translation following the success of the original game, the late start ultimately doomed it. Progress was slow, the game was ageing, and the SNES was on the horizon, so it was ultimately scrapped. Western players would finally get to play it as part of the PlayStation compilation *Final Fantasy Origins* in 2003.

The same fate befell the next game, *Final Fantasy III*. This game centred on four orphans who are tasked with restoring balance to the world, which they seek to do by defeating Xande,

» Mid-battle dialogue can turn what seems to be a hostile encounter into a gut-wrenching moment.







» Bartz and Lenna find an old man passed out by the meteor impact site.

» Some people weren't used to emotional content in gaming – Aeris and her fate served as a sudden introduction.





» *Final Fantasy VI* was a visual upgrade over its predecessors, with more detailed background work.

▶ a warlock whose goal is to gain crystals of light and unleash chaos upon the world. Unusually, each of your characters in *Final Fantasy III* begins the game as an Onion Knight, but can switch jobs freely during the course of the game, allowing a wide range of character and class combinations.

Despite a disruption caused by the expiration of Nasir Gebelli's work visa, which forced the team to relocate to the USA to finish the game, *Final Fantasy III* was the most advanced game in the series so far, shipping on a four megabit cartridge when it released in April 1990. The series was still growing, with 500,000 copies sold in the first week and 1.4 million copies sold in total. Despite being one of the most popular entries in the series among Japanese fans, remake projects faltered until a full 3D Nintendo DS remake in 2006, which opened the game to Western players a mere 16 years after its initial release.

Another crucial part of the *Final Fantasy* identity is the constant push for bigger and better technology. "We have always tried to be at the cutting edge of gaming in each era, going from 2D pixel sprites to 3D, and from prerendering to real-time," explains Hashimoto. "The media our games are on has also followed the trends in hardware, going from ROM cassettes through CD-ROM to DVD-ROM, Blu-ray and even branching into smartphones." This drive would define *Final Fantasy IV*, which became the first entry in the series to debut on the SNES.



» The US SNES version of *Final Fantasy VI* was the last to use Western numbering – everyone synchronised at *VII*.

***Final Fantasy IV* featured characters with fixed classes, and centres around Cecil Harvey, who begins the game as a member of the Kingdom of Baron's elite Red Wings air force unit.** The battle system in this game received an overhaul, with turn-based combat giving way to a system that Square termed 'Active Time Battle' – menu-driven combat taking place in real time, with enemies capable of launching attacks even as you decide on your next move. This exciting system would carry forward to many of Square's other RPGs, including *Final Fantasy* games. Technologically, the game took advantage of the enhanced colour palette of the SNES, and used Mode 7 effects to create spectacular battle animations and spice up airship sequences.

> "WE HAVE ALWAYS TRIED TO BE AT THE CUTTING EDGE OF GAMING IN EACH ERA"
>
> SHINJI HASHIMOTO

Despite having to adjust to working with brand-new technology, Square's team was able to complete *Final Fantasy IV* in just one year, meaning that the game arrived in July 1991, during the Super Famicom's launch year. 1.44 million copies were sold, reviews were highly positive, and it has retained a great deal of popularity over time, with Famitsu readers voting it the sixth best game of all time in 2006. *Final Fantasy IV* was also the game that marked *Final Fantasy*'s return to the West – however, it was named *Final Fantasy II* so as not to confuse American audiences, which had missed the previous two games. Unfortunately, the game was also simplified due to Square's concerns that it would be too large of a leap in complexity. A number of spells, items

A LITTLE DISTRACTION

Though the heroes of the Final Fantasy series are busy saving the world, they can always find time for minigames. Here are five of the best



G-BIKE

FINAL FANTASY VII

■ To be fair to Cloud and company, the initial G-Bike segment of *Final Fantasy VII* is a genuine life or death escape from Shinra headquarters. Playing it again in the Gold Saucer is pretty frivolous though, as was the standalone mobile version.



TRIPLE TRIAD

FINAL FANTASY VIII

■ It's not exactly *Magic: The Gathering*, but *Final Fantasy VIII* has its own well-loved collectible card game that shines pretty brightly. Players take turns to place cards on a three-by-three grid, with directional attack statistics causing cards to be won and lost.



BLITZBALL

FINAL FANTASY X

■ If you're going to make your protagonist a fictional sports star, you might as well let the players play that fictional sport while you're at it. While Blitzball gameplay isn't the all-action affair you'd expect from its FMV depiction, it's a fun diversion all the same.



and abilities were removed – including the consolidation of various status healing items into one catch-all remedy – items were made cheaper, and secret passages were made visible. Fans should seek out one of the more recent re-releases instead.

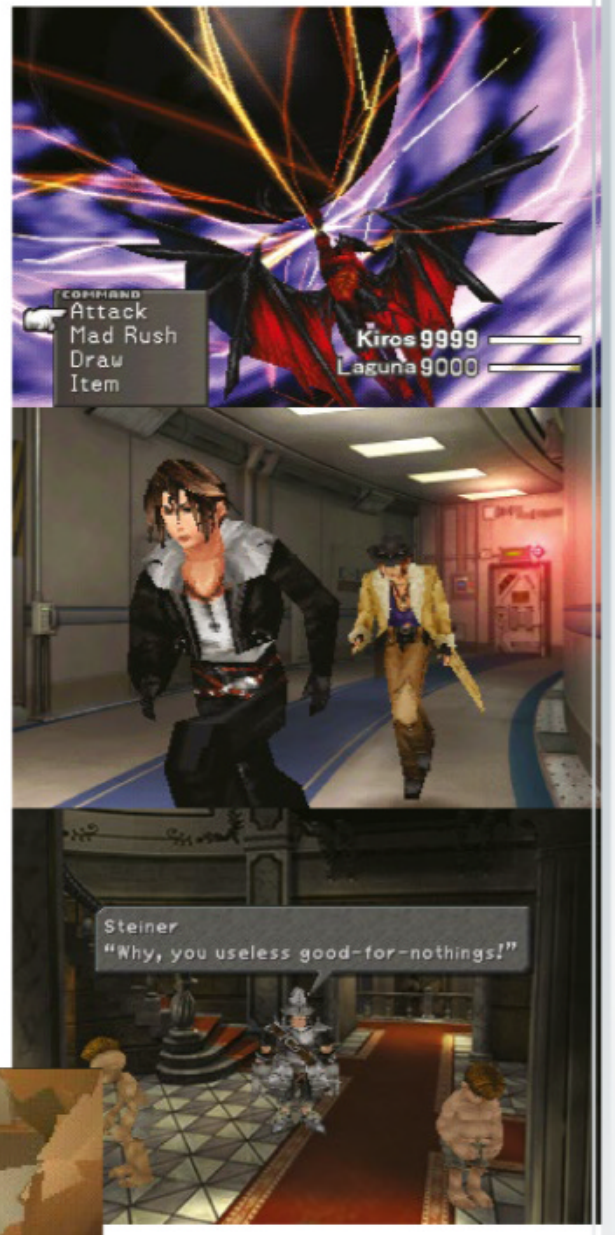
Final Fantasy V followed the story of Bartz Klauser, a wanderer who becomes wrapped up in a royal family's quest after happening upon a meteorite that had struck the planet. Mechanically, the biggest thing about *Final Fantasy V* is its incredibly expansive job system – you can assign one of 22 classes to any member of your party, giving you more choice than any other game in the series thus far.

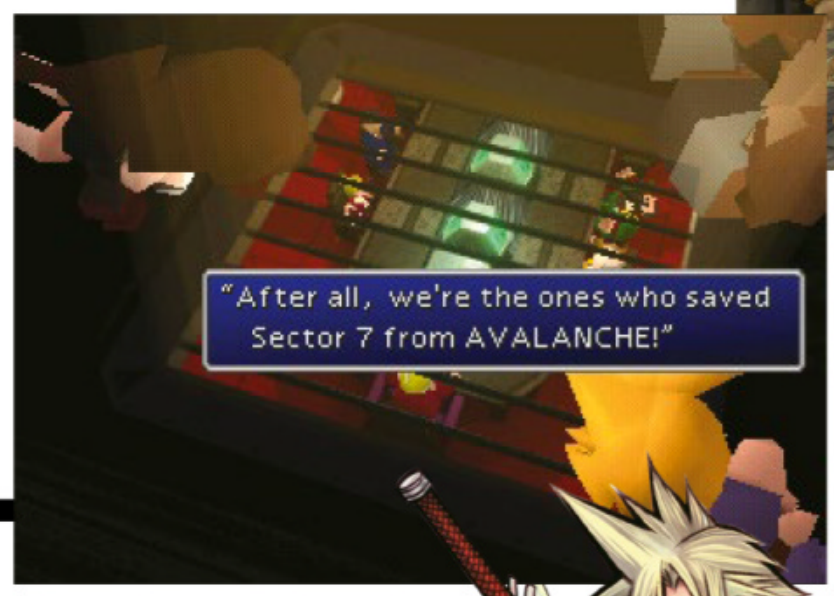
When it was released in December 1992, *Final Fantasy V* became the series' bestselling game in Japan by selling 2.45 million copies. Unfortunately, *Final Fantasy V* was the third game not to receive a timely English translation. Though it was being worked on, Square once again felt that difficulty was an issue – translator Ted Woolsey told *Super Play* that "although the more experienced gamers loved the complex character building, it's just not accessible enough to the average gamer."

***Final Fantasy V* was also the first game in the series to spawn a direct spinoff story, in the form of an anime video series titled *Final Fantasy: Legend Of The Crystals*.** However, this was another major step in establishing the identity of the *Final Fantasy* series – spinoffs have become as big a deal as the main games themselves, and they've proven incredibly versatile. "That is probably because the series has such a strong foundation in the first place and fans have such positive memories of the worlds and characters in them that they always want to spend more time there," Hashimoto assures us. Indeed, the number of non-crossover spinoffs lends weight to his argument – many characters and stories have even returned for their own individual follow-up projects, including the likes of the episodic game *Final Fantasy IV: The After Years*, the handheld sequel *Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings* and the CGI movie *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*.

Final Fantasy VI was the final game of the SNES era and one that started to shift the series away from traditional high-fantasy settings towards more sci-fi-influenced worlds – technological advances on display in the game's world include trains and drills, as well as coal mining. The story follows Terra Branford, a human-esper rescued from her Imperial captors by a resistance group. Technical advances over the previous SNES games were limited, and character customisation was once again simplified, allowing for characters to add equipment rather than going through job changes. Still, the game was exceptionally well-crafted, with amazing music, a lengthy main quest and memorable characters, particularly the main villain Kefka Palazzo. 2.62 million copies shifted in Japan following the game's April 1994 release, and a further 860,000 were sold in North America.

Though the first six games were obviously successful, *Final Fantasy* had been primarily a Japanese phenomenon for the first decade of its life. North America had received patchy support, and Europe hadn't been let in on the fun at all. This would all change with the introduction of *Final Fantasy VII*. It was an important game in many respects – it introduced 3D models and FMV to the *Final Fantasy* series, and marked the series' proper debut in Europe. Perhaps most significantly,





» *Final Fantasy IX* was the last of the highly stylised games, and used humour liberally.

» Custom scenes like this were only possible with the adoption of 3D character models.





CHOCOBO RACING

FINAL FANTASY XIV

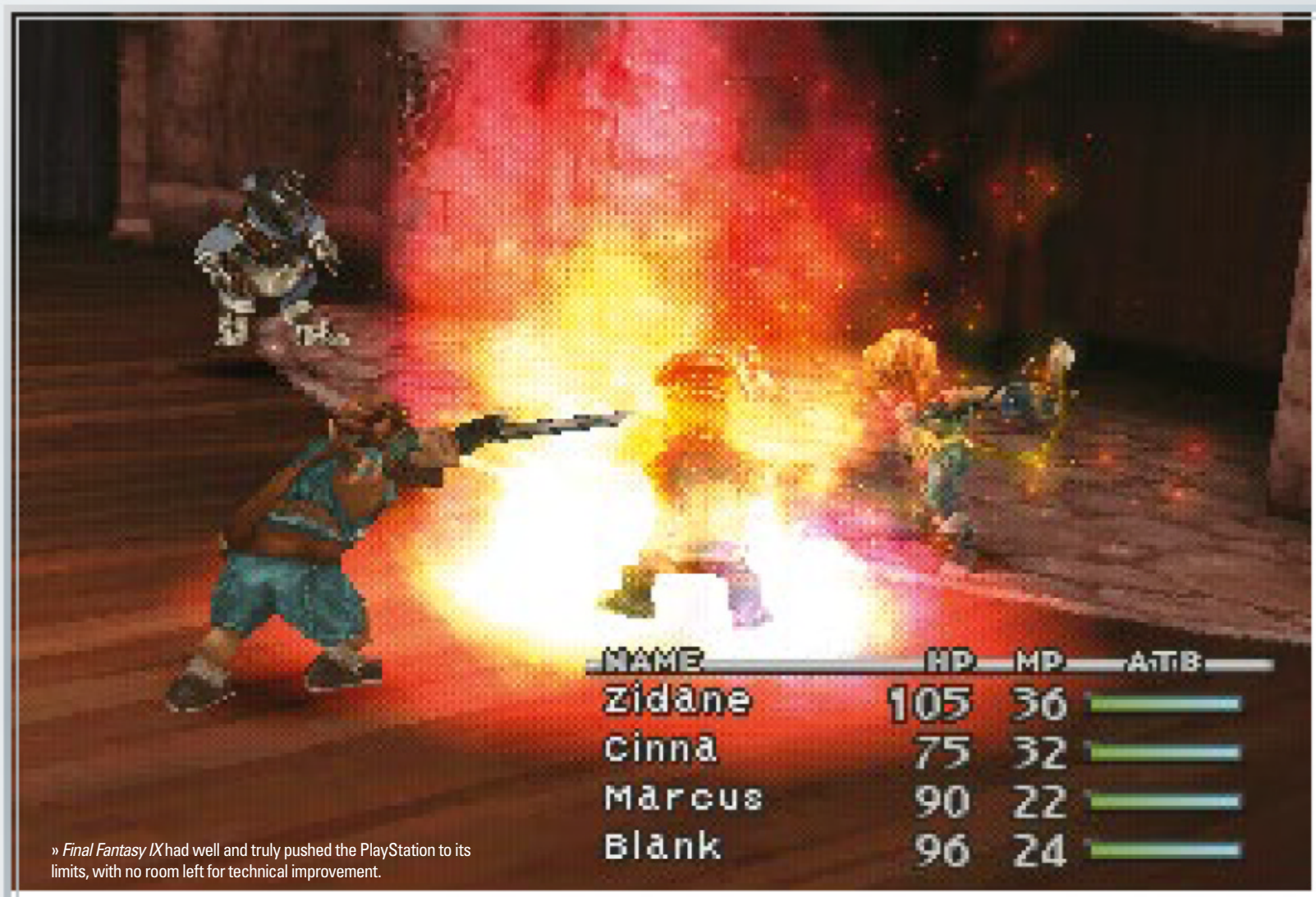
■ The MMORPG isn't the first game to allow players to race the iconic birds of the *Final Fantasy* series, but unlike previous incarnations, it allows you to beat other players with your expertly trained Chocobo – that's worth the price of admission alone.



FISHING

FINAL FANTASY XV

■ In a game where 'hanging out with the guys' seems to be a major driving factor, fishing is an obvious inclusion. This is another minigame spun off into a standalone production, with *Monster Of The Deep: Final Fantasy XV* coming soon for PlayStation VR.



» *Final Fantasy IX* had well and truly pushed the PlayStation to its limits, with no room left for technical improvement.

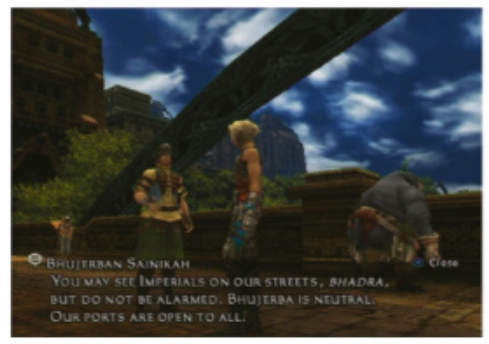


» Rikku and Yuna took the lead in *Final Fantasy X-2*, the first direct videogame sequel to a *Final Fantasy* game.

it marked the end of Squaresoft's historic link with Nintendo and the start of a strong relationship with Sony. *Final Fantasy VII* was set to be an epic and needed the massive storage afforded by CD-ROMs, a requirement at odds with Nintendo's decision to stick with cartridges for the N64.

It's fair to say that *Final Fantasy VII* revolutionised RPG production values. The basic elements of adventure, swords and sorcery remained, but where previous games had expressed this through small sprites and top-down or isometric viewpoints, *Final Fantasy VII* added previously unseen cinematic ambition. The use of polygonal characters on prerendered backdrops allowed for stunning wide shots of industrial facilities, claustrophobic close-ups in tight corridors, and even sequences overlaid on FMV. In the West, *Final Fantasy VII* blew away the stereotypical view of Japanese RPGs with an attractive sci-fi narrative. Critical acclaim followed, along with 10 million sales, making it the most popular game in the series.

For Hashimoto, it was a formative first experience with the series. "I have attachments to all the *Final Fantasy* games but the first one that I was actually involved in developing was *Final Fantasy VII*. *Final Fantasy VII* has some very strong memories for me. As well as the game itself, I was also involved



» Vaan certainly wouldn't want to see Imperials – he rather hates them.



» The first *Final Fantasy* MMO introduced drastic changes to everything, from the combat system to the storytelling.





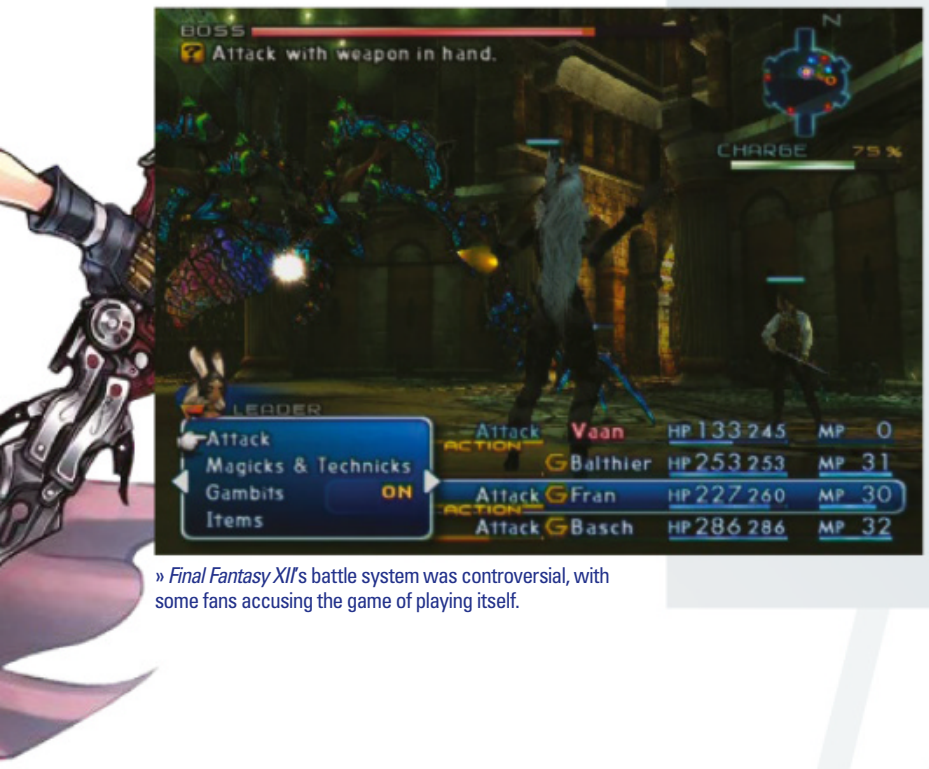
with the movie, and it was a very happy experience being able to take that to the Venice International Film festival."

With a brand-new audience captured, *Final Fantasy VIII* became the most highly anticipated entry in the series so far. The game signified some major changes for the *Final Fantasy* series, particularly in terms of artistic direction. Instead of the highly stylised character designs in past games, *Final Fantasy VIII* used realistic depictions of humans in all scenes. The game's plot followed Squall Leonhart and his fellow cadets from the SeeD military force, who start out by turning back advances from the hostile Republic of Galbadia.

Magic points were dropped from the battle system, with characters instead required to 'draw' spells from points around the world, as well as enemies. Magic could also be tied to your statistics via the Junction system, allowing you to stockpile spells to raise your stats. This ultimately proved to be somewhat broken, allowing players to build extraordinarily powerful characters too quickly.

Though critics loved it, *Final Fantasy VIII* can be a polarising game. Some of the millions who bought it in 1999 found themselves alienated by the new visual style and changes to the battle system. However, the game's fans will point to its incredible cinematic sequences, compelling (if convoluted) plot, and strong customisation elements as key qualities. 3.7 million copies were sold in Japan and 4.45 million elsewhere, which suggests that those fans might just be onto something.

The next three games in the series were all announced simultaneously, and were drastically different. *Final Fantasy IX* was a celebration of the past, offering one last set of stylised character designs in a classic kingdom setting – a merging of the old style of games with the latest production values. As the thief Zidane



» *Final Fantasy XII*'s battle system was controversial, with some fans accusing the game of playing itself.



» *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII* took combat realtime, to the delight of many.

"THE FIRST [FINAL FANTASY GAME] THAT I WAS ACTUALLY INVOLVED IN DEVELOPING WAS FINAL FANTASY VII"

SHINJI HASHIMOTO

Tribal, you end up taking in Alexandria's princess Garnet after attempting to kidnap her, only to find that she's worried by Queen Brahne and will join you willingly. Classic character classes return and characters can gain permanent skills from equipment.

With 5.3 million copies sold worldwide, *Final Fantasy IX* is less popular than its PlayStation predecessors, despite critical consensus holding it as arguably the best *Final Fantasy* game overall. Part of this can be attributed to the series falling behind technological progress for the first time, because it arrived during the peak of PlayStation 2 hype, and people were already looking ahead to the game's successor.

Final Fantasy X was an exploitation of increased power in the present. While the game was very much a traditionally structured entry in the *Final Fantasy* series, the arrival of the PlayStation 2 gave Square access to sufficient graphical power to move away from prerendered backgrounds, replacing them with realtime 3D environments. Additionally, the large capacity of DVDs allowed for the introduction of voice acting. The game follows Tidus, a Blitzball star in his native Zanarkand, who finds himself stranded in a place called Spira following the appearance of a destructive beast known as Sin. *Final Fantasy X* sold an enormous 6.6 million copies worldwide following its July 2001 release, and in 2006 Famitsu readers voted it the best game of all time.

Final Fantasy XI took the series in a whole new direction, as the first massively multiplayer online RPG in the series. Players are allowed to create their



» As the series' most recent MMO, *Final Fantasy XIV* has a lively population congregating in its bustling towns.

own characters and wander freely around the world of Vana'diel, banding together with others to complete missions and advance the story. The initial antagonist was the resurrected Shadow Lord, who needed to be defeated, but years of expansions and add-on content have shifted the focus of the storyline. The game was primarily developed for the PC and released in 2002, but gained cross-platform support with the PlayStation 2, and then an Xbox 360 version followed in 2006.

Numbering *Final Fantasy XI* as part of the main series was a bold move, but one that showed confidence in the game and ultimately paid off handsomely. The game reached break-even at 200,000 monthly subscribers, and had up to 300,000 daily players during 2003. In 2012, Square Enix announced that the game was the most profitable *Final Fantasy* title of all, and although the PS2 and Xbox 360 servers have been closed, the PC servers are still active, ensuring its status as one of the longest-running MMORPGs.

In the modern era, Square Enix has spent more time exploring the universes it has established. *Final Fantasy XII* (the making of which precedes this feature) was followed up very quickly with ▶



FLIGHTS OF FANTASY

We investigate the many spinoffs of the Final Fantasy universe



CRYSTAL CHRONICLES

FIRST RELEASE: **2003**
GAMES: **7**

■ First released on the GameCube and developed by The Game Designers Studio, *Crystal Chronicles* not only boastsed extensive GBA compatibility, but it also featured real-time fighting that instantly made it stand apart from the core *Final Fantasy* games.

The series has continued to evolve with subsequent releases, such as *My Life As A King*, which introduced city building, and *My Life As A Darklord*, which was a well-regarded tower defence game. The 2007 *Ring Of Fates* was a standalone release for the Nintendo DS, while the 2009 Wii exclusive, *The Crystal Bearers*, was the last current game in the series to be released.

CHOCOBO GAMES

FIRST RELEASE: **1997**
GAMES: **19**

■ Although the series has received more games than any other *Final Fantasy* spinoff, only a handful were released outside of Japan. The first game in the series, *Chocobo's Mysterious Dungeon*, never arrived in the West, although we did get to enjoy the 1999 sequel, *Chocobo's Dungeon 2. Chocobo Racing* was a decent-ish stab at a *Mario Kart* racer, while *Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales* for the DS was a card-based RPG that received a Japanese-exclusive sequel.

Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo's Dungeon improved on the original *Chocobo Dungeon* formula by adding new mechanics, like a job system, while *Chocobo Panic* was a bizarre variant on the old electronic game, *Simon*.





MANA SERIES

FIRST RELEASE: **1991**
GAMES: **10**

■ This is something of an odd inclusion but we're including it due to its origins. Known as *Seiken Densetsu: Final Fantasy Gaiden* in Japan, this Game Boy spinoff was called *Final Fantasy Adventure* in the states and *Mystic Quest* in Europe. Highly regarded as one of the best action games on Nintendo's portable, it eventually led to the critically-acclaimed *Secret Of Mana* in 1993. The series continued to move away from the *Final Fantasy* elements found in the original game, and is now considered a franchise in its own right. Interestingly, the last released game was *Adventures Of Mana* in 2016 for iOS and PS Vita, which was essentially a 3D remake of the original game.

FINAL FANTASY TACTICS

FIRST RELEASE: **1997**
GAMES: **4**

■ Unlike other *Final Fantasy* games, those in the *Tactics* series are strategy RPGs and very good ones at that. The original game was released on PlayStation in 1997 and was critically received at the time. It was eventually updated in the form of *Final Fantasy Tactics: The War Of The Lions* for PSP, and later iOS and Android.

Final Fantasy Tactics Advance followed on Game Boy Advance in 2003. It's not an actual sequel and is set in a dream world alternative of Ivalice. Its DS sequel, *Grimoire Of The Rift*, is actually set in the real version of Ivalice. The last game in the series, *Final Fantasy Tactics S*, was released in 2013 for iOS and Android, but closed its servers the following year.





CRYSTAL DEFENDERS

FIRST RELEASE: **2008**
GAMES: **2**

■ Originally known as *Crystal Guardians*, this interesting tower defence series started off life by being released on three separate mobile services in Japan, before eventually being consolidated and released on iOS (and later, Xbox 360 and PS3) as *Crystal Defenders*. As with *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* and its DS sequel, *Crystal Defenders* is set in *Final Fantasy XII*'s world of Ivalice, and features extremely distinctive artwork. A sequel, *Crystal Defenders: Vanguard Storm*, followed in 2009, which was specifically designed to work with a touch screen, and introduced new mechanics, including a fun take on 'rock-paper-scissors'. No additional games are currently being planned.

DISSIDIA FINAL FANTASY

FIRST RELEASE: **2008**
GAMES: **3**

■ *Dissidia* settles one of *Final Fantasy*'s biggest arguments: who would win in a fight between Cloud Strife and Squall Lionheart? It also answers many other hypothetical matches, as it allows a huge number of popular characters from the first ten games in the series (with one additional hero from *FFXI* and *FFXII*) to battle each other in arena-based combat.

Dissidia 012 Final Fantasy followed in 2011 and acted as both a prequel and a remake and introduced nine additional characters and tweaked many of the existing abilities of existing heroes. The most recent game, *Dissidia Final Fantasy*, was released in arcades in 2015 and is due to appear on PS4 in 2018.





KINGDOM HEARTS

FIRST RELEASE: **2002**
GAMES: **8**

■ A chance meeting in an elevator led to one of the most popular crossovers of recent memory. Joining Disney characters with those from the worlds of *Final Fantasy* seems an odd decision, but it works well. The original game sets the scene, introducing new characters – Sora, Riku and Kairi – and having them interact with some of Disney's biggest movies, from *The Little Mermaid* to *Tarzan*.

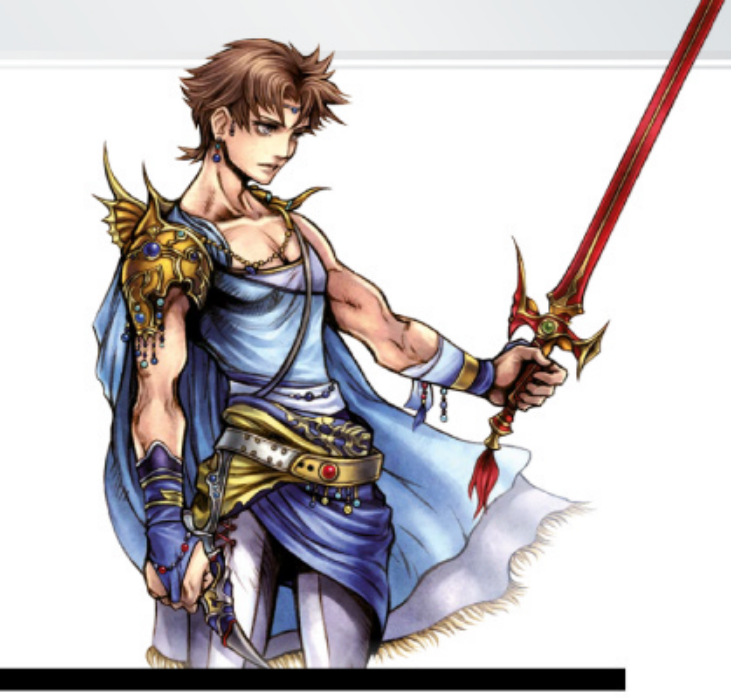
A core sequel, *Kingdom Hearts II*, was released in 2005, while *Kingdom Hearts III* is due sometime in 2018, but there are also countless minisequels and prequels as well as several HD remakes that can make it a little bewildering to those who haven't followed the series.

SAGA SERIES

FIRST RELEASE: **1989**
GAMES: **12**

■ This is another series that started off as a *Final Fantasy* spinoff before forming into its own standalone series. The two Game Boy sequels were eventually remade for the Nintendo DS, but were exclusive to Japan. The next three games were exclusive to the Super Famicom and were known as *Romancing SaGa 1-3*. *SaGa Frontier 1* and *2* were exclusive to PlayStation, while *Unlimited SaGa* and *Romancing SaGa: Minstrel Song* (an enhanced remake) debuted on the PS2. *Emperors SaGa* followed in 2012, which was exclusively for the GREE platform, while *Imperial SaGa* was exclusive to PC. The most recent game, *SaGa: Scarlet Grace*, was released for the PS Vita in 2016.







THEATRHYTHM

FIRST RELEASE: **2012**
GAMES: **3**

■ Considering how famed the *Final Fantasy* series is for its intricately designed compositions, we're surprised it took so long for a rhythm action game to receive a release. Developed by indieszero, it works as a brilliant slice of fan service, delivering some of the franchise's biggest tunes and marrying them to a number of entertaining game modes. A quasi-sequel, *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call*, was released in 2014, and enhanced the base game and introduced a new mode called Medley Quests. It also featured 221 songs and 60 characters, with additional ones being available in the form of DLC. The most recent game in the series focuses on the *Dragon Quest* franchise.



WORLD OF FINAL FANTASY

FIRST RELEASE: **2016**
GAMES: **1**

■ Tose, Division 3 and Square Enix Business worked together on *World Of Final Fantasy* as a celebration of the franchise's 30th anniversary. As with the *Kingdom Hearts* series, it features new protagonists (Lann and Reynn) but has them interact with a large number of classic characters and monsters from the popular franchise.

Set in the world of Grymoire, it features a distinctive chibi-like style, which some may find a little too cute for their tastes. It works well, however, ensuring the likes of Cloud Strife and Lightning are instantly recognisable. It's notable for having a long development period, so the localisation could be as close to the original Japanese dialogue as possible.

▶ a handheld sequel, and Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 owners were catered to with the *Final Fantasy XIII* series, a trilogy of games released between 2009 and 2014 with Lightning as the figurehead.

The *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy was particularly interesting to watch, as the gameplay changed quite a lot between each instalment. While *Final Fantasy XIII* did well with critics, it was roundly criticised for its linearity and Lightning's cold personality. "We do take on board the opinions of our fans, but at the same time we balance that with the unique personality and vision of each episode's director and make full use of those as well," notes Hashimoto. The results of that listening process were *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, a less linear game with a reduced emphasis on Lightning, and *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*, an open world game that gives the player full choice over the quests they take and a real-time combat system. Despite these changes, neither game did quite as well as the original with critics.

Another game that came in for criticism was *Final Fantasy XIV*, the second MMORPG entry in the series set in the world of Eorzea. The initial response to the game in 2010 was incredibly poor, based on its gameplay and interface. Square Enix responded by dropping the game's fees completely and making improvements, but it wasn't enough – eventually, the servers were shuttered in 2012, and the game was replaced in 2013 with *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*, a much better version that is currently active with a player base that's over 800,000 subscribers.

That's a non-traditional solution to a bad game, but it's fair to say that after 30 years, it's clear that *Final Fantasy* can forge its own path without being beholden to history. 2016's *Final Fantasy XV* is a great example of that – if you brought a *Final Fantasy* fan from the late Eighties to the present day, the Xbox One and PS4 game would be practically unrecognisable to them, given that the common image is a bunch of guys driving around in a car. Yet the open structure, contemporary clothing styles and real-time combat all make sense when you look at how the series has developed over the last three decades, and it's plain to see that people who became hooked on *Final Fantasy* many years ago are still going along for the ride with Square Enix.

So, how does Hashimoto see the series as it reaches its thirtieth anniversary? "It would be easy to sum up those 30 years in some way, but I really could not even begin to talk about the series without mentioning the sheer passion and ability of all the talented creators that have worked on *Final Fantasy* over its lifetime," he says, offering credit to the development teams. Although it can be debated which individual elements have most heavily driven the success of the series, for Hashimoto there's no individual unique selling point. "I think that one of *Final Fantasy*'s biggest strengths is that sheer energy that comes through when you combine all the different elements together: the characters, the story, CG and music etc.."

Indeed, while *Final Fantasy* has adapted to changing tastes over the years, the desire for it to be at the forefront of the Japanese RPG market has never wavered. "The *Final Fantasy* series will continue to be a hungry contender, always taking on new challenges and pushing for the top. Nobody knows what the future holds but I think that the series will continue to produce unique and imaginative games," Hashimoto concludes. Given the experiences that philosophy has produced over the last 30 years, we'll definitely be keeping our eyes on *Final Fantasy* over the years to come. ✱



» Realtime combat expanded into a team environment in *Final Fantasy XV*.

"WE DO TAKE ON BOARD THE OPINIONS OF OUR FANS, BUT AT THE SAME TIME WE BALANCE THAT WITH THE UNIQUE PERSONALITY AND VISION OF EACH EPISODE'S DIRECTOR"

SHINJI HASHIMOTO



» Do chocobos count as luxury travel in *Final Fantasy XV*? These guys are more accustomed to their car.

Final Fantasy Trading Card Game

» **DEVELOPER:** SQUARE ENIX » **FIRST RELEASED:** 2011 (JAPAN) 2016 (WORLDWIDE)
» **EXPECT TO PAY:** £11.99 FOR A STARTER DECK

The heroes, villains and worlds of each *Final Fantasy* game are gorgeously rich and diverse. There's a heck of a lot of them, too, so summoning this much-loved 30-year-old franchise into a collectable card game must've been a no-brainer for developer Square Enix. The card game revolves around playing cards from your hand into either a 'forward' or 'backup' lane, with the aim of building an attack force that can wipe out your opponent's cards, leaving them open for a direct hit. Once you score seven points of damage to your opponent, you will emerge victorious.

Of course, there's a little more nuance to it than that. Each card has a cost to play, and an element that you must pay for in Crystal Points (CP). To earn CP you can discard cards from your hand that match the element of the card you wish to play, alternatively you can tap into the power of a card you've played in your backup lane. Each of your forward cards has a value that acts as both its attack power and HP, and once that's reduced then the card 'breaks' and is discarded.

It makes for a strategic game of resource management, one that isn't as complex as *Magic: The Gathering*, but is for the player who has enjoyed the likes of the *Pokémon Trading Card Game* in the past. The cards themselves are lovely, too, utilising the wonderful art from the series and boasting a robust, sturdy build quality.



» The cards themselves are wonderful collectors' items for fans of the series

INSTANT GUIDE

1. Abilities



Non-standard cards have special abilities. The Emperor, for example, lets you play another Emperor card if it gets sent to the Break Zone (essentially the graveyard). It's important to consider your cards' abilities and build a deck where they synergise together.

2. Artwork



Final Fantasy is known for its stellar visuals and characters, and this is reflected in the card art. The cards use pre-existing *Final Fantasy* illustrations and renders, be it from the games themselves or concept art, making for a diverse library of artistry.



3. Category

The roman numeral on the middle-right of each card indicates which game the character has come from. So, if you happen across an unfamiliar-looking card in a booster pack and want to learn more, Square Enix has got you covered.

4. Attack power

That big, important-looking number in the bottom-right of your forward cards is their attack power. The bigger the value, the more damage it will be able to deal to your opponent's forwards. Keep in mind, this also acts as their health value, too.



Or you could try:

POKÉMON TRADING CARD GAME

If this caught your eye, odds are you're a fan of videogames, so why not try the most famous card game to be spawned from one! The *Pokémon TCG* is brimming with different cards and strategies, plus it has the benefit of knocking around for almost 20 years – and it's still going strong. With multiple sets being released each year, and tournaments held worldwide, there's always a good reason to jump into this phenomenon.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Discover how Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson created a game that's as relevant today as it was four decades ago



Before there were dungeons, or even dragons for that matter, there was Jeff Perren. Perren was a game designer, a friend of the late Gary Gygax and a member of the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association (as Gygax was). When the convention received a large number of Elastolin figures, it inspired Perren to create a new set of rules which focused on mass combat. Gygax took the base rules, added a fantasy twist and made some tweaks, with the end result being published as *Chainmail*.

The late Dave Arneson was well aware of *Chainmail*, because he was using it while playing *Braunstein*, an unpublished Napoleonic game that was set in the fictional town of Braunstein. It was more focused on individual play as opposed to the popular mass combat games of the time and Arneson was using *Chainmail*'s combat system. He started adding additional mechanics like levels, experience points, armour class and other important elements which would define the genre for years to come, and eventually made his way to Gygax.

Gygax began crafting a world and rule set to house all the interesting mechanics that Arneson had created and he took inspiration from a huge variety of sources. History, world mythology and pulp fiction all played important parts for Gygax while he was creating his new universe, but fantasy novels, particularly *The Lord Of The Rings*, would prove to be one of the most valuable resources. Copyright action from Tolkien Enterprises meant Gygax had to change a number of creatures and races, so hobbits became halflings, ents became treants and so on, leading Gygax to downplay the importance of Tolkien's influence on his game (although he eventually admitted that the books had "a strong impact" on him in a 2000 interview).

Literature continued to shape *Dungeons & Dragons* with various monsters, spells and magical

Most Desireable
Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set

■ First released in 1977, TSR's gateway entry into the world of *D&D* really came alive with its third revision in 1983. Housed in a gorgeous red box, it included a 64-page *Players Manual*, a 48-page *Dungeon Masters Rulebook*, six dice and stunning artwork by Larry Elmore.

Widely available in all sorts of locations (even high profile high street shops sold it) it was instantly recognisable and was designed to take characters up to level three. Four additional sets were available, which would eventually take heroes all the way to immortality status. Fortunately, it's relatively cheap to pick up nowadays, with the 1983 version selling for around £25.



“The first version of Dungeons & Dragons was released across a set of three booklets in 1974. It became a considerable success, easily selling over a 1,000 copies in its first year”

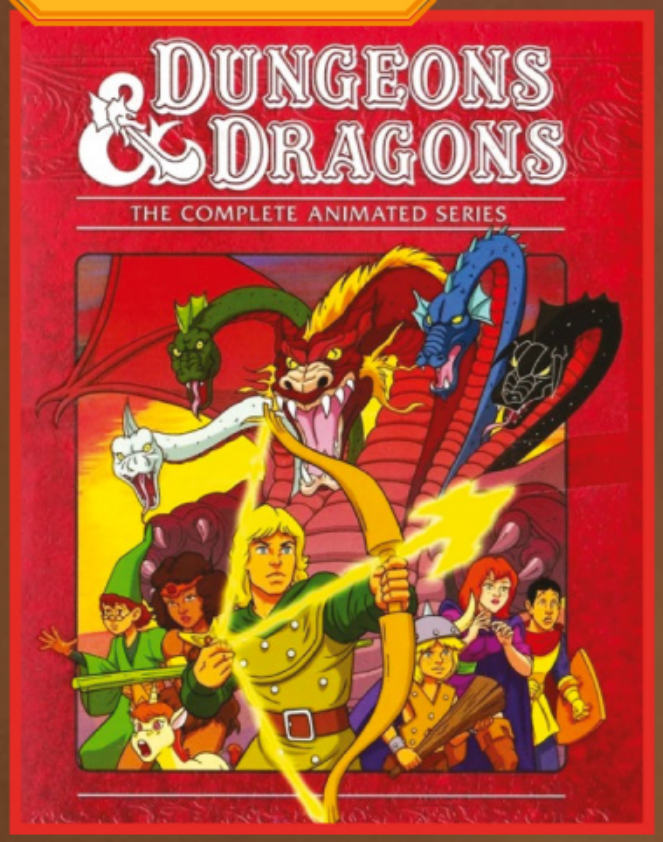
items coming from the works of Lewis Carroll, Edgar Rice Burroughs, HP Lovecraft, Fletcher Pratt, Michael Moorcock and many, many others. Jack Vance’s *Dying Earth* series heavily influenced how wizards would memorise their spells, while Poul Anderson’s *Three Hearts And Three Lions* would form the basis of D&D’s alignment system. Even the *Book Of Genesis* provided inspiration, with the flaming sword described in it inspiring the clerical spell, Blade Barrier.

The first version of *Dungeons & Dragons* was released across a set of three booklets in 1974. Despite being rather basic looking and needing a heavy reliance on familiarity with wargaming it became a considerable success, easily selling over 1,000 copies in its first year of release. Gygax and Arneson had created something truly special, but it was only going to get bigger…

In 1977, TSR, the owners of *Dungeons & Dragons*, introduced a brand new concept for playing *D&D*. While it divided the user base in some ways and caused various issues along the way, it arguably helped popularise the company’s game and helped bring it to even more people. TSR essentially split *Dungeons & Dragons* in half. There was a basic set, which was put together by J Eric Holmes, as well as *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, a more complex version of the game which was targeted at advanced hobby gamers and overseen by Gygax. It meant that TSR not only had the perfect springboard for those eager to try its new game, but was also able to appeal to long-term gamers who were looking for a fresh challenge. Many of the rules contradicted each other, but the lighter tone and structure of the basic set made it perfect and it was soon being found throughout the United States and numerous other countries.

The rules for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* were spread across three core books (a concept that remains to this day): *The Player's Handbook*, *The Dungeon Master's Guide* and the *Monster Manual*, all of which were essential to play the game. As more and more people became interested in the game, TSR released all sorts of expansion adventures (called modules) and campaign settings, for those gamers who were

Essential Merch



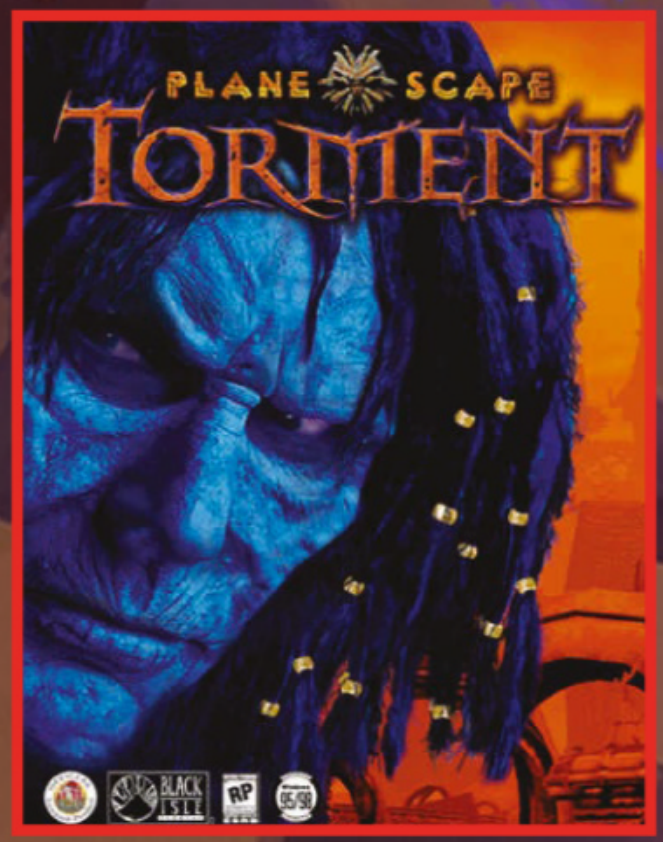
The Complete Animated Series

■ The adventures of Hank the ranger, Bobby the barbarian and Presto the wizard were essential viewing to any kid that grew up in the early 1980s and it's now possible to get every single episode on a complete DVD boxset. It even reveals the outcome of the final, unproduced finale, Requiem.



Ravenloft

■ There are countless brilliant *AD&D* modules, but one of the best is easily this 1983 offering by Tracy and Laura Hickman. Effectively their own take on Count Dracula, it became so popular that TSR turned it into a campaign setting in 1990. It now sells for around the £30 mark.



Planescape: Torment

■ This exceptional 1999 adventure game is not only considered to be the best *D&D* videogame adaptation, but one of the best Western RPGs. Coded by Black Isle Studio, it features a deep, gripping story and incredibly memorable characters.
An enhanced version was recently by Beamdog in 2017.

▶ too lazy, or simply didn't have the time, to create their own wondrous worlds.

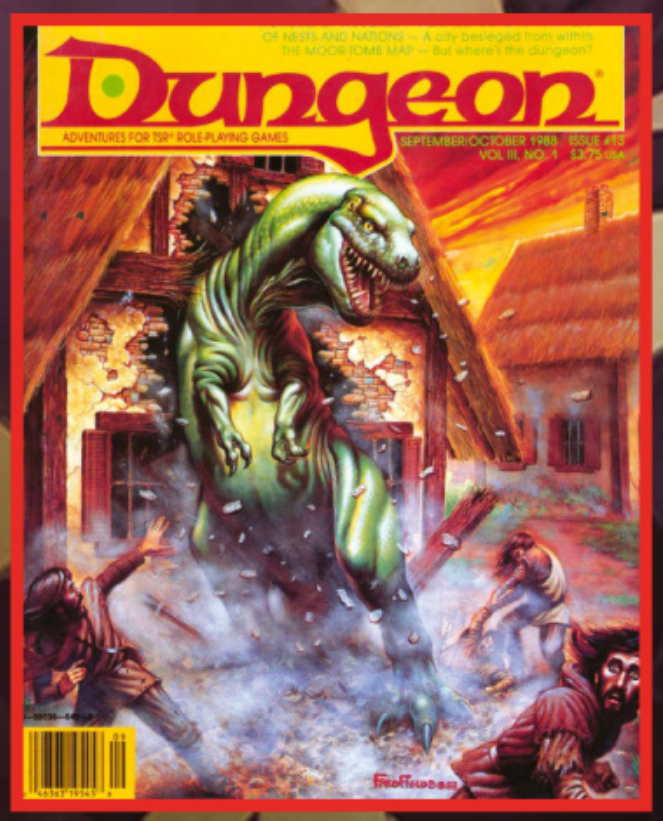
D&D really came of age during the 1980s with films like *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* and a *D&D* TV show, which ran from 1983 to 1985. All sorts of campaign worlds were introduced during the period, including *Mystara*, *Dragonlance*, *Greyhawk* and *Forgotten Realms* (which remains the most popular setting to this day) and countless new rule books were released. Novels based around the campaign worlds grew in popularity and numerous videogames started to appear also. Its success drew controversy however, particularly from Christian groups who claimed it promoted witchcraft, pornography, murder, suicide and Satanism. More bad publicity came after the press linked the disappearance of 16-year-old James Dallas Egbert III to the game and the one-woman crusade of Patricia Pulling, who founded Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons after her son committed suicide. He was an active player of the game and the lawsuit she filed against TSR led both her and Gary Gygax to appear on *60 Minutes*.

When TSR revised its rule set in 1989, it took the opportunity to remove all references to demons, devils and other potentially offensive supernatural entities. Demons became known as tanar'ri, while devils were known as baatezu. The controversy had played its hand however, and *D&D* began to be confined to specialist hobby shops.

In the subsequent decades the game continued to evolve and change. Most notably its publisher, and original owner, TSR, was acquired by Wizards Of The Coast, the owners of the popular collectible card game, *Magic: The Gathering*. New campaigns were introduced, novels based on the various game



"Basically, if you are interested in entering the exciting world of D&D, there's never been a better time to discover it"



worlds continued to be popular and videogames continued to evolve. *D&D* continued to be referred to in popular culture and has had something of a renaissance in the last decade thanks to brilliant references in shows like *Community* and *Stranger Things*, as well as popular podcasts like *Critical Role*.

Now in its fifth edition, *Dungeons & Dragons* shows no signs of slowing down and its rich rule set, emphasis on working together with a group of like-minded people, and sheer creativity continues to excite gamers to this day. It's astonishing to think that after nearly 45 years the creation of Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson is stronger than ever.

The sheer breadth and diversity of *Dungeons & Dragons* means there's pretty much something for everyone. Want to play an apocalyptic version of *D&D*? Then you'll want to track down *Dark Sun*. Fancy playing in an Arabian Nights campaign setting? Then *Al-Qadim* is the perfect set for you. Horror fans can delve into the excellent *Ravenloft*, sci-fi fans can try out the short-lived *Spelljammer* campaign, while those interested in more traditional settings can seek out the likes of *Greyhawk*, *Dragonlance* and *Forgotten Realms*; there really is something for everybody.

There are a wide range of videogames based in *D&D* universes, some of which are slowly rising in price and include the likes of the *Eye Of The Beholder* games and the *Baldur's Gate* series. As with anything collectible, it's typically super-popular items or the ones that failed first time around that go for the most money, but fortunately, even first edition books of *D&D* can be picked up relatively cheaply, and it's often the modular adventures that tend to go for more money. Because the rules of *D&D* have constantly evolved over the years, certain players will favour certain rule sets, which can again keep costs down. Basically, if you are interested in entering the exciting world of *D&D*, there's never been a better time to discover it.





THE HISTORY OF THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

DONKEY KONG MAY WELL HAVE BEEN NINTENDO'S MOST IMPORTANT CREATION BUT THERE'S ANOTHER THAT WAS THE REAL DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE COMPANY'S SUCCESS; A GAME THAT THE BIG APE HELPED TO STUMP UP THE CASH FOR. JOIN STUART HUNT AND NICK THORPE AS THEY CELEBRATE ONE OF GAMING'S GREATEST FRANCHISES



Since his videogame debut in 1985 (save for the Virtual Boy), Link has always worked his little elfin boots off to ignite interest into every single piece of Nintendo hardware to ever find a release… and even some of the weird and wonderful contraptions that never left his native Japan. Even through that dark GameCube period, where seemingly infallible Nintendo IPs were somehow failing to capture that Nintendo magic, there was one licence that has always looked after its Nintendo Seal of Quality. It's apt then that *Zelda* would become the final resting place for the GameCube, and the first licence that Nintendo would turn to as a 'proper' launch title for its much-hyped Switch.

Before Hyrule, videogames were usually single-screen worlds filled with bleeping and chirping sprites, where progression and skill was distinguished by stamping three letters into a list. And before *The Legend Of Zelda*, game narratives were generally spared a measly paragraph on an arcade cab or a few dubiously spelt words on a menu screen, and rules and stories would generally play out via easily digestible visuals and an ounce of common sense – escape the ghosts, shoot the crab-looking invader, avoid those asteroids.

Off the back of the unprecedented arcade success of *Donkey Kong*, Nintendo would be able to finance three pivotal projects that would transform it from a Hanafuda card manufacturer dabbling in the world of electronic entertainment, to a leading player in that very market almost overnight: the Famicom, *Super Mario Bros* and *The Legend Of Zelda*.

Zelda's development would begin at around the same time as *Super Mario Bros*, with Shigeru Miyamoto splitting his time between his divided development team and overseeing both projects. His early intention for *The Legend Of Zelda* was to create a sprawling 'virtual garden'; a videogame set inside a lush world that would grow and unfurl. The thinking, at that time, was that *Super Mario Bros* was going to offer an immediately accessible and technically unique gaming experience, and *The Legend Of Zelda* would offer gamers the freedom to essentially shape their own adventure.

Despite this peculiar juxtaposition of projects inside the camp, *Mario* and *Zelda* would both decide to outmode the element of high-score chasing and instead replace it with the notion of completion – ending the gaming experience and unlocking a reward screen for your troubles. It was a belief that wouldn't hold up inside the money-feeding world of arcade gaming, but one that Miyamoto believed was perfectly viable in the home.

Miyamoto grew up in the small town of Sonebe, in Kyoto, Japan – a picturesque upbringing that would offer the perfect place for his fertile mind to wander. He was a keen artist with an affinity for music, architecture and design; passions that would ultimately lead him onto an academic road in industrial design and as a staff artist for Nintendo. But it was his early fascination for exploration that he would ultimately try to impart to the player through *Zelda*.

His inspiration behind the dungeons – now a staple of the *Zelda* series – came ▶



» *Zelda II* is generally regarded as one of the weakest games in the series.



» *The Legend of Zelda* satisfied Miyamoto's love of exploring. It remains a superb NES game.

A Link To The Palm

WE TAKE A QUICK LOOK AT SOME OF LINK'S BEST PORTABLE ADVENTURES



The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening

Released: 1993
System: Game Boy

The first, and what many fans consider the best, portable *Zelda* game. *Link's Awakening* was a dazzling GB follow-up to *A Link To The Past* that would mark the first time that the series would ever play an away game and Zelda and the Triforce would get left on the sub's bench. It's also the first *Zelda* game not to be directed by Shigsy – possibly why it has a lot of *Mario* imagery in it. Link is marooned on the strange island of Koholint, where he learns of the mysterious Wind Fish; a giant guppy that lives inside an egg sitting aloft a volcano. Legend has it that when the fish is awoken he will be mighty peeved and the island will disappear, so Link and an owl set off to find an orchestra of instruments and aim to wake up the slumbering Fish to put the myth to the test.



The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening DX

Released: 1998
System: Game Boy Color

Adding its name to the Game Boy Color's Deluxe series, *Link's Awakening DX* would be a coloured-in, spruced-up port of the Game Boy original. As well as improving the visuals (which looked pretty fantastic to begin with) Nintendo would also add a few new additions to the game, most notably a new 'Color Dungeon', which made use of colour-based puzzles, and a camera shop and photo album function that made use of the Game Boy Printer.



The Legend Of Zelda: Oracle Of Seasons/Oracle of Ages

Released: 2001
System: Game Boy Color/Game Boy Advance

Released consecutively, *Oracle Of Ages* and *Oracle Of Seasons* would be the first handheld *Zelda* games not to be developed by Nintendo. Instead, the Capcom/Sega-funded studio Flagship, founded by Capcom stalwart Yoshiki Okamoto, would take hold of the reigns. The *Oracle* series would initially start out as a planned Triforce trilogy; three games that could be played in any order and allow your actions in one game to have an influence on the others. Because of the complexity in achieving this, the idea was later scrapped and the trilogy became a duo. But through use of a password system the influencing elements would remain.



The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past & Four Swords

Released: 2003
System: Game Boy Advance

Marking the start of a series crossover between the GBA and the GameCube, Flagship Studios was at it again with this sublime double-pack that housed a brilliant redux of the SNES classic and a four-player multiplayer add-on in *Four Swords* (the first time the series would introduce multiplayer elements). *Four Swords* allowed two to four players to link up their GBAs, take control of a different coloured Link (red, blue, purple and green) and work together to crack its clever colour-themed puzzles. Adopting *The Wind Waker*'s chipper look, the game would also introduce a new villain in Vaati, who would become an iniquitous mainstay in the *Four Swords* series.



The Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap

Released: 2004
System: Game Boy Advance

Just to make things confusing for everyone, *The Minish Cap* marks the final game in Flagship's *Four Swords* trilogy, but is actually said to be the prequel to the first game (*Link's Awakening: Four Swords*) in the series. In terms of narrative – sages being mysteriously transformed into talking caps, Link shrinking in size and then bafflingly transforming into a large sphere – it is all a little bit strange, but it all makes for another quality *Zelda* caper. Graphically, with a closer camera, picking up the brilliant hues and attention to detail packed into the game, *The Minish Cap* is probably the best-looking *Zelda* handheld game to find a release before *Phantom Hourglass*.



The Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass

Released: 2007
System: DS

Making inspired use of the Nintendo DS's touch-screen capabilities, *The Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* shows us how great a *Zelda* game can be when Nintendo builds it specifically around its hardware (which has us eagerly anticipating whatever it has up its sleeves for the series on the Wii). A direct sequel to *Wind Waker*, seafaring elements would again play a strong role, with the stylus being used to plot your journey and jot down notes and reminders on the game map. Couple this with a brilliant story, lush visuals and quirky puzzles and *Phantom Hourglass* maintains *Zelda*'s impeccable handheld lineage.





» *Four Swords Adventures* on the GameCube allowed four friends to link up their GBAs and tier off to do their own thing.



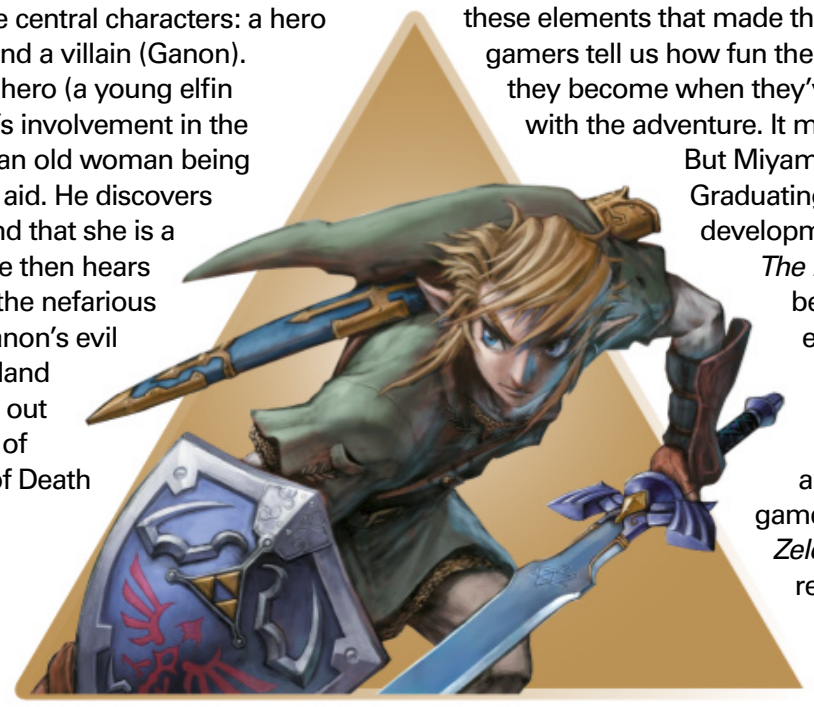
» *Four Swords Adventures* introduced a unique strategy element to the combat of *Zelda*. While teamwork was essential, it soon went to pot once everyone started fighting over rupees.

from the many hours he would spend playing around the rooms of his home as a boy, and the crystal lakes and bountiful greenery of Hyrule from his recollections of exploring the vast fields nearby. Miyamoto's decision to use the name Zelda was inspired by the wife of the American author F Scott Fitzgerald. Famously dubbed "the first American flapper" (the term for a ladette in the Forties), it was her wilful nature that Miyamoto would find so endearing, and persuade him to select her as the muse for the titular princess. With his ideas in place, all he needed to do was create a game.

As with *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros*, Miyamoto would polarise *Zelda*'s story around three central characters: a hero (Link), a damsel (Princess Zelda) and a villain (Ganon). Again it would look to an unusual hero (a young elfin boy) to embark on the quest. Link's involvement in the story comes about after he spots an old woman being attacked and quickly jumps to her aid. He discovers that the woman's name is Impa and that she is a porter to the Princess of Hyrule. He then hears news of the ensnared princess at the nefarious trotters of Ganon and learns of Ganon's evil intentions for the Triforce and the land of Hyrule, and duly agrees to seek out the eight segments of the Triforce of Wisdom and ventures to the top of Death Mountain where Ganon awaits.

In the first game, the Triforce is described as 'three magical triangles' capable of granting great power to their bearer. But its mythology and origins would continue to evolve throughout the series. Essentially, the Triforce is the catalyst, the object of desire that brings and binds the story and characters together. Inside Hyrule there exists three parts to the Triforce: the Triforce of Power that Ganon acquires during his siege on Hyrule castle, the Triforce of Wisdom, which is the part Link is seeking inside the dungeons beneath Hyrule, and the Triforce of Courage, which would first make an appearance in *The Adventure Of Link*.

The Legend Of Zelda was first released in 1986 on the Famicom Disc System, a secondary disk drive that made use of rewritable disks, which never found a release outside of Japan. In the West the game came pressed on majestic gold cartridges that incorporated an internal battery facility to save game data, and it would become the first game cartridge to do this.



Miyamoto's notion to have the game feel completely bilinear was very apparent. Dropped into a huge overhead world, paved with little direction, it would be left to the player to decipher *Zelda*'s modus through consideration and natural exploration alone; a mantra that actually caused a bout of anxiety in the prolific game designer when the game was eventually released.

"I remember that we were very nervous because *The Legend Of Zelda* was our first game that forced players to think about what they should do next," Miyamoto told Superplay magazine. "We were afraid gamers would become bored and stressed by the new concept. Luckily, they reacted the total opposite. It was these elements that made the game so popular and today gamers tell us how fun the *Zelda* riddles are, and how happy they become when they've solved a task and proceeded with the adventure. It makes me a happy producer!"

But Miyamoto needn't have worried. Graduating with honours alongside its developmental classmate *Super Mario Bros*, *The Legend Of Zelda* would go on to be hugely successful for Nintendo, eventually grossing sales of 6 million copies.

As with *Donkey Kong*, Nintendo was quick to churn out a sequel while the popularity of the game was still piquant. And a year later *Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link* was released. Although Miyamoto would oversee the game's development, its creation would fall to a new development team, one who would switch the action from overhead to a side-on perspective and bathe it in subtle *Mario*-esque platform undertones – a change that proved to be unpopular with fans of the original. Its structure would remain generally similar to the first though. It is another 'find several somethings' (nine crystals) to open 'something' (the Great Palace) that holds 'something with wish-granting properties' (the Triforce of Courage) – and this is a structure that has been mirrored for almost every game in the series.

The Adventure Of Link would also introduce a few staples of the RPG genre that would never really take off in the series. Link, for instance, could earn experience points to beef up his attacks, raise his stamina and also obtain magic points to cast spells. However, the game would also introduce village sections,

The Missing Links

We take a look at some of the Zelda titles that slipped through the release net…

The Legend Of Zelda 64
Nintendo 64DD
Originally said to be a launch title for the 64DD, *The Legend Of Zelda 64* was rumoured to have been a weird coaxial of *Ocarina Of Time* and *Majora's Mask*. Long delays and a lack of confidence in the hardware would force Nintendo to cram the game on to a large N64 cart and release it as *Ocarina Of Time* instead.

Zelda: Gaiden
Nintendo 64DD
Rumoured to be a very early sequel to *Ocarina Of Time* that would make full use of the 64DD's advanced memory system, this 64DD *Zelda* project was again switched to standard N64 carts and would be released as *Majora's Mask*.

Ura Zelda
Nintendo 64DD
Picking up where *Ocarina* left off, this add-on pack originally intended for the 64DD was to chronicle Link's mission to find the Triforce. It would later find a release in the form of the *Master Quest* bonus disc and was released with *The Wind Waker*.

The Legend Of Zelda
Game Boy Color
Said to be developed by Capcom's studio Flagship, it's believed that inside the vaults of Nintendo headquarters lives an extremely sought-after GBC port of the original NES game. If this rumour holds water then it's probably the most valuable videogame in existence.

The Mystical Seed series aka Triforce Trilogy
Game Boy Colour
The two games from the *Oracle* series would originally be intended to be a series of three games called the *Mystical Seed* series. They were to be named after the three seeds of Power, Courage and Wisdom. One game was eventually dropped and Flagship would release them as two games.

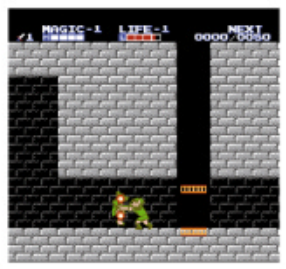
Zelda III
NES
Apparently, before releasing *A Link To The Past* on the Super Nintendo it's believed that Nintendo was actually working on another *Zelda* game for the NES that was said to marry elements of the first two games. It's believed that its bones were later used to create *Link's Awakening*.

The many legends of Zelda

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (1986)
The evil pig-faced Ganon has invaded Hyrule Kingdom and kidnapped Princess Zelda. During the siege he steals the Triforce of Power. But it transpires that a cunning Zelda somehow managed to shatter the Triforce of Wisdom and scatter its parts around the dungeons of Hyrule. When Link gets wind of this he vows to collect up the pieces, glue them back together and go and save the princess.



ZELDA II: THE ADVENTURE OF LINK (1987)
Lending quite a bit from *Sleeping Beauty*, Link is trying to wake Princess Zelda from a potent sleeping spell cast on her by a powerful sorcerer. The evil mage is holed up inside the ruins of the Great Palace and has locked the door using magic. It's up to Link to seek out the scattered shards of the Magic Crystal in Hyrule, break the seal, fight a doppelgänger and then restore peace to Hyrule Kingdom.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST (1991)
Thanks to an evil sorcerer named Agahnim, Ganon has returned from the darkness again – and this time he has a pitchfork with him! Agahnim has also dethroned the king of Hyrule, kidnapped his daughter Zelda and opened up a portal to the Golden Land that has allowed a whole bunch of evil to flood in and wreak havoc in the once peaceful land of Hyrule.



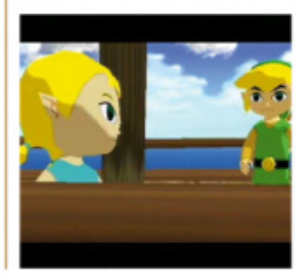
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME (1998)
Ganon's back once again in *Ocarina Of Time*, and this time he's up to his old megalomaniac tricks, so Link's on a mission to banish him to the Dark World forever (well, at least until the next *Zelda* release, that is). To do this Link requires the power of the Seven Sages, and to find them he must travel back in time making changes in one time that will have a knock-on affect on the next.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK (2000)
Link is cast into an alternative world known as Termina (a slightly more chic version of Hyrule). But when he arrives he soon discovers that the world, in three days time, will be levelled to dust by its moon. With just 72 hours on the clock, Link must work fast to locate Majora's Mask and save the world and its people from an imminent moon-crushing.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER (2002)
In *The Wind Waker* Link is on a mission to rescue his sister, who has been abducted and locked up somewhere by a giant bird. Surrounded by miles of water, and using the power of the Wind Waker – which gives Link the power to change the course of the wind – Link must venture out into the Big Blue and travel to different islands to find out who it is that's holding her captive.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS (2006)
When Link and his friends are attacked by a posse of monsters, Link wakes up to find his pals have been kidnapped. Miffed, he sets off to save them, and steps through the Twilight Realm where he's transformed into a wolf and imprisoned. He soon escapes, but learns that evil sorcerer Zant is trying to merge Hyrule with the Twilight Realm… spelling bad news for everyone, except for Zant.





where Link would need to gather information from locals, laying down a foundation for the many games that would follow.

In 1990, a new Nintendo console was breaking into the market rapidly. An early and pivotal partnership with Capcom – securing the machine ports of both *Street Fighter II* and *Final Fight* – bolstered by an impressive debut by *Super Mario Bros* would have everyone eagerly anticipating the end of Link's four-year absence from videogames. And Nintendo certainly wouldn't disappoint. Released in 1991, and into a swathe of praise, *A Link To The Past* is cited by many fans as the seminal game in the prolific *Zelda* franchise.

The first two *Zelda* stories were the creations of Miyamoto and fellow game designer Takashi Tezuka. However, for *A Link To The Past*, Miyamoto would enlist the writing talents of producer Kensuke Tanabe. Link's SNES debut would mark a return of the popular overhead look of the first game, as well as introducing some customary tweaks to the visuals and controls. Link could now move diagonally, run (with the aid of Pegasus Boots) and the range of his sword attack was also improved. Perhaps the most notable aspect came from the game's deft use of its items. There was the new Hookshot, which Link could use to stun his enemies and pull himself across large gaps in the ground, the Bow (which made an appearance in the first game but is used to greater effect here) and the Magic Mirror, which Link can use to shift between The Light World: a colourful and lush depiction of Hyrule, and The Dark World: a dank and nightmarish vision painted with skulls, oily looking marshes and menacing-looking trees. The game was packed with a dizzying array of side quests, sub-plots and gameplay.



A Link To The Past also marks the first time in the series that the game's three main protagonists: Link, Zelda and Ganon are not the same incarnations seen in the previous games. It's set hundreds of years before the first game – as flipping the back of the box states – our heroes are 'predecessors' to the original Link and Zelda, and this time-fudging has been a running theme throughout the series. The *Zelda* trend seems to be for Nintendo to release a *Zelda* game, set it in its own unique time and then

"For many fans, the series would never better A Link To The Past"

follow it up with a quirky direct sequel. *Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link*, *Link's Awakening*, *Majora's Mask* and *Phantom Hourglass* are all direct sequels that adhere to this thinking. But for every third game, generally, the player will always be controlling a spiritual descendant of Link inside a game set in its own unique time; *A Link To The Past*, *Ocarina Of Time*, *The Wind Waker* again all back up this belief. It explains why it is that there's this peculiar sense that Nintendo are occasionally rewriting its story, and why characters in certain sequels react and communicate like they're meeting each other for the very first time.

For many, the series would never better *A Link To The Past*. And yet, despite the huge swathe of popularity that the game would glean, the Super Nintendo would receive only one Western *Zelda* game in its lifetime. Nintendo would still cash in on the game's popularity in the East by releasing two *Zelda*-based games on its Satellaview system – a peculiar





satellite modem for the SNES co-developed by Nintendo and Bandai. The first game, entitled *BS: The Legend Of Zelda*, was a downloadable four-part episodic remake of the original NES game but with a few subtle differences. First, the graphics and music were given a colourful facelift and a few elements of the gameplay (such as having it play out in real-time, and increasing the capacity of Link's rupee purse) were also tweaked. It's often cited as '*The Third Quest*', because of the way it messed with the dungeons, items and the size ratio of the Overworld.

To cunningly boost awareness of the Satellaview, Nintendo would also opt to supplant the system's two mascots – a boy in a baseball cap and a girl with red hair – in the shoes of protagonists instead of Link. In 1997, Nintendo released a follow-up to the game, *BS The Legend Of Zelda: The Sacred Stones*, which again divided the game into four-weekly downloadable chunks. *Sacred Stones* is considered to be side quest to *A Link To The Past*, owing to the look and feel of the game. It retained the two Satellaview mascots as before, and would set the player on a quest to find eight pieces of hallowed masonry and defeat a resurrected Ganon. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Satellaview games is that, like an interactive television show, they could only be played while the game was being aired. This allowed Nintendo to broadcast hints and tips to the player while they played to help assist them on their quest.

As well as the Satellaview, it was always Nintendo's intention to produce a CD add-on for the Super Nintendo. Sony had developed the sound chip for the SNES (the SPC700) and had experience and grounding in CD technology, therefore, Nintendo's looking to Sony to get the project off the ground was really a case of natural selection. However, as the story goes, Sony was determined to break into the videogame market itself, and had seen an ideal opportunity to do so when that early contract with Nintendo was drawn up. During that deal Nintendo would unknowingly sign an agreement that would give Sony the rights to work on a CD-based console that would run both the planned SNES-CD games and also be backward compatible with SNES carts. In secret, Sony had been working on the console, named the Super Disc, and as that contract would enforce, it would legally play all SNES games. When Nintendo eventually caught wind of this, and realised that Sony would then hold the control, and (it's reputed) profits of all SNES-CD games, it would then side with Sony's rival Philips.

After a messy legal battle, Nintendo successfully found a way to pull out of the contract. But a resolute Sony would simply refine and rework its existing hardware, eventually rolling it out as the Sony PlayStation. After eventually dropping the idea of releasing a CD component for the SNES, Nintendo would give Philips use of two of its IPs for a series of videogames for its CDi machine. Mario and Luigi would cordially appear in the puzzle game *Hotel Mario*, and Link and pals in three interactive movie-games: *Link: The Faces Of Evil*, *Wand of Gamelon*, (released concurrently in 1993), and *Zelda's Adventure* (released a year later). The first two games (*Faces Of Evil* and *Wand of Gamelon*) were side-scrolling action games, à la *The Adventure Of Link*, but spliced up with dated-looking cartoon sequences. For *Zelda's Adventure*, the original top-down approach was adopted but the game filled its boots with poorly rendered CG sprites and astonishingly dire blue-screen acting. Not surprisingly, given the games' prolific heritage, the Philip's games were lambasted by the gaming press and fans of the series.



» Despite the criticism, we think *The Wind Waker* looks like a Pixar movie.

"Instead of thinking of it as making a game, think of it as nurturing a miniature garden called Hyrule," the words of Miyamoto about the making of *Ocarina Of Time*. Ironically, many fans of the popular series would view *Ocarina* not as a brilliant nurturing of Hyrule but as a brilliant nurturing of Link. Released in 1998, and built from a drastically modified version of the *Super Mario 64* engine, *Majora's Mask* chronicled the biggest shift in the series to date, the transition from a 2D to a 3D realm, and a longer period in Link's life. Starting out as a boy, between the age of eight and nine, we would see Link's quest lead him into adulthood. But it's clear what Miyamoto was hinting at. Technically jaw-dropping draw distances, real-time light sourcing and expansive environments that could be covered effortlessly on Link's steed Epona and an almost faultless camera and control system; it's true that the world of Hyrule was never so brilliantly fleshed out.



The Dark, the Pig and the Fabergé egg

HERE'S OUR COMPLETE RUNDOWN OF LINK'S MOST COMMON ADVERSARIES



Dark Link

Appeared as a villain in: *The Adventure Of Link*, *Ocarina Of Time*, *Oracle Of Ages*, *Four Swords Adventures* and *Twilight Princess*.

Dark Link (aka Shadow Link) is an ominous and mysterious villain that makes its first appearance as the final boss in *The Adventure Of Link*. Taking many different guises over the years – he's essentially an evil version of Link draped in darkness with glowing red eyes. Little is known about the origins of Dark Link, but if his appearance in *Ocarina Of Time* is anything to go by, then he seems symbiotic. So, if *Spider-Man 3* was factually accurate, we can assume he's an alien from outer space.



Ganon/Ganondorf Dragmire

Appeared as a villain in: *The Legend Of Zelda*, *The Adventure Of Link* (Game Over screen), *A Link To The Past*, *Ocarina Of Time*, the *Oracle* series, *The Wind Waker*, *Four Swords Adventures* and *Twilight Princess*.

Ganon is Link's first and most prolific adversary. Kicking things off at the end of *The Legend Of Zelda* as a giant pig, he would retain this porky form up until *Ocarina Of Time*, where he would show his true colours: as Ganondorf Dragmire. Ganondorf was the only male born into a guild of women thieves known as the Gerudo clan. Being the only male, he would become the 'King of Thieves' and would lead the Gerudo into taking over Hyrule. Without the power of the Moon Pearl to protect him, the Dark Realm would transform him into a powerful demon who resembles a pig, and he would take vengeance on Hyrule.

Vaati

Appeared as a villain in: *The Minish Cap*, *Four Swords* and *Four Swords Adventures*.

Vaati is the recurring villain of the *Four Swords* series, who, like Ganon/Ganondorf Dragmire, appears in many different forms. Beginning life as a lowly Minish (a race of fairy-like creatures) he would betray his master, Ezlo, by stealing his power cap and turning himself into a sorcerer. During the *Four Swords* series he can be seen in his original Minish form, his sorcerer shape and also three different variations of his demonic state; which look like a cluster of Fabergé eggs with demonic eyeballs painted on them. Absolutely terrifying.





The sequel to *Ocarina Of Time*, *Majora's Mask* (2000) introduced many firsts to the series. Originally titled '*Zelda: Gaiden*' in 1999, it was the first time, inside the main canon of games, that Nintendo would really break its Triforce of Character (the first game to do so was *Link's Awakening* on the Game Boy). *Majora's Mask* doesn't include any physical incarnation of Ganon (although his name is mentioned) and Zelda's appearance is relatively brief in relation to the prevailing games in the series. Beginning life as an intended extra-section of *Ocarina Of Time* (had the game been released on the Nintendo 64DD as originally intended), it heavily tweaked at the *Zelda* structure and messed with the series' familiar Hyrulian setting. As a result, many fans viewed it as the most jarring game in the series. The graphic style of *Majora* is essentially *Ocarina* refined, with many of the same elements wholesaled across. The biggest difference between the two N64 games is that in *Majora's Mask* Link doesn't age (although there's a mask in the game that makes it possible) and the whole episode is set over just three videogame days. Link's mission is to prevent the destruction of Termina (a slightly more sophisticated alternative vision of Hyrule) from an ominous moon that in three days will destroy the town. With only three 'days' until the game ends it was necessary for Link to keep travelling back in time, to the start of the first day, until his quest was complete. Oddly, despite the notion of time travel and rebirth being a strong mantra for the *Zelda* series, some would find it difficult to warm to *Majora's* confining time-travel structure, and view it as the most linear game in the series.

If there were some fans that found it difficult to warm to the direction of *Majora's Mask*, then the next *Zelda* game was always destined to put a few noses out of joint. After the infamous *Legend of Zelda: Space World* GameCube demo in 2000, which showed an impressively rendered sword fight between Link and Ganon, its sinewy graphical style of an adult Link had many fans believing they were going to get a darker *Zelda* adventure. However, the game they eventually got would look nothing like the teasing demo unveiled to Space World attendees. Taking the biggest shift in terms of visual style, *The Wind Waker*'s cel-shaded graphics would disgruntle fans who were expecting an epic and mature *Zelda* appendage. Ironically though, perhaps the biggest shift in the game came from its scrapping of certain *Zelda* gameplay elements. Instead of time travel, *The Wind Waker* uses the wind and the ocean for its puzzle and explorative elements, and rather than one large land to explore, it's split into islands connected by miles of sea that Link must traverse by sailboat. But *Wind Waker* also had a sense of humour, and took many aspects from the portable *Zelda* games, with more emphasis on characters and a feeling of being more accessible for newcomers. Its effusive and simple anime-style graphics captured the facial expressions of its characters better than any *Zelda* game before it, going lengths to invoke emotion, a real connection with Link, and cleverly serving as subtle hints to the player to help them solve puzzles. In a bid to perhaps soften that visual blow to its fans, Nintendo would accompany the game with a bonus disc containing the original *Ocarina Of Time* and *Ocarina Of Time/Master Quest* – a more arduous version of the N64 game that was intended to be released for the 64DD.

Perhaps due to its basic look, the next *Zelda* game to appear on the Cube came and went with generally little fanfare.

The A-Z of Zelda

A is for A Link To The Past
Link's seminal *Zelda* adventure and a firm fan favourite

B is for Ballad Of The Wind Fish
The song which Link must play to rouse the Wind Fish.

C is for Crossbow Training
Link's Crossbow Training is a peculiar lightgun spin-off of *Twilight Princess* that comes bundled with the Wii Zapper.

D is for Death Mountain
The home of Link's evil arch nemesis Ganon.

E is for Epona
The name of Link's noble steed.

F is for Four Swords trilogy
A series of three spin-off *Zelda* games – *A Link To The Past & Four Swords*, *Four Swords Adventures* and *The Minish Cap* – that are all linked by The Four Sword.

G is for Ganon
Begins life as a pig with a pitchfork, later games would reveal his true form: Ganondorf Dragmire.

H is for Hyrule
The fictional land where the majority of *Zelda* games take place.

I is for Impa
Impa is the caretaker of Princess Zelda, and the old woman that Link saves in *The Legend Of Zelda*.

J is for Jabber Nut
The nut that Link must eat to understand the Minish language.

K is for Koholint
The setting of *Link's Awakening*, marks the first time a *Zelda* game wouldn't be set in Hyrule.

L is for Link
Steadfast, brave, full of gusto and dressed in green, the pointy-eared Link is the saviour of Hyrule.



Developed by Nintendo, *The Legend Of Zelda: Four Swords Adventures* took visual and multiplayer elements from the GBA game, *A Link To The Past & Four Swords* (see 'A Link To The Palm' boxout), and brought an entirely new squad-based dynamic to the series. Slotting weirdly between two Game Boy Advance games, *Four Swords Adventures* would form the second game of *Zelda*'s *Four Swords* trilogy. It allowed one to four players (if you had a linkup cable and knew three people with a GBA) to control four differing coloured Links, position them into various formations and tier off to work together to solve the game's colour and teamwork-themed puzzles. The multiplayer emphasis of the game was further bolstered by a unique battle mode that allowed four friends to select a Link and duel to the death.

The next game to appear in Nintendo's popular series was the engaging *Twilight Princess*, a game that famously carried the weight of two consoles on its shoulders. After a one year delay, *Twilight Princess* would prove a fantastic farewell to the GameCube, but sadly a tepid and awkward debut for the Wii. With *The Wind Waker*, Nintendo's intention was to make a *Zelda* game that anyone could finish, and as a result many fans would bemoan the game for being far too easy. So Nintendo looked back to *Ocarina* as the blueprint for the style and direction for *Twilight Princess*. Running from a heavily tweaked *Wind Waker* engine, *Twilight Princess* looks to be the polar opposite to its GameCube sibling. In hindsight, it's actually a culmination of ideas and themes from the later *Zelda* games. It clearly borrows from *Ocarina Of Time* in terms of its visuals, adopts the darker undertones of *Majora's Mask*, and boasts the scale and subtle gameplay tweaks of *Wind Waker* – with regard to its cinematic look and continued use of facial expressions.

It was decided, mid-development, that the graphical style of the game would be altered. Early shots of the game showing Link inside a grey and desaturated world would reaffirm to fans that *Twilight Princess* was to be a darker direction for the series. However, the eventual graphical style would shift to a hazy world made of warm serene palettes, but that darker direction was kept. The game also contained more dungeons and more items than *Ocarina Of Time*, as was the intention by Nintendo to finally offer the hardcore *Zelda* fan a game to really test their mettle. While the Wii version is essentially an enhanced port of the GameCube release, the game would actually play out slightly differently; the game worlds were mirrored. Link has always been left-handed in the game, and if you were to look closely at the series, you'll notice that whatever direction Link (which, incidentally, means 'left' in German) is facing he will hold his sword in his left hand. With the advent of the Wii-remote controls in *Twilight Princess*, Nintendo realised that many players would be right-handed so would make Link enantiomorphic in the Wii version, and the game world would follow suit.

With the exception of *Link's Crossbow Training*, a short game packed in with the Wii Zapper as a means of demonstrating the peripheral, Link would not return to the Wii for several years. In the meantime, the cartoonish Link of *Wind Waker* and *Minish Cap* continued to adventure on the Nintendo DS. The first of these was *Phantom Hourglass*, a direct successor to *Wind Waker* which retained much of the game's seafaring action. Link's pirate pal Tetra goes missing after the pair happen upon a ghost ship, which kickstarts a quest to save the girl and uncover the mystery of the phantom vessel. The biggest change here was a touchscreen control method that saw players directing Link and even performing combat moves using the stylus. Though some players disliked the lack of a traditional scheme using the D-pad and buttons, *Phantom Hourglass* received critical acclaim and sold over 4.1 million copies.



» Yep, even *Zelda* couldn't avoid a clichéd runaway mine section.

Given that success, it's unsurprising that the *Zelda* series returned to the DS in 2009 with *Spirit Tracks* – and once again, the stylus was the main input device. Instead of sailing the high seas, Link now found himself riding the rails as a train engineer with a mean sideline in swordplay, trying to discover why the

M is for Majora's Mask
An evil heart-shaped mask is what Link needs to save Termina.

N is for Nintendo
Nintendo is the creator of *Zelda* and the Walt Disney of videogames.

O is for Ocarina
The flute-type musical instrument that makes its first appearance in *Link's Awakening*.

P is for Pikmin
Like Pikmin, Miyamoto wanted Hyrule to feel like a virtual garden.

Q is for Quiver
The quiver is the item that holds Link's arrows.

R is for Rupees
The ruby-like currency of *Zelda* that Link can acquire by killing enemies and cutting the grass.

S is for Satellaview
The SNES equivalent of Xbox Live, only released in Japan, home to two *Zelda*-based games.

T is for Triforce
This is the sacred triangular relic that binds the characters and events of *Zelda* together.

U is for Underworld
The term for the underground dungeons beneath Hyrule.

V is for Vaati
Is the villain in the *Four Swords* series. Like Ganon he takes two forms: a human sorcerer and a giant bat eye with pincers.

W is for Wind Waker
Wind Waker was the first *Zelda* game for the GameCube, and marked a dramatic shift in the visual style of the franchise.

X is for X-rated action
It's implied throughout the series that Link and Zelda are romantically involved. If only they could remember.

Y is for Yoshi
Yoshi appears in *Link's Awakening* as a sought-after cuddly toy that Link must win.

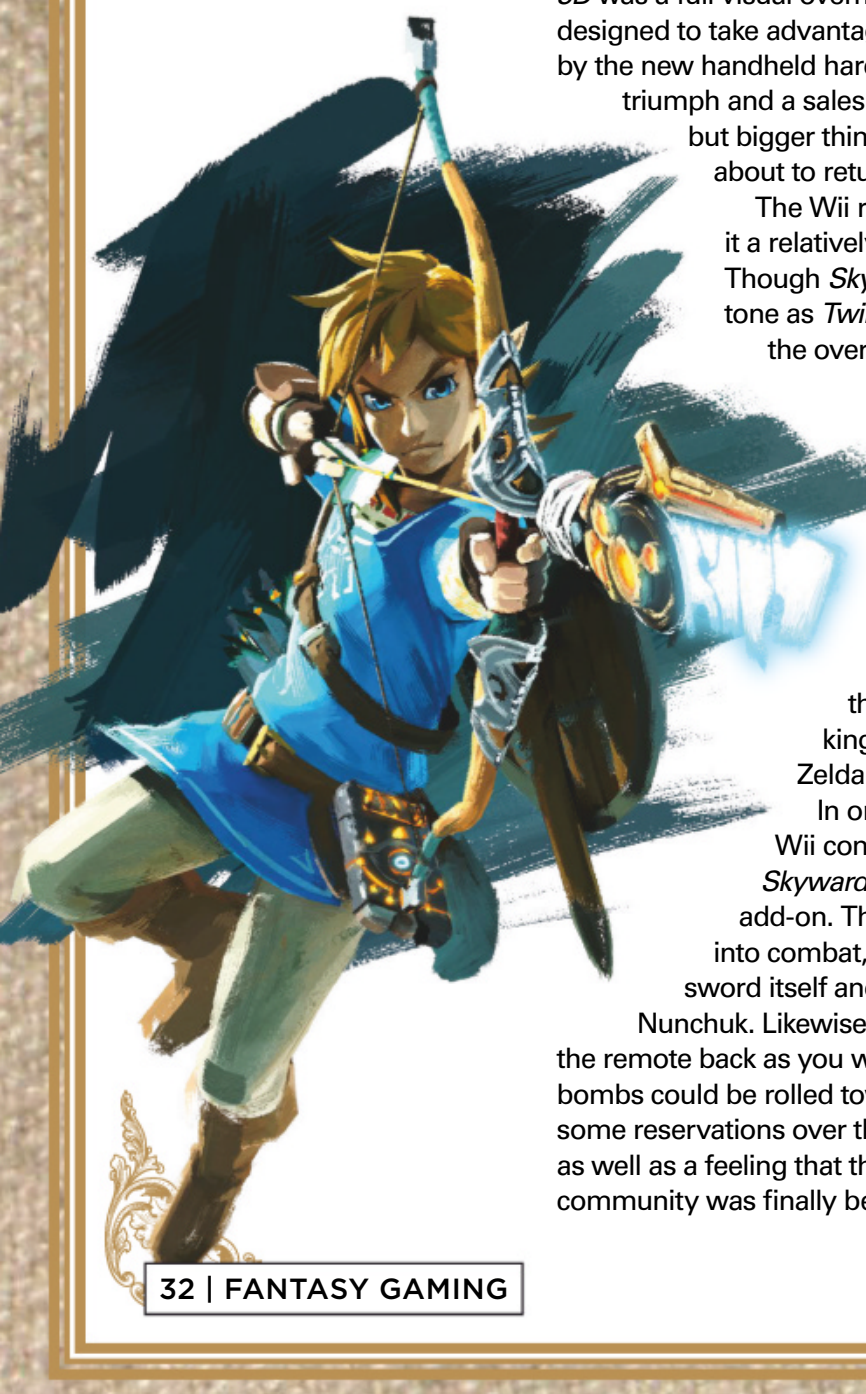
Z is for Zelda: Gaiden
Was the original working title for *Majora's Mask*.



» *Hyrule Warriors* allowed players to control a variety of characters in combat, including Princess Zelda herself.



» The *Zelda* series was chosen to demonstrate the Wii Zapper in *Link's Crossbow Training*.



titular Spirit Tracks that connected the kingdom were disappearing. Though this might seem a little out of place in a series that has usually had a fantasy focus and not drawn too much attention to technology, director Daiki Iwamoto was deliberately aiming for a different feeling to a regular *Zelda* game. The result was another success, though with 2.6 million sales it didn't quite match up to its predecessor's popularity.

Though Link's next game was not a new one, it generated considerable excitement as it was a remake of the game many still considered to be the greatest in the series. *Ocarina Of Time 3D* was a full visual overhaul of the N64 game for the 3DS, designed to take advantage of the added sense of depth offered by the new handheld hardware. The game was both a critical triumph and a sales success, selling over a million copies, but bigger things were coming as the *Zelda* series was about to return to the home console arena.

The Wii received *Skyward Sword* in 2011, making it a relatively late release in the console's life. Though *Skyward Sword* was not nearly as dark in tone as *Twilight Princess*, it didn't veer back into the overt cartoonishness of the cel-shaded *Wind Waker*. The tone was instead pitched closest to that of *Ocarina Of Time*, with a slightly more vibrant colour palette. The game is also the earliest in the *Zelda* story chronology, with Link and Zelda cast as childhood friends. When Zelda is kidnapped and taken down to the Surface, Link becomes entangled in the evil Ghirahim's plot to free the demon king Demise, and must prevent it to save Zelda and the world.

In order to add extra precision to the Wii controller's motion sensing capabilities, *Skyward Sword* made use of the Wii MotionPlus add-on. The more accurate tracking played heavily into combat, with the Wii controller used for the sword itself and the shield controlled using the Wii Nunchuk. Likewise, the bow was now fired by pulling the remote back as you would the string in actual archery, and bombs could be rolled towards targets like bowling balls. Despite some reservations over the implementation of this new scheme, as well as a feeling that the rest of the game development community was finally beginning to catch up to the 3D *Zelda* mechanics, most reviewers were overwhelmingly positive about the game and it sold millions in short order.

Though the Wii was succeeded by the Wii U in late 2012, there was no early *Zelda* release, so GameCube remasters were released to plug the gap, *Wind Waker HD* in 2013 and *Twilight Princess HD* in 2016. Instead, new developments would take place on the 3DS, though they would also mine the past for inspiration. *A Link Between Worlds* was released in 2013 and served as a proper sequel to the SNES classic *A Link To The Past*. Link's task was to prevent the theft of Hyrule's triforce by the inhabitants of the parallel world of Lorule, who seek to restore their kingdom after it falls into decay due to the destruction of their own Triforce. One fun mechanic introduced here was the ability to merge onto walls as a mural, allowing Link to cross otherwise impassable gaps and explore further than he could otherwise. It was a rather excellent game and went on to sell over 2.5 million copies.

"Breath Of The Wild carried a new piece of hardware to glory"

The next game to release was *Majora's Mask 3D*, another 3DS remake in the fashion of the previous *Ocarina of Time 3D*. This sold over 2 million copies and was easily the most exciting *Zelda* development of 2015, as the year's other 3DS release was a rare misstep for the series. *Tri Force Heroes* focused on multiplayer cooperation in a similar manner to the prior *Four Swords* games, and allowed players the option to play alone, via local wireless and even online. However, communication options were limited and the game was stifled by its need to cater to the friendless, with few challenges truly testing a truly organised team. Additionally, much of the design was lifted from prior *Zelda* games with little innovation. Likewise, the spin-off *Hyrule Warriors* on Wii U was little more than the *Dynasty Warriors* games with a new skin, though it was popular enough to see 3DS and Switch conversions and is a lot of fun to play.

A lack of innovation is not something that troubled the most recent major game in the series. Though it began life as a Wii U game and was revealed as such in 2014, *Breath Of The Wild* ended up carrying a new piece of hardware to glory, as the Nintendo Switch ended up as the system that most players

Evolving Zelda

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD HAS REINVENTED THE SERIES FOR A NEW AGE – HERE'S HOW...

1 Climbing is a major part of traversing the new open world – but Link will need enough stamina to reach the summit

2 If you see an enemy with a deadly weapon, you can steal it once they're defeated, but it might not last long

3 These items can be picked up and used to craft new items, for example by cooking delicious and health-replenishing meals

4 Hyrule is bigger than ever, and you'll need to climb towers in order to reveal new points of interest on the map

5 Link's clothes can be changed, both to increase his defensive protection and to guard against the elements in harsh weather conditions

6 If it gets too hot or too cold, Link will begin to take damage, but this can be mitigated by using the right items



would use to experience it. Eventually released in 2017, the game served as a radical reinvention of the *Zelda* series, taking the game's trademark mechanics and fitting them into an open-world game design that draws strong influences from games such as *Assassin's Creed*. This game saw Link awakening from a long slumber to find a world in ruins, having been sealed away by Zelda following a heavy defeat by Ganon. In order to end the tyrant's influence over Hyrule, Link's goal was to defeat the Divine Beasts that had been corrupted by Ganon, release the spirits of the kingdom's champions and then defeat Ganon himself. *Breath Of The Wild* was a critical success and also the best-selling *Zelda* game ever, with over 10.8 million copies sold. Next up is a remake of *Link's Awakening*, the popular Game Boy game, on Switch.

So what is it that makes the *Zelda* series so popular? Why does every new chapter create such an air of excitement surrounding a cloud of high expectations? Why do people meticulously dissect every screenshot, analyse and pore over every *Zelda*-related rumour and await the next chapter more so than any other videogame franchise to date? Miyamoto sums it up perfectly. "I think many people dream about becoming heroes", he told Superplay magazine in 2003. "For me it has always been important that the gamers grow together with Link, that there is a strong relationship between the one who holds the controller and the person on the screen. I have always tried to create the feeling that you really are in Hyrule. If you don't feel that way, it will lose some of its magic."





» Dungeons remained an integral part of the DS *Zelda* games, in spite of other changes.

KeyForge

» **DEVELOPER:** RICHARD GARFIELD
» **FIRST RELEASED:** 2018 » **EXPECT TO PAY:** £10 - £35

It beggars belief that *KeyForge* even exists. Board games tend to be more costly when they include bespoke components but here, every single deck in existence is unique, from the cards that comprise it right down to the unique card backs that carry that deck's very own procedurally generated name. Whatever you end up with, your deck will include a host of heroes, monsters, weapons, tools, abilities and so forth, divided by House and with each faction having its own theme and gameplay niche.

Unlike so many other card games, there's no cost (such as tapping Lands in *Magic* or Mana Crystals in *Hearthstone*) to play cards. As such, it's not uncommon to see huge board presences even in the early game, with a hand loaded with same-suit cards allowing a player to make a huge push in a single turn. Things can turn around just as quickly though, and a monster-packed board isn't always the auto-win it might be in similar games, either. Even battles between the same two decks can turn out very differently each time, and each new deck you add into the mix increases the permutations exponentially.

A novel fantasy card game that's surprisingly simple to pick up and quick to play, *KeyForge* is perfect for anyone that wants the thrill of high-level trading card games, without having to spend a fortune on boosters and singles to build something that is competitively viable.



» Chains are an important aspect of the game and are tracked here.



» You'll take a lot of damage in *KeyForge*, so these tokens are useful.

INSTANT GUIDE

1. Houses



Each deck combines cards from three Houses, and the first thing you do each turn is declare which of these you will be representing that round. Only cards of the corresponding House can be played, activated and discarded during this time.

2. Æmber



Æmber is the game's primary currency, with players spending six at the start of their turn to forge a key. The first to create three keys wins the game, so manipulating your opponent's Æmber supplies can really mess with their progress.

3. Artifact cards



These cards offer powerful boons, but they may not always be in effect. If your card has bold 'action' text on it, then you'll need to be representing the correct house in order to use its effect during your turn. Otherwise, it's always active.

4. Power value



Characters have one combined value for attack, defence and life. Their armour value on the right can serve to reduce incoming damage once per turn, but cumulative damage accrued has to stay on the card until it is destroyed.



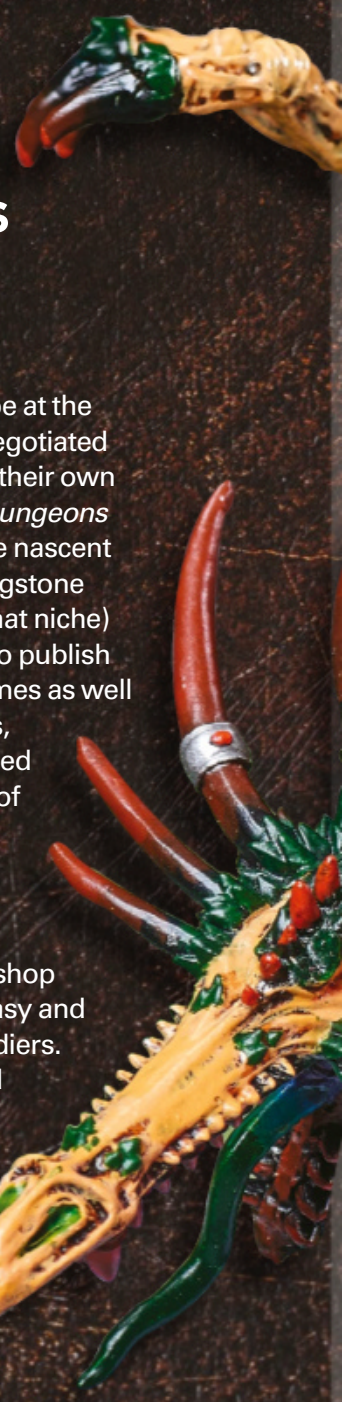
Or you could try:

THUNDERSTONE QUEST

There's nothing really like *KeyForge* on the market, so instead we'll take this opportunity to mention the latest edition of one of our favourite deckbuilders. *Thunderstone Quest* was originally released on Kickstarter and built massively on the franchise's original game mechanics by adding new things like side quests and guild sponsorships that greatly change the base gameplay. AEG, the game's creators, once again headed to Kickstarter last year to not only reprint the game, but also deliver a brand-new expansion and support for more players.

THE HISTORY OF WARHAMMER

Warhammer, The Game Of Fantasy Battles – for over 35 years, it's been a market-leader in doing exactly what it says on the tin: war, hammers, fantasy and battles. Where did it come from, and what gives Warhammer its peculiar, chaotic recipe for success?



There's a story well known to fans of *Warhammer* about how two childhood friends, with hopes of turning their love of games into a way of making a living, set up a business selling imported copies of *Dungeons & Dragons* by mail order from the spare bedroom of their flat in London. The year was 1975, the friends were Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone, and the company was Games Workshop. The venture did so well that soon after the pair began to publish their own gaming magazine, *White Dwarf*, opened the first Games Workshop store in Hammersmith, London, and started making their own games. One of these games was *Warhammer* (with the pair also responsible for the famed *Fighting Fantasy* series of choose-your-own-adventure style gamebooks), and the rest is history.

This oft-told tale is true, so far as it goes, but what the traditional potted history of the world's most successful tabletop games company perhaps doesn't emphasise quite enough is just how quickly the newly created *Warhammer* overtook its creators and came to define Games Workshop ever after. (Indeed, today, a number of Games Workshop's own stores have been rebranded simply 'Warhammer', the ubiquitous fantasy battle game now eponymous.) So what made *Warhammer* so special?

Games Workshop's early success was a result of Livingstone and Jackson correctly predicting huge demand for the novel fantasy roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons*. Arguably the first real roleplaying game, it allowed players to assume the role of characters from a number of different fantasy races and battle their way through a series of quests set for them by the Dungeon Master – effectively, another player serving as a combination of storyteller and opponent. Published by US publisher TSR, *Dungeons & Dragons* was virtually unknown in the UK or Europe at the time and Jackson and Livingstone negotiated an exclusive distribution deal. Using their own *White Dwarf* magazine to promote *Dungeons & Dragons* and other games from the nascent roleplaying genre, Jackson and Livingstone found themselves a large (if somewhat niche) audience. Games Workshop began to publish games of their own – roleplaying games as well as strategic and fantasy boardgames, like the classic *Talisman* – but remained by and large a stockist of all manner of tabletop games, with arguably little to set them apart from anyone else. *Warhammer* would change all that.

As well as roleplaying games and boardgames, the early Games Workshop stocked and distributed various fantasy and historical miniatures – that is, toy soldiers. Where *Warhammer* broke the mould was in combining the two. This was a simple and rather predictable development but one for which the gaming world of the early 1980s was clearly waiting. Fantasy roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and traditional wargaming (fighting out battles with toy soldiers) had shared parts of their audience all along, but the mainstream of traditional wargaming was still Napoleonic, medieval and ancient battles, with many of its proponents having little time for 'that fantasy nonsense'. When it came to toy soldiers, by the early 1980s, plenty of companies were producing fantasy miniatures – wizards, elves, barbarians, orcs and others, typically advertising their wares in the now ubiquitous *White Dwarf*. These found a use mostly as heroic adventurers or monstrous foes in games of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the like, small bands of adventurers crawling their way through monster-filled dungeons, and



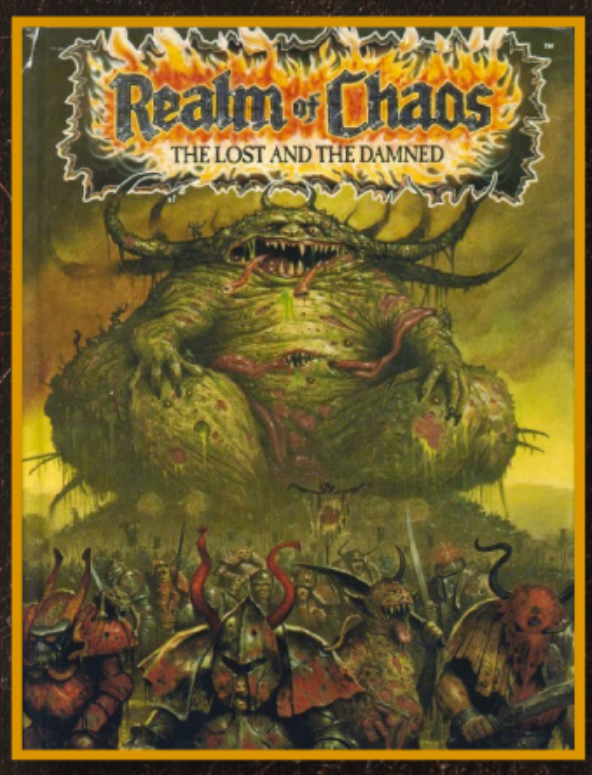
» There are a variety of races to control and battle in the *Warhammer* universe, including wood elves, goblins and orcs.



MOST DESIRABLE

Realm Of Chaos

Warhammer's formative forbidden tomes, the *Realm Of Chaos* books, pulled *Warhammer* free from its roots in high fantasy and military history, and planted it in the dank, dark, tainted soil where it has flourished ever since. Long sought-after secondhand gems, and latterly commanding a hefty price on eBay or Amazon Marketplace, the first of the two books, *Slaves To Darkness*, received a 30th anniversary reprint in 2018; though officially only available from Games Workshop's museum and exhibition centre – Warhammer World – in Nottingham, it has nevertheless made this rarity just a little easier to find. Pray to the Dark Gods that the second volume, *The Lost And The Damned*, will follow soon.





▶ not as the massed armies *Warhammer* would soon deliver. *Dungeons & Dragons* was itself in no small part a product of the booming popularity of fantasy following the publication of *The Lord Of The Rings* (and subsequently a host of imitators) some 20 years earlier. Where *Dungeons & Dragons* took up the 'quest' aspect of the archetypal fantasy adventure, epic battles also loomed large as part of the fantasy imagination, notably represented in *The Lord Of The Rings* by the battles of Helm's Deep and Pelennor Fields.

The melding of epic fantasy, toy soldiers and roleplaying games was clearly just waiting to happen. (In fact, *Dungeons & Dragons* creator Gary Gygax had himself earlier published a set of rules for a fantasy battle game called *Chainmail*, but to nothing like the success he would find with *Dungeons & Dragons*.) By the time *Warhammer* appeared in 1983, it was perhaps just a surprise it hadn't really been done in a big way sooner.

In many ways, *Warhammer* was made possible by developments in the real world, where Jackson and Livingstone had partnered with another (in)famous figure in the history of *Warhammer*, Bryan Ansell, to set up a dedicated company, Citadel Miniatures, to produce fantasy miniatures in Newark, Nottinghamshire. A game embracing aspects of both roleplaying and wargaming with fantasy miniatures unashamedly at its heart was just the obvious thing to do, and so it was, written by Citadel's Rick Priestley and Richard Halliwell, along with Bryan Ansell, and published by Games Workshop.

Even then, this first edition of *Warhammer* was a little bit coy about its 'big battle' ambitions – the box described *Warhammer* as 'The Mass-Combat Fantasy Role-Playing Game' – but even this original edition was clearly already in reality a game of fantasy battles. A second edition followed only a year later, this time bearing the descriptive, if somewhat less-than-poetic subtitle of 'Fantasy Battle Rules'. *Warhammer*, the game of fantasy battles, had arrived. *Warhammer* in its early days displayed its influences in sometimes rather naked fashion. Tolkien-inspired fantasy archetypes

“The melding of epic fantasy, toy soldiers and roleplaying games was clearly just waiting to happen”

featured in pastiches of real-world historical battles, like Orc’s Drift (a now legendary scenario from the second edition of the game, modelled on and named for the real Battle at Rorke’s Drift, made famous by the film *Zulu*.) The game never completely lost this ‘all your favourite things in one place’ feel (punning references to popular culture would remain a staple for longer than most sensible adults might now think they should have done) but *Warhammer* really developed its own identity, its familiar fantasy tropes gaining dark and peculiar twists, as the *Warhammer* world itself became more and more a feature of the game and, crucially, the stories and art that accompanied it.

As a tabletop game, the rules of *Warhammer* are ‘encoded’ in its rulebooks and supplements (of which there have been many), and it’s in published form that *Warhammer* is really made manifest. As a result, the art and stories used to illustrate these books and build the world are as prominent



» Early *Warhammer* figures feature square bases, but those used in *Warhammer: Age Of Sigma* use circular ones.



» Over the years the model work has become ever more detailed and impressive to look at. Some of them are true works of art.

“Games Workshop stores cannily displayed beautiful painted examples in glass cabinets in the shop window to lure in unwary teenagers and the occasional grown-up”

a part of the game’s appeal as the hordes of miniatures that make up players’ armies, or the actual playing of the game itself. It’s from these stories and illustrations that a lot of the essential ‘weirdness’ of *Warhammer* – a stark departure from the heroic high fantasy of Tolkien and others – really comes, and nowhere more so than in the essential *Warhammer* madness of Chaos.

In the *Warhammer* world, Chaos is a physical force, an ever-present corrupting influence. It is all pervasive and constitutes the defining threat to the *Warhammer* world and its peoples. But Chaos isn’t simple ‘evil’. It isn’t a particular race or civilisation or some dark lord set on conquering and enslaving all others, either. It’s more akin to a sort of magical counterpart to the inescapable forces of nature like time, gravity and decay. Chaos is embodied by the four Dark Gods of Chaos – Khorne, the Blood God, Nurgle, the Lord of Decay, Tzeentch, the Changer of Ways, and Slaanesh, the Dark Prince – who exist in an otherworldly Realm of Chaos but whose influence leaks through into the material world, where it corrupts, seduces and destroys anything it touches.

Individuals fall prey to Chaos in a number of ways. They can simply be destroyed by it, or be so consumed by fear of it that they turn to worship of the Dark Gods, or they may be seduced and led astray by the promises of great power that each of the Chaos gods offers in their own way.

The insidious, corrupting influence of Chaos lurked in the background of the *Warhammer* world from more or less the start, but really became its defining peril with the publication, in 1988 and 1990, of the two volumes of the legendary *Realm Of Chaos* series, each a suitably hefty, grimoire-like hardback tome dedicated to two of the four Chaos gods. The books added masses of sinister detail to the *Warhammer* world and its warring races and definitively established *Warhammer* as its own unique fantasy creation. Chaos has suffused everything about *Warhammer* ever since.

By the early 1990s, Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone had sold up to Bryan Ansell, and Games Workshop and Citadel Miniatures were amalgamated as a single company based in Nottingham (though the Citadel Miniatures ‘brand’ remains to this day for all of Games Workshop’s *Warhammer* miniatures). *Warhammer* had well and truly taken over. By that time, too, Games Workshop was possessed of a chain of several dozen high-street shops, most of them in the UK though with a growing presence in France, Germany, Australia and the US. The company was becoming a global success despite its incredible humble beginnings.

It was through these shops that thousands upon thousands of would-be gamers discovered *Warhammer*, and again the game’s use of fantasy miniatures played the pivotal role, with each Games Workshop store cannily displaying beautiful painted examples in glass cabinets in the shop window to lure in unwary teenagers and the occasional grown-up. Around this time, too, Milton



ALTERNATIVE WORLDS

Drachenfels by Jack Yeovil



Drachenfels was the first novel-length *Warhammer* fiction ever published, in 1989, and played no small part in presenting the deeper and darker *Warhammer* world as it was then becoming. In fact, the book holds such a place in *Warhammer* history that in 2017 it returned to print as the winner of a Black Library Reader's Choice poll.

Claws Of Chaos by Gav Thorpe



The first book of the *Slaves To Darkness* series (named for the classic gamebooks that introduced Chaos as the *Warhammer* world's most existential threat), *Claws Of Chaos* chronicles the slow fall of an Empire soldier, depicting the corrupting influence of Chaos from the inside. A quintessentially *Warhammer* novel.

Gotrek & Felix by Bill King



Gotrek Gurnisson is a Dwarf Troll Slayer, sworn to seek a glorious death in penance for past shame; Felix Jaeger is a human poet pledged to chronicle it. Together, the pair's adventures introduced readers to countless dark corners of the *Warhammer* world in some of the most popular spin-off fiction ever.

Bradley released the classic *HeroQuest*, a dungeon-bash boardgame produced in collaboration with Games Workshop, featuring Citadel Miniatures (and set in a world very much like that of *Warhammer* itself, although the exact relationship between the two is a subject of much debate).

People who'd never played a roleplaying game or a wargame before discovered *Warhammer*. The game became a rare example of a niche hobby that seemingly everybody had heard of. *Warhammer* hadn't gone mainstream exactly, but the mainstream had certainly noticed it was there.

Of the thousands of new gamers drawn to *Warhammer* from that first early 1990s heyday onwards, many would become lifelong fans, while others stayed in the hobby only a little while or dipped in and out over the years as real life offered various other distractions. But the 'suck you back in' nature of *Warhammer* as a game and as a hobby has long been a part of its appeal. Where computer gamers await the next instalment of a favourite series, or the next iteration of their console of choice, *Warhammer* players await with hope a new version of their own favourite army. The wait could be a long one, but throughout the 1990s and 2000s each of the *Warhammer*'s armies grew through new editions of the game, gaining new miniatures and improved versions of older ones, and there were even a couple of new (or long-forgotten) armies along the way, like the Lizardmen and Ogre Kingdoms. As *Warhammer* developed, each new incarnation of all of these armies – from the disdainful High Elves to the dour Dwarfs and maniac Orcs and Goblins, many of them those same fantasy archetypes in origin – took on more and more of *Warhammer*'s essentially dark, baroque flavour.

Warhammer had become established and known as a unique and distinctive flavour of fantasy in its own right, and the *Warhammer* world became ▶



▶ the source of computer games (beginning with 1995's *Shadow Of The Horned Rat*, followed by a steady if irregular stream thereafter) and novels, with Games Workshop launching its own fiction imprint, Black Library, in 1999. *Warhammer*, the breakout sensation of the early Nineties, remained at its peak over much of the next 20 years.

Nevertheless, by the 2010s, *Warhammer* had become overshadowed by its futuristic sibling, *Warhammer 40,000*, which had pushed *Warhammer*'s uniquely baroque stylings and the singular lure of Chaos even further. *Warhammer*'s origins in historical and fantasy archetypes had started to make elements of the game appear slightly dated to some, and with 30 years of accumulated lore and more than a dozen major armies, room for major changes or new additions seemed limited.

The response was The End Times, a year-long saga in five volumes that saw Archaon the Everchosen – the favoured warlord of the gods of Chaos – lead an epoch-ending invasion of the Old World. The End Times brought many of *Warhammer*'s most famed warriors and legends to renewed prominence, including in many cases stunning new miniatures, leaps and bounds beyond anything that had ever been produced before. The tumult of the End Times breathed new life into the *Warhammer* world… ironically before utterly destroying it (no, really; the *Warhammer* world actually exploded in a cyclone of magic) in the series' finale. For a few months in 2015, and for the first time since its creation in 1983, there was no *Warhammer*…

Of course, we live in the age of the reboot, and when something blows up, something new, old-but-new-again, rebooted, reimagined, remade or redesigned is bound to follow. Sure enough, a few months after the destruction of the *Warhammer* world, *Warhammer* returned as *Warhammer: Age Of Sigmar*, a new game in a new setting, connected by only the slenderest thread to what had gone before. The game rules were the biggest revision of *Warhammer* since its invention, and even the core fundamentals of unit and character stats were jettisoned and redesigned from scratch. The new setting, the titular *Age Of Sigmar* (ruled over by a reborn manifestation of the God-King of the original *Warhammer*'s Empire), finally severed *Warhammer* from its historical wargaming roots, instead injecting influences from film, comics and computer games and other fantastical parts of popular culture, in much the same way as the original had drawn on the then overlapping tastes of fans of fantasy and gaming.

The relaunch wasn't for everyone, however. *Warhammer: Age Of Sigmar* was radically stripped down compared to its predecessor, which might have been a relief for many had not some of the scope for carefully balanced, competitive play been removed in favour of a storytelling, narrative style of play. Early editions of the game had actually followed a similar philosophy; without the obsession with army lists and points value and the putatively 'balanced armies', they allowed players to easily construct what eventually came to

"Unshackling *Warhammer* from its past had caused some upset, but it had also shown what was possible"

characterise the game. But with a setting essentially being built from scratch and many players upset at the seeming end of 30 years of accumulated passions, narrative gaming was a hard sell and the initial response to the game from many players was less than enthusiastic.

The game's aesthetics differed from its predecessors, too, with *Sigmar*'s armies made up of gleaming heroes the Stormcast Eternals, and much of the game's accompanying art seemed to do away with *Warhammer*'s traditionally gloomy feel. Where the promise of this new age for *Warhammer* was immediately obvious, however, was in the miniatures. The break with *Warhammer*'s past allowed radical reimaginings of several races, with armies like the Sylvaneth (monstrous tree spirits), the Kharadron Overlords (sky-faring dwarf adventurers), and the various armies of the Chaos gods capturing more of *Warhammer*'s dark weirdness than ever before. Unshackling *Warhammer* from its past may have caused some upset, but it had also shown what was possible.

Recently, more of the 'old' *Warhammer*, and more of the elegant, sinister creature-fantasy elements introduced by the miniatures, has crept into the game's stories and art, for a deeper, darker, more intriguing – if not yet completely cohesive – world of *Warhammer*. But the Old World wasn't built in a day either.



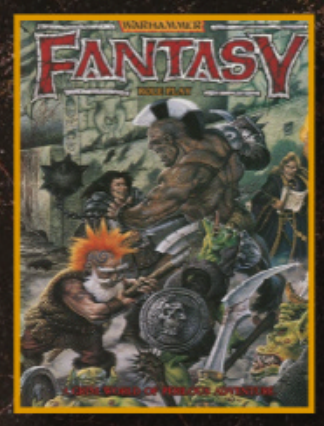


» Painting models is a huge part of the *Warhammer* experience, but first you'll have to assemble your figures, as they come on sprues (shown right).

POPULAR SPIN-OFFS

WFRP

'Wuffrup', as it's usually pronounced, is *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, the roleplaying game inspired by the tabletop battle game and which, in a colossal original rulebook first published in 1986, really brought the *Warhammer* world to life in great encyclopaedic detail. It's been through a few editions since and is today published under licence by Cubicle 7.



Mordheim

Compared to the fantasy worlds that came before it, *Warhammer* is weird, dirty and scary. *Mordheim* was weirder, scarier and dirtier still, a tabletop game that was a distillation of the purest elements of the *Warhammer* essence, with desperate adventurers searching for treasure and glory in a city ruined and corrupted by a falling comet. It lives on today in videogame form.



Total War: Warhammer

Total War + *Warhammer* = *Total War: Warhammer*. Blindingly obvious but every bit as perfect a fit as it should be. The *Warhammer* world provides ample inspiration for videogames in a host of different genres, but it's hard to imagine an adaptation of the tabletop battle game itself any truer than this offering, developed by Creative Assembly and published by Sega.



Special thanks to Matt Elliiot (@matt.paints) and Huw Evans for supplying models for this feature.

CLASSIC GAMES

Descent

» **DEVELOPER:** COREY KONIECZKA, ADAM SADLER, KEVIN WILSON
» **FIRST RELEASED:** 2012 » **EXPECT TO PAY:** £75

If you love the idea of *Dungeons & Dragons* but worry about its role-playing aspect, you'll discover *Descent* to be a perfectly suitable alternative. Like *Dungeons & Dragons*, games are overseen by a referee (the Overlord in this case) and players typically team up with a group of friends and journey into dungeons or explore the dangerous wilderness. The key difference with *Descent*, however, is that the Overlord isn't just there to ensure that each game runs smoothly – no, he's there to destroy every single puny adventurer that faces him. It certainly adds an interesting dynamic to proceedings and will be familiar to anyone who ever experienced the brilliant *HeroQuest* back in the day.

Descent may seem pricey, but it makes sense once you realise how much content comes in the box. There's a lengthy campaign (with plenty of narrative flavour text to suit the mood), gorgeously designed modular tiles that can be fixed together to create all sorts of labyrinth-like dungeons to explore, and a large number of superbly modelled monsters and detailed tokens to punch out. Interestingly many of its neat mechanics like its expansive action system, the modular board design and non-standard dice combat all originated in *Doom*, an adaptation of the hit videogame and an earlier board game from Fantasy Flight Games.

Descent's mechanics are greatly refined however, and have been supplemented over the years by a staggering number of expansions and new heroes to brave whatever nefarious plans the Overlord throws at them. If you've craving for adventure, then *Descent* makes for one satisfying quest.



» The modular boards mean two layouts will never be the same.



» This hand card sums up everything you can do in a single turn.

INSTANT GUIDE

1. Hero sheet



These useful cards display everything you need to run your hero, including their characteristics, attributes, heroic ability and their special heroic feat. You'll always have to flip your card over when the heroic feat has been used in order to show it has been activated.

2. Overlord cards



These cards are essential for the player running the game. You'll start off with useful basic cards, but will be able to power-up to more useful upgrade cards as play continues. Upgrade cards are purchased with experience points.

3. Tokens



There's a plethora of different tokens that are used in order to play *Descent*, and they cover everything from fatigue and damage points to specific conditions, villagers and searching areas. These are fatigue tokens and are used to show your hero's tiredness.

4. Custom dice



There are numerous different dice in *Descent*: Attack dice, Power dice and Defense dice. As you'd expect, these dice are largely used to resolve *Descent*'s exciting combat. You'll often need a lot, so we'd advise buying an additional set.





Or you could try:

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: LEGEND OF DRIZZT

It was inevitable that one of *D&D*'s most popular characters would receive their very own board game. Like *Descent* it's a dungeon crawler, but it's one that doesn't pit player against player. Instead, everyone works together and the turn of the monsters is controlled by specific AI cards that determine how they move and attack. The available quests are very good as well, with many of them being based on famous battles that Drizzt and his friends have participated in over the years.



Most desirable: Black Lotus

■ The most powerful and iconic card in *Magic: The Gathering*'s history was released in its very first set and has been coveted by fans and collectors of the game ever since. As an artifact that can be played for free it can go into any deck, and the one-off boost of three mana of any colour allows for some truly obscene plays. In fact, it's so overwhelmingly good that it's a restricted card in the only tournament format that allows it, which limits it mostly to casual play – but if you've got one, you'd be advised to keep it away from the kitchen table. A Black Lotus sold for over $166,000 on eBay in February 2019. Imagine the packs you could buy with that!

THE HISTORY OF MAGIC The Gathering®

As the innovator in the collectable card game industry, Magic has evolved considerably over the years – find out why it's still going strong today

It's crazy to think that trading card games as we know them are a relatively recent invention, but *Magic: The Gathering* only launched in 1993. Designed by mathematician Richard Garfield and tested by other students at the University of Pennsylvania, *Magic* was envisaged as a game that could be played during breaks at conventions and other such events. The game's theme draws on common elements of fantasy stories and *Dungeons & Dragons*, and casts the players as duelling 'planeswalkers' – powerful magic users with the ability to move between worlds.

"I first learned about *Magic* because I was working in a game store and people kept coming in and asking for the game," recalls Mark Rosewater, who joined Wizards Of The Coast in the mid-Nineties and is currently the head of design for *Magic: The Gathering*. "We didn't have it, but I was fascinated by how people described it. I eventually found someone who had a deck at San Diego Comic Con and the first time I fanned through the cards, I said to myself, 'I have to pick up this game.' As a wannabe game designer at the time, I was fascinated by a game where each person had different pieces." It was that aspect of the game that proved key to its initial appeal. "There are many ways to play *Magic* and many different kinds of decks to make, so it allows the player to have a huge amount of freedom in controlling the type of game they play."

The initial launch of *Magic: The Gathering* was a limited-edition set now known as Alpha, sold in starter decks of 60 cards or expansion packs of 15 cards. A complete list of cards was gathered by users within weeks and the initial release of 2.6 million cards sold out quickly, leading to the slightly revised Beta release a few months later. Beta's 7.3 million card print run sold out just as quickly and in December 1993, the Unlimited Edition was released with a print run of 35 million cards. With the game's popularity quickly established and constantly growing, it was time to expand *Magic* into new areas.

The first *Magic: The Gathering* expansion set was released a couple of weeks after the Unlimited Edition, and was a 78-card set titled Arabian Nights. While that set was themed after existing stories, *Magic* gained its first major plot in the following set titled Antiquities, which chronicled the war between the sibling artificers ▶





» One of the more recent sets, Ixalan, introduced dinosaurs, including the mighty Carnage Tyrant



» Mark Rosewater is one of the key figureheads of *Magic*. The card Maro is named after him



“From borrowing real-world stories for Arabian Nights, *Magic* now has a broad collection of original worlds”

Urza and Mishra. These expansions are a key part of keeping players interested in *Magic*. “It’s constantly evolving so the game never gets boring, because just when you think you’ve figured it out, it changes on you,” says Mark.

Dozens of sets have been produced, including multiplayer-focused sets like *Conspiracy* and humorous sets like *Unstable*. Many of them have introduced new game mechanics, and there are many thousands of unique cards now available to players. “The *Magic* audience learns all your tricks, so you keep having to find new ways to surprise them,” says Mark, whose job requires him to do just that. “The key to doing this is to always start each design from a fresh starting point so that you force your design team to explore different areas and make new mechanics and cards.”

While many players are happy to play the game casually, the organised play system gives the competitively inclined something to aim for. The first *Magic: The Gathering* World Championships tournament was held at GenCon in 1994, and in early 1996 the first Pro Tour event – a predecessor to today's Mythic Championships – offered cash prizes to the best players. Today, Wizards Of The Coast sanctions events of all sizes, from thousands of players down to small Friday Night *Magic* gatherings at local stores. “I believe organised play has been one of *Magic*’s secrets for success,” says Mark. “We’re now printed in eleven languages and run organised play in over 150 countries. We have the Mythic Championships and Magic Fests that run around the world giving away millions of dollars every year.”

Though physical cards are still a hugely important part of *Magic*, digital products have also been important to the game for over 20 years. The first *Magic: The Gathering* computer game was released in 1997, and *Magic: The Gathering Online* offered competition between real players in 2002. *The Duels Of The Planeswalkers* series of games for consoles and PC attained popularity and helped the game to grow, while *Magic Arena* is a young game but appears to have achieved breakout success. “I do believe the various digital ways to play has

Essential merch



Urza's Saga

■ This popular set kicked off the Urza Block, a trio of sets that featured many cards that were banned from tournament play, including the likes of Tolarian Academy and Time Spiral. That might not sound like a good thing, but if you're looking for highly powered cards, there's no better place to start. Don't be surprised if your opponent gets annoyed, though.

Innistrad

■ Our first visit to the realm of Innistrad was fun to draft and offered plenty of powerful cards, but the real triumph was its theme. Zombies, werewolves, vampires and spirits all tormented the besieged human population of this world, drawing on images of gothic horror nightmares familiar to *Magic* veterans and newcomers alike.

Dominaria

■ Many newer players aren't too familiar with *Magic*'s original setting, but this set reintroduced the world in a way that all players could appreciate. Fan-favourite characters returned, exciting new Saga enchantments retold the history of the world, while classic *Magic* creatures including Homarids and the Kavu were dusted off.

been an important on-ramp for many new players," notes Mark. "With *Magic: The Gathering Arena* and *Magic Online,* we're also seeing digital become a bigger part of the organised play system."

Magic inspired a number of other collectable card games, from Richard Garfield's *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* and *Netrunner* to the likes of the *Pokémon Trading Card Game* and *Yu-Gi-Oh*. But despite generating so much competition for itself, *Magic: The Gathering* continues to thrive as a dominant game in the genre it created – mostly because it never stands still.

At the heart of all of this is the game's design. "The cards of the early years were visceral and exciting and dripping with flavour, but they were also inconsistent and confusing," says Mark. "Having had 25 plus years to refine the game, we now have a much leaner, meaner structure for everything." New mechanics don't just keep the game fresh but substitute for confusing older ones: rules are adjusted to keep up with player expectations, and abilities are divided between the game's five colours to avoid any single one having all the best cards. But as the game has evolved, so have the players. "*Magic* started out trying to be secretive, not giving out card lists, wanting the audience to explore the game in the real world," says Mark. "25 years later, social media has exploded and how *Magic* players interact with one another has fundamentally shifted." Tournament results can be shared within moments of the final game ending, and it's easy to find out which decks have been successful – but that only makes it more rewarding when you innovate a way to beat the dominant deck of the day.

The game's creative side has also developed considerably. From borrowing real-world stories for *Arabian Nights, Magic* now has a broad collection of original worlds, from the nightmarish New Phyrexia to the urban sprawl of Ravnica and the untamed wilds of Ixalan. A central cast of planeswalker characters now drives the plot of the game, from the heroic Gatewatch to the arch-villain Nicol Bolas. There's a rich *Magic* universe now, and people enjoy the game as much for its art and story as its strategic gameplay.

"Richard Garfield started us off by making one of the greatest games ever and we've spent 25 plus years iterating and improving on it, which has resulted in an amazing and very fun game," says Mark. Millions of *Magic: The Gathering* players agree – if you aren't already one of them, take a trip to your local games store and find out what you've been missing.



Warkie

Digital Card Classics

Magic: The Gathering Arena

» **DEVELOPER:** WIZARDS OF THE COAST » **FIRST RELEASED:** 2018
» **EXPECT TO PAY:** FREE-TO-PLAY WITH IN-GAME PURCHASES

It's been a staggering 26 years since Wizards Of The Coast first published *Magic: The Gathering*, and the highly acclaimed collectible card game shows no signs of falling out of favour with its core audience. Part of the reason for this is its sheer flexibility and that it remains one of the best CCGs around, but we'd also argue that it's down to its publisher spotting key gaps in the market and successfully exploiting them. Long-time gamers will realise that *Magic* has appeared in various times over the years in videogame form, but its latest iteration is arguably the most successful.

Arena clearly borrows from *Hearthstone*'s winning formula and features single-player matches, cool animation and sound effects when cards are played, and the ability to create tournament-worthy decks with no need to spend money (although it's inevitable that you will). The main difference between the two games is that *Hearthstone* allows you to dust unwanted cards to craft the ones you want, while *Arena* rewards you with Wildcards that can be crafted for the specific cards you're after. It's a solid system, but like any free-to-play game, it will require some hefty grinding if you're not prepared to spend money.

We'd argue it's worth investing, though, as there's a greater range of deck construction choices compared to Blizzard's game, and Wizards is currently bending over backwards to make the game as accessible as possible to newcomers. If you've ever been tempted to play *Magic* but have been put off by the hefty prices that its cards can command, then *Arena* is the perfect place to start.



Or you could try:

HEARTHSTONE

Blizzard's take on the collectible card game came out of nowhere and quickly become a gigantic success. It's notable for featuring popular characters from the *World Of Warcraft* universe, and the ability to craft any cards you want by simply dusting ones you don't need. It's supported by a large number of different expansions, and Blizzard also includes standalone games for solo play. Like *Magic Arena* it uses a free-to-play model if you're not prepared to spend large amounts of cash.

Strideristhebest

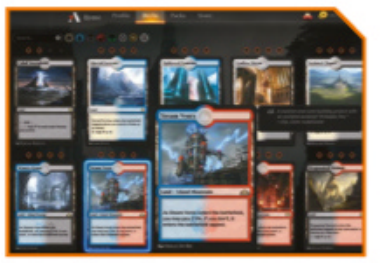
INSTANT GUIDE

1. Hand size



You'll start the game by drawing seven cards. If you don't initially draw a suitable opening hand you can mulligan and redraw, drawing one less card each turn. An opening hand should ideally have around three lands as a good starting point.

2. Lands



This is the life blood of *Magic* as you can't cast spells without the relevant colour mana. Swamps produce black mana, mountains supply red mana, plains are tapped for white mana, forests produce green and islands create blue mana.

3. Planeswalkers

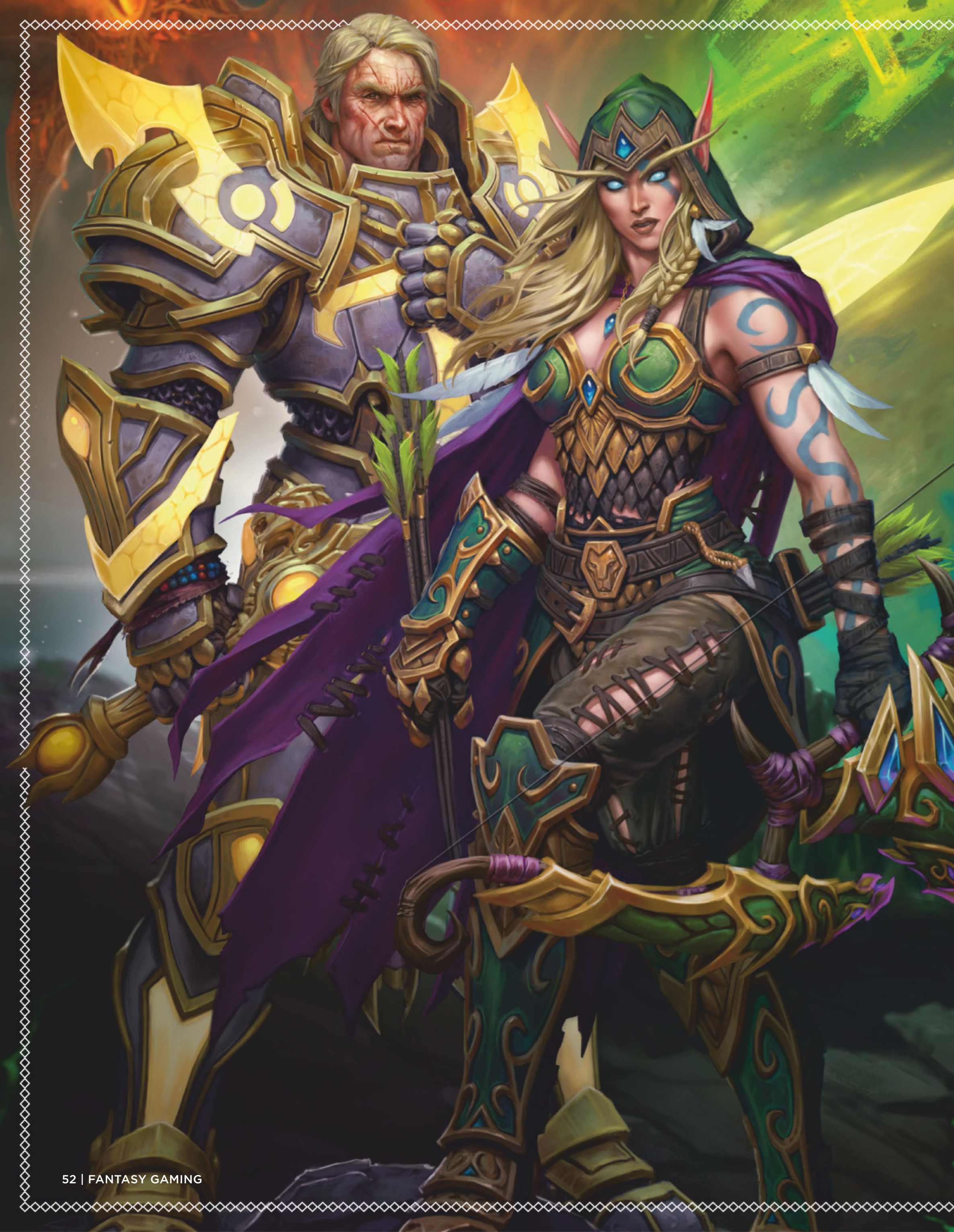


These incredibly powerful cards represent the movers and shakers of the *Magic* universe. They come with a certain amount of loyalty counters, which can be used to create game-altering effects. Cast a planeswalker's ultimate ability and you'll probably end the game.

4. Creatures



You won't get far in a game of *Magic* without summoning and trading off creatures. They have all sorts of abilities that range from haste (attack the turn they come into play) to life link (earn life for each point of damage they deal).



CHANGE *the* WORLD

Looking back at *World of Warcraft*, PC gaming's most important MMO.

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The SCARAB LORD

Destiny 2's game director talks about *World of Warcraft*'s most ambitious world event ever. *By Steven Messner*

When *Destiny 2* director Luke Smith sends an email, his signature reads a little differently than you might expect. "Luke Smith, Scarab Lord" – an honorific given to just a few hundred *WoW* players out of the tens of millions who have played since it launched. It's a title Smith came to own when his tauren Shaman, Aganathyre, stood before thousands of players on the Eredar server one fateful Saturday morning in spring 2006 and rang an ancient gong.

"Aganathyre, Champion of the Bronze Dragonflight, has rung the Scarab Gong," read a broadcast to every player in Azeroth in that moment. "The ancient gates of Ahn'Qiraj open, revealing the horrors of a forgotten war..."

ENEMY AT THE GATES

In 2006, Blizzard launched a world event so ambitious that, to date, nothing has eclipsed it. With many of Azeroth's original threats defeated, players' attention turned to Silithus, a land on the doorstep of the dormant insectoid empire of Ahn'Qiraj. To open the gates and unleash the monsters (and loot) within, players had to contribute to a war effort that required cooperation on a scale never seen in *World of Warcraft* before or since. It wasn't just words in a quest window — all of Azeroth came together to fight the .

As the raid leader of Paradox, Eredar server's top Horde guild at the time, Smith didn't realise what he was doing when he claimed Broodlord Lashlayer's head. The guild had cleared the Blackwing Lair raid, where the Broodlord resided, plenty of times. But Lashlayer's head was a new item they had never seen before. Because only one version of it dropped for the 40 players in the raid team, Smith took it for safekeeping. "I said hey this thing is going to drop from Broodlord, it's the head, and I'm going to take it," Smith says. "This was before people knew what it was for." He didn't know it would put him on the path to becoming a legend.

"WE WERE SHARING IN THIS QUEST TOGETHER AS A GROUP"



Lashlayer's head became the first piece in a quest chain to build The Scepter of the Shifting Sands, an artefact that would ring the Scarab Gong and open the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj for everyone on the server. But doing so was a gargantuan effort. To fuel the war effort, players in each faction had to gather just over a million different supplies from 90,000 copper bars to 250,000 Mageweave Bandages – each one handcrafted by an actual player.

Meanwhile, Smith and his guild were racing to beat top Alliance guilds and build the sceptre first. Part of that race involved grinding reputation points with the Brood of Nozdormu by killing Qiraji monsters and turning in their carapaces. Smith and his guild enlisted the aid of other Horde guilds, offering to run them through difficult raids for gear in exchange for turning in carapaces on Smith's behalf. "You had to create a supply chain," Smith says. "It wasn't just Paradox, it was a server-wide effort – easily hundreds of players."

It was a 24-hour effort for Smith's character. When he slept, friends would log into his account to play and receive carapaces from others. During the day, Smith organised raids to defeat the bosses required to earn the three shards to craft the sceptre.

One quest required defeating a raid boss that broadcast a message to all players letting them know what was happening so opposing guilds could interfere. Another involved a 'smash and grab' operation where Smith had to infiltrate the human capital of Stormwind and steal the page of a book. "It was completely transcendent," Smith explains. "I didn't do any of this by myself. We'd all get into Ventrilo and I would read the whole quest text I was seeing to everyone. We were really sharing in this quest together as a group."

Amazingly, Smith and his guild beat the Alliance and became the first to complete The Scepter of the Shifting Sands, grind the requisite reputation and amass the millions of supplies. It was official: he would become Azeroth's champion against the Qiraji threat and the dangerous Scarab Lord.

OPEN SESAME

A bleary-eyed Smith logged into *World of Warcraft* to an audience of thousands. Paradox had formed a protective line creating a path to the Scarab Gong while a sea of Alliance and Horde players waited eagerly. Smith tells me the moment is etched so clearly in his mind he can remember the exact armour his Shaman was wearing. "I walked up to the gong and the game was running at a profoundly sad framerate," Smith laughs. "It's like you're playing a slideshow, though that's not how it felt at the time."

The moment that gong was rung, and the game-wide broadcast made sure everyone knew Aganathyre's name, the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj opened and hundreds of monsters spilled forth. It was a battle that would last ten hours, but Smith and Paradox weren't there to see it. They waded through the hordes and began a new race: the first to clear the new raid.

Smith didn't realise it, but that gong rang an end to a life-defining moment. "It was such an important chisel that would hammer me into what I would become today," Smith tells me. "My time with *World of Warcraft* is really embodied by the Scarab Lord experience."

Ahn'Qiraj



WORLD *of* WOWCOHOL

Building *World of Warcraft*'s most impressive booze collection. *By Nika Harper*

It all started in Zul'Gurub, in 2005… wait a second, strike that. It started with *World of Warcraft's* launch in 2004. *WoW* is a game with so much content that it's impossible to have everything, and collecting achievements, mounts, pets or fashionable armour is not rare. I ended up taking a different route: since the old days of *WoW*, I have collected alcohol.

When the game launched, alcohol was included simply for whimsy. Upon drinking, your screen blurred a bit, typed speech would slur and walking in a straight line was nigh impossible. This was completely useless, yet tons of fun.

"I NEEDED TO TRY AS MUCH OF THIS BOOZE AS I COULD GET"

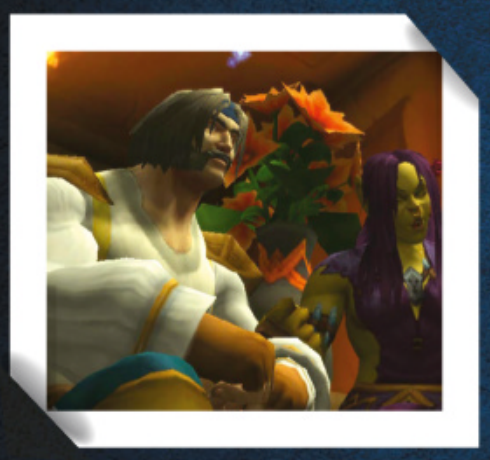
Getting drunk was a money sink and a pastime you shared with friends, but the habit was also surprisingly cost-prohibitive. It's difficult to get loaded on 40-silver bourbon all the time when you had to save up for that expensive mount. Regardless, my friends and I imbibed with impunity, spending our time being social and ridiculous instead of grinding for cash.

There was an unobtrusive island in the Zul'Gurub dungeon which nonstop-spawned Darkmoon Special Reserve, the most potent alcohol in the game, and it could be looted for *free*. As a Druid, I would stealth around, dodging the murderous mobs, and fill my packs with a bounty of booze to share with friends. For a time, I was the guild drunk, my chat messages all punctuated by a "…hic!" Over time the prices of this habit became trivial, but I still had appearances to keep up. When achievements were released, guess which I got first?

TIPSY

One thing I'd noticed is that although the achievement 'It's Happy Hour Somewhere' required 25 beverages, the progress bar kept count of every unique drink above that amount, and since I was the guild boozer I took pride in raising that number. With some finagling, the game could show you a list of the drinks you had not yet consumed for further credit, and this is when the true obsession began.

I started to appreciate how varied and difficult it could be to attain these absurd drinks. Some were obscure quest rewards, others required a special dungeon run or killing certain mobs. I got Alliance friends to sell Rhapsody Malt on the black market, or gathered pals to do a Dire Maul tribute run so Stomper Kreeg would sell me Gordok Green Grog. Mostly, these drinks functioned in the typical way, but Sulfuron Slammer actually set your character on fire. Suddenly, I was hooked: I needed to try as much of this booze as I could get, and the collection began in earnest. With every expansion to the game, it became clear that the developers were having loads of







» The NPC bartenders don't seem to care about tips at all.



fun, and it was those little touches that made playing such a delight. Drinking Moonglow made your character sparkle, and Brewfest was an entire event based upon getting trashed, with items like a pony keg and amusingly, a keg pony. There were callouts to local breweries in Lavastone and Da Bruisery, and ingratiating yourself with a tiny tribe of murlocs allowed purchase of a Winterfin Depth Charge. This game was as obsessed with getting loaded as I was, and it provided a plethora of ways to go about doing so. An intrepid Rogue could pickpocket alcohol that would, presumably, be smashed into oblivion upon the mob's death, so of course I made a Rogue with the express purpose of liberating liquor from the pockets of my enemies.

In addition to adding whimsy to the world, alcohol seemed to cater to the roleplaying contingent of *World of Warcraft*. Buying a keg of Aged Dalaran Red wine displays a timer of 365 days, so if you keep it in your bank for a whole damn year it turns into a blue item, Peaked Dalaran Red! In the ever-exclusive Brawl'Gar Arena zeppelin, buying a single bottle of Moneybrau for *one thousand gold* makes you puke up piles of cash. Diligence in using Blingtron or an Ogre Brewing Kit sometimes yields exclusive alcohol not found anywhere else in the game. And it does absolutely nothing! It exists for the sheer joy of it!

SMASHED

Finally, I joined a roleplay server with the notion of collecting, cataloguing and sharing every single alcoholic item I could, which still challenges me to this day. I have spent countless hours fishing, pickpocketing, murdering, rep-grinding, questing and waiting for those special weeks (or even single days) in which an in-game event might have booze that I haven't snagged before. I have even managed to contribute names to two drinks in the Kirin Tor Tavern Crawl: Mechs on the Beach and Entangling Rootbeer (I'm still fond of the unselected Val'Shiraz and Mrrrglrita).

"THIS GAME WAS AS OBSESSED WITH GETTING LOADED AS I WAS"



Little details can make a good game very special, and with every looted Half Empty Bottle of Prison Moonshine, I found a way to collect those nuances of creativity in the world *and* get wasted in the process. So if you're ever on Moon Guard and see the Darkmoon Drink Society, ask for a cocktail. I'll mix ya up somethin' good …hic! ✱



» [PC] : Looking for an Arena partner? I found mine duelling outside Orgrimmar.

CLASS WARFARE

The pull of *World of Warcraft*'s PvP Arena. *By Chris Bratt*

For me, *World of Warcraft* has never been about the dungeons or the raid bosses. As much as I've enjoyed trying to defeat the latest demon lord hoping to destroy all of Azeroth before looting his shoes as a trophy, I would always struggle to return to the same fights week after week. Instead, it was the other half of the game that really got its hooks into me. The often-overlooked PvP.

Back in *Wrath of the Lich King* (the greatest expansion *WoW* has ever had, if you ask me), I fell in love with its most competitive PvP mode, the Arena. Here you can choose to play in 2vs2, 3vs3 or 5vs5 setups, as you attempt to kill everyone that isn't on your team before they do the same to you. It's explosive. This is where the very best players in the world (of *Warcraft*) come in order to prove their worth.

UNHOLY FIRE

I used to stick to the 2vs2 bracket back then, playing an unforgivable number of matches alongside a buddy of mine each season. He played a Rogue, which is a class very clearly designed for PvP combat with its emphasis on stealth and dealing damage quickly. I, on the other hand, favoured the Shadow Priest. Back in the *Wrath of the Lich King* days, at least, this meant I spent the vast majority of my time running away from the other team wishing I'd levelled up a Warlock instead. It was fantastic.

Similarly to raiding, you do need some decent gear to hold your own in the arena, but two other factors truly separate the best players from the rest of the pack. First of all, you need an encyclopedic knowledge of how each of the game's classes work. This means learning what their abilities do and how often they can use them. With 12 classes, each offering three specialisations, this is

a lot easier said than done. Fighting a Feral Druid, for example, is a different experience to taking on a Balance Druid. Despite them being the same base class, you could be dealing with either a stealthed melee damage dealer, or a giant magical owl. These require rather different responses.

The other key to PvP is timing. Many of the abilities in *WoW* have cooldowns. This stops you from only relying on your most powerful skills over and over again, because that'd be boring and we'd all end up playing mages spamming Dragon's Breath or something rubbish like that.

The trick, then, is to use your cooldown abilities at the right moment, and likely in conjunction with your teammate. But more than that, it's about noticing when your opponents are trying to do the exact same thing to you. If you see this coming and survive, you'll suddenly be presented with a window in which your team has the upper hand. With your opponents' most powerful abilities on hold, they'll likely want to back off. That's when you strike.

HOLD BACK

The best example of this rule can be seen with an ability that removes movement-impairing effects from your character. If you've been stunned or snared, you can use this ability to escape. It's a vital part of PvP and an ability you'll be using in almost every match you'll ever play, but it's also got a hefty two-minute cooldown. Use it too early and a good team will punish you for it, controlling how and when you move from that point onwards. This presents some amazing tactical decisions for you to contend with as you're playing. Let's say you're frozen in place for a few seconds while your partner is being shredded to pieces by the other team: do you use your ability now and help them out, but risk being in an even worse situation in a few seconds time? Or, do you try and hold out? Can your teammate survive long enough for that to work? Is that a risk worth taking? Those questions are what I love about *WoW's* PvP combat. In the Arena you're constantly reacting to what's just happened.

"YOU DO NEED SOME DECENT GEAR TO HOLD YOUR OWN IN THE ARENA"

It has its problems, of course. Blizzard has struggled to balance *WoW* in a way that works for both PvE and PvP. Characters end up using a lot of the same abilities across both aspects of the game and this has caused no end of issues over the years (2009 was cruel for Shadow Priests, let me tell you). But I have such fond memories of my time spent with this game. It's not for everyone, and it can make for a very confusing spectator sport, but *WoW's* PvP is why I play each new expansion. Keep your raid invites to yourself, I'm after the Gladiator title.

WORLD *of* ADVENTURE

A guide to Azeroth. *By Andy Kelly*



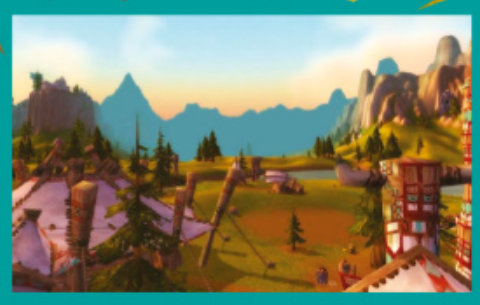
AZSHARA
This forest zone was pretty unremarkable until the *Cataclysm* expansion changed it. Goblins transformed the landscape with their janky industrial tech, and the post-*Cataclysm* quests here are some of the most enjoyable and varied in the game.

NORTHREND
Introduced in the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, Northrend is an icy continent located in Azeroth's frozen north. From the Howling Fjord to Crystalsong Forest, it's a brutal landscape ruled by the Lich King, and one of the game's most striking regions.



ORGRIMMAR
The Kalimdor equivalent of Stormwind City, evoking similar feelings of nostalgia for Horde players. This vast multicultural capital is somewhere you'll return to often throughout your Horde character's life, and is fun to zip around on a flying mount.

ASHENVALE
This forest wilderness, located south of Darkshore, is one of the most popular Alliance zones for levelling. It was also a notorious PvP hotspot, with ganking (MMO speak for high-level players killing low-level ones) being a regular occurrence.



THUNDER BLUFF
This is the capital city of the cow-like tauren race, located in the centre of Kalimdor. The city is built on towering bluffs and is only accessible by elevator, making it a dramatic setting for some interesting quests that give you an insight into tauren culture.



THE BARRENS
Once upon a time, the Barrens was a major 10-20 levelling zone. As a result, the chat was infamous for new players asking (in the eyes of veterans) stupid questions. However, the zone was changed forever when it was torn apart in the *Cataclysm* expansion.



ZANDALAR
This subcontinent, the homeland of the Zandalari trolls, will become accessible in *Battle for Azeroth*. It's a lush tropical island dominated by Mount Mugamba, and the jungle is littered with ziggurats where troll Shamans and Witchdoctors dwell.



BROKEN ISLES

The Broken Isles became accessible for the first time in the *Legion* expansion. The island chain is scattered with ancient elven ruins, including the remains of the night elf city of Suramar, and is crawling with demons emerging from the Tomb of Sargeras.



SILVERMOON CITY

The arrival of the blood elves in *The Burning Crusade* gave us a chance to explore their grand capital. Silvermoon City is arguably the prettiest of the game's urban zones, with Art Nouveau-influenced architecture and a striking red-and-gold colour palette.

KUL TIRAS

Another new addition to *Battle for Azeroth*, this island is home to proud seafaring humans. The Alliance turns to the island and its strong navy for help in the war against the Horde. The landscape is cold, mountainous, and surrounded by wild seas.



PANDARIA

Mists of Pandaria introduced us to this mystical land and its divisive fluffy natives, the pandaren. Influenced by Chinese history and mythology, Pandaria is a vibrant setting with some of the best questing and environment design in the game.



STORMWIND CITY

This capital is one of the most iconic locations in *World of Warcraft*. Players enter through the dramatic Valley of Heroes, a bridge lined with statues of heroic figures. If you've been Alliance since the early days of *WoW*, the nostalgia here is powerful.



TWILIGHT HIGHLANDS

A new zone added in *Cataclysm*, this rolling green landscape of hills and forests is home to the warring Wildhammer dwarves and the Dragonmaw orcs, as well as Twilight cultists who have sensed the presence of the Old Gods there.



» The faithful of Scarlet Monastery eagerly await your input on their doctrine.

ARISE, MY CHAMPIONS!

An ode to one of *WoW*'s most beloved dungeons.

By Emily Marlow

Scarlet Monastery, originally a set of four separate spaces introduced into *World of Warcraft* in 2004, was a dungeon painted in vivid narrative brushstrokes. It was a commitment, an ordeal even, but also it was a campy, horror tale full of pop culture references. It spoke of Hammer horror, of Sleepy Hollow, of The Exorcist and Raiders of the Lost Ark. It is, to this day, a fond memory for many a nostalgic *World of Warcraft* player, because we all remember Scarlet Monastery.

"FOR PLAYERS, SCARLET MONASTERY BECAME A RITE OF PASSAGE:

For *WoW* players, Scarlet Monastery became a rite of passage. Similar to its plotline of zealots deep in devotion to their cause, Scarlet Monastery required you to commit to it. If you were from the Alliance you would have to travel through countless map zones to arrive at the monastery, including travelling quite close to the Horde-controlled Undercity. It took hours. Because many players would originally attempt the dungeons at a low level and couldn't yet ride a horse, the journey to Scarlet Monastery also had to be undertaken on foot. Whilst workarounds were eventually invented to cut the walk down, this epic march (or should I say pilgrimage) was part of what made Scarlet Monastery so memorable. And of course, no Alliance trip to Scarlet Monastery was complete without a lighthearted Undercity raid after the dungeon was cleared.

THEY'RE BAAACK

The dungeon was a series of seemingly endless corridors lined with stained glass, a monastic setpiece that featured nearly every reference in the Gothic horror rulebook. Militant zealots blindly fighting in the halls? Check. Power-mad priests in the library? Check. A gladiator-style miniboss that one could only access if they had a mythical key? You betcha. It even included a haunted sword that actually talked.

The quests for Scarlet Monastery required players to 'cleanse' the

Arise, My Champions!



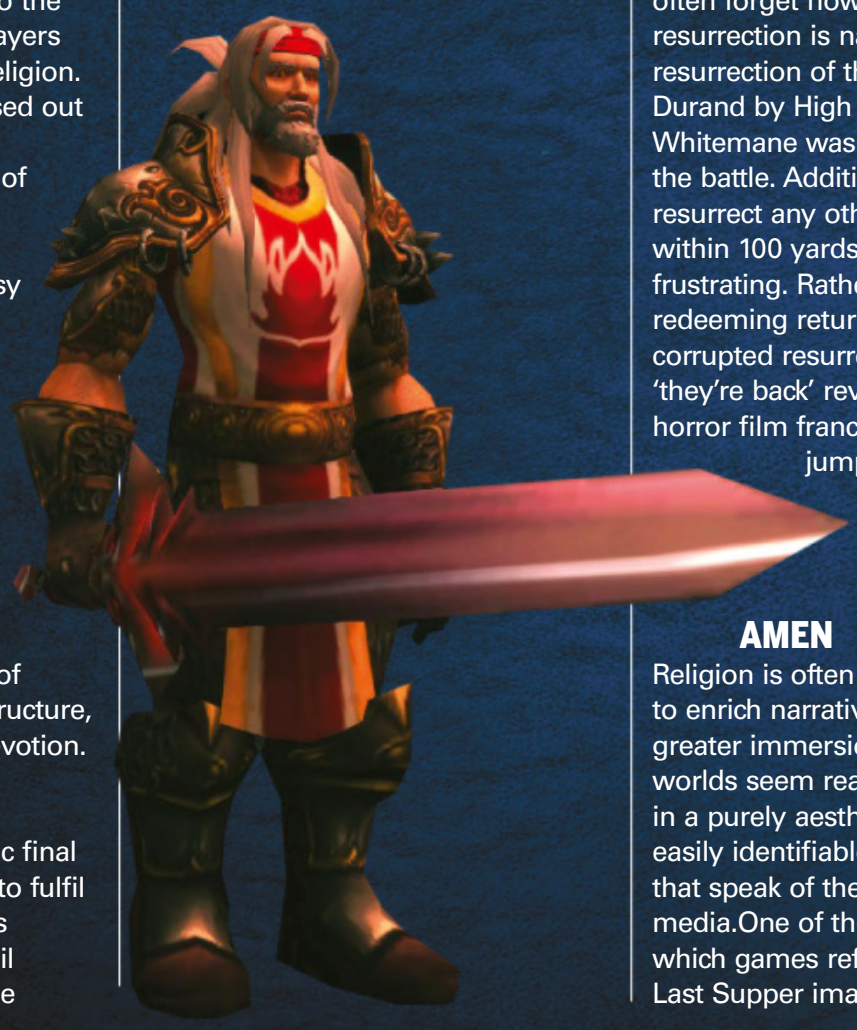




» Scarlet Monastery used Gothic architecture, tropes and references to great effect.

monastery of the rabid cult members, playing directly into the ways in which the Alliance players had already interacted with religion. The Church of Holy Light, based out of the Alliance stronghold Stormwind, holds the virtues of respect, tenacity and compassion in the highest regard. Similar to other fantasy churches featured within gaming, such as the Church of Eternal Fire in the *Witcher* franchise, or even the Chantry in *Dragon Age*, the church within *Warcraft* has priests, bishops and archbishops, cathedrals, abbeys, relics and reliquaries. All iconic signifiers of a particular type of organised religion – one of structure, hierarchy and the purity of devotion.

The act of resurrection, performed within the original dungeon, as part of a dynamic final boss fight, is perfectly suited to fulfil this stylistic choice. As players continually interacting with fail states, or the 'You've Died' title screens of the gaming landscape, we often forget how impactful a resurrection is narratively. The resurrection of the initial boss Durand by High Inquisitor Whitemane was a shocking part of the battle. Additionally, her ability to resurrect any other dead enemies within 100 yards was particularly frustrating. Rather than a hero's redeeming return to life, this corrupted resurrection referenced the 'they're back' reveals present within horror film franchises – the final jump scare reveal that the film isn't over and the hero isn't actually safe yet.



AMEN

Religion is often used within games to enrich narrative, allowing for greater immersion – it makes virtual worlds seem real. It can also be used in a purely aesthetic way – there are easily identifiable tropes and motifs that speak of the religious within media.One of these is the way in which games reference the Christian Last Supper imagery – promotional materials featuring game cast members in portraits designed to remind viewers of Leonardo Di Vinci's famous painting. While *Far Cry 5's* use of Da Vinci is still rather recent, it has also been seen in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

This overt referencing can be seen throughout Scarlet Monastery's entire quest design. Here, religion is used not only as an antagonist, in the form of the zealous Scarlet Crusade, but also as the protagonist's motivation.

All of this – the campy references, the Gothic overtones as well as the inherent drama – was why I loved Scarlet Monastery. How could you not love something that required from you a full evening's work and paid you back with such dramatic, pulp fiction goodness? It wasn't grinding, or a forgettable dungeon that you only did for an achievement. For me it was the best of what *World of Warcraft* could offer – a compelling narrative that was built on relatable tropes, full of references so incredibly cinematic that you instantly understood them. ✱

BARRENS *of* HELL

Lost wives, rare drops and Chuck Norris: in defence of *WoW*'s worst area.

By Matthew Elliott

Few games contain true rites of passage – watershed moments you can share with other players, which elicit excitable, relatable anecdotes. Beating Ornstein and Smough in *Dark Souls* is an obvious one. Your first romance in *Mass Effect* is another. But for me, nothing defines an era in gaming quite like the meandering, broken, oddly brilliant experience of The Barrens in vanilla *World of Warcraft*. And whereas the first two examples endure because of martial prowess or emotional resonance, the experience of The Barrens galvanised those who survived it precisely because it was a bit shit. An example:

[1. General] [Doombull]:
where is makriks wife
[1. General] [Ahanu]:
in bed with chuck norris lol
[1. General] [Revara]:
Chuck Norris doesn't sleep. He waits.
[3. Local Defense]
The Crossroads is under attack!

If you never played *WoW*, this will be gibberish – like the codes dentists call out before they drill your teeth. But for anyone who wasted weeks and months grinding for XP in *WoW's* Horde faction, it's a window to the past. Barrens chat was a stream of requests, insults, and Chuck Norris jokes – like the ur-YouTube comments, long before



Pepe avatars or Logan Paul – and it was a constant, reassuring presence during the lonely slog of levels 10-25.

To understand why The Barrens, and by extension its chat window, elicits such nostalgia, we need to examine the area's construction. It was a vast, unavoidable corridor, through which most Horde players would inexorably be funnelled. If you rolled a troll, orc, or tauren, The Barrens was the place you'd come when you hit level 10. Even undead players, isolated on *WoW's* other continent, would take the trip to join their Horde brethren rather than brave Silverpine Forest alone. It represented a player's first steps into a larger world, as you moved out of the starting areas into zones that had high-level players, and enemy Alliance combatants.







» A bubbling river of lava never improved anything. The Barrens is no different.

THE GRIND

So the stabilisers came off, you'd start to pedal furiously… and you'd keep pedaling for the next 15 levels. Because back in vanilla *WoW*, nothing happened quickly. This was a time before Dungeon Finder, when you couldn't earn XP from careers like Herbalism or Alchemy. Horde players trying to level up back in 2006 would have to find a group and spend three hours in the Wailing Caverns – not the most efficient use of time – or grind and do quests in The Barrens. There were a few problems with this. Firstly, The Barrens was *huge* – an area so big that when the *Cataclysm* expansion came, it was split into two separate zones. There were also only three flightpaths – one to the goblin settlement of Ratchet, one to Camp Taurajo, and one to the legendary town of The Crossroads – which meant lots of travelling between outposts. And, at the risk of sounding like an old man grunting at a cloud, we didn't get mounts until level 40. You were lucky if you could turn into a ghost wolf and move 30% faster. So if you wanted to get *anywhere* in The Barrens, you were going to have to walk. Or, more accurately, autorun while reading awful Chuck Norris jokes.

And then there were the missions. Endless, doddering quests which had you collecting zhevra hooves with an absurdly low droprate and enough quilboar murder to start your own pork farm. But the hunt for Mankrik's wife is perhaps the most memorable quest of all – partly because it was so ridiculously obtuse, and partly because barely a day went by without some Barrens chat innocent asking for directions, only to be met with a slurry of in-jokes and insults. It sounds wretched when I write it down, but like a hygienically-challenged relative in a slapstick buddy movie, we learned to love it.

GANK SQUAD

Perhaps we were bound by adversity. Another idiosyncrasy in The Barrens' design was that it was incredibly easy for high-level Alliance players to hop on the boat to Ratchet, take the short walk to The Crossroads, and kill all the flight masters and quest givers.

The area was always under attack, becoming a hotspot for world PvP as high-level Horde players returned to clear out the cackling gnome Warlocks. Whether through design or accident, constant Alliance attacks made the Horde players feel like a persecuted faction. The first place I visited after The Barrens was Duskwood: not to quest or level up, but to spend two months killing Alliance players as a means of catharsis.

"THE BARRENS REPRESENTED A PLAYER'S STEPS INTO A LARGER WORLD"

When I go back to The Barrens now, it's changed. It's been refined, bisected and – if we're being honest – vastly improved. There are so many ways to level in *WoW* that most players skip it, giving the area the same vibe as an abandoned factory – the products once made here have been superseded, the staff are long dead. But I'm glad I got to play it when I did. Hearing that music stirs memories of months spent butchering plainstriders under starry skies, of random conversations with strangers sat around flickering digital campfires. I'd wake up early to go fishing at Lushwater Oasis in the hope of catching lucrative deviate fish to sell in the auction house. I'd stare in envy at the top-level players stomping past on mounts I'd never afford. And while *World of Warcraft Classic* will give me the chance to go back, it's madness to think it'll be the same. But for those of you lucky enough to experience it for the first time, who are lost looking for Mankrik's wife, I say this:

Chuck Norris can strangle you with a cordless phone.

Dice Forge

» **DESIGNER:** RÉGIS BONNESSÉE » **FIRST RELEASED:** 2017
» **EXPECT TO PAY:** £30

There's something inherently satisfying about rolling dice. Whether you're wishing for a critical in a *D&D* session, hoping to see anything at all on the half-blank *Small World* reinforcement dice, or looking for a specific symbol you want on something like *Blood Bowl*'s bespoke block dice, it doesn't change the fact that every throw of the bones is its own thrill. No surprise, then, that a game entirely built around the idea of building, evolving, and repeatedly rolling your own custom dice should strike such a chord. *Dice Forge* plays out as a battle of the gods, each player taking their turn to replace faces on their pair of custom dice to aid them in completing legendary feats and winning glory. Said glory is primarily measured in Victory Points, although there are a number of other currencies at work.

Gold for example, allows you to buy more powerful faces for your dice, while Sun and Moon Shards are used to pay for attempting the various feats that litter the game board. Some manifest as ongoing boons, several offer unique new die options, while others reward lump sums of Victory Points. They're all beneficial… it's just a case of settling on a combo that works for how you want to play, which adds plenty of fun. Make a beeline for Gold and you'll likely be able to bling your dice up with stronger options faster than others, but focus on the Shards and you can receive powerful effects from the cards you receive after completing the relevant trials around the board. Flexible systems and the tangible excitement of shaping your own dice over the course of each game make this an interesting proposition for players of all ages.

INSTANT GUIDE

1. The temple



New die faces can be purchased and applied each turn, but the finite amount of each piece ushers players to race for the more attractive ones. Special faces can also be earned by completing different feats around the game board.

2. Dice



Each player has two custom dice to work with. Every player's pair share the same faces at the start, but they grow increasingly different as the game goes on and players' priorities start to shift towards wealth, glory or subterfuge.

3. The board



Each 'feat' along the length of the board costs a certain amount of Sun or Moon Shards to undertake. Planning and working out which feat you need to prioritise when building your dice can help you get set up a lot quicker.

4. Cards



The game comes with two sets of options for most of the spaces around the board – one easier version and one more complex. Mix and match these to your liking and games can play out very differently depending on the combination in play.



Or you could try:

QUARRIORS

Although it doesn't allow you to craft your dice like *Dice Forge*, *Quarriors* does feature plenty of the little things and it's a brilliant game to boot. Originally launched in 2011 and supported by a plethora of expansions, *Quarriors* is an excellent pool-building game that has you buying different dice, whose faces have powerful spells and monsters on them. Once purchased the dice eventually make their way back into your resource pool (essentially a drawbag with all your unused dice in), and are used to attack your opponents.

LOST VALLEY *of the* DINOSAURS

When most fantasy board games were content to mimic Dungeons & Dragons, Waddingtons sent players to a forgotten land filled with dangerous dinosaurs. Creator Julian Courtland-Smith explains how it happened

Few fantasy board games were as impressive in the Eighties as *Lost Valley Of The Dinosaurs*. Meticulously detailed and boasting interesting play mechanics, the aim of the game was to send your explorers into the titular valley and retrieve gold from a nearby temple. Care had to be taken however, as dinosaurs tracked your every move and a nearby volcano would eventually erupt, making certain areas of the board impassable as lava began to fill it. Extremely exciting to play due to the constant harassment of dinosaurs, which included an airborne pterodactyl, it's interesting to learn that the game's genesis originated in far less stressful circumstances.

"I was standing on a London Underground platform one day waiting for a train and saw a Natural History Museum poster advertising a dinosaur exhibition," recalls Julian Courtland-Smith, the game's creator. "It was then that I thought dinosaurs would be a good theme for a board game." With a theme decided Julian sent his idea off to Waddingtons, a popular publisher of board games that had already published Julian's earlier game, *Escape From Atlantis*, in the late Seventies. That earlier game never meant *Dinosaurs* was a guaranteed pitch, though. "I never worked at Waddingtons, but I did submit my games to Waddingtons every year along with 5,000 other hopefuls," Julian confirms. As it turned out, Julian's idea was just what Waddingtons was looking for, and he was soon hard at work on his designs.

One of the most interesting aspects of *LVD* was that for all its impressive design mechanics, it was turned around in a relatively short space of time. Although publishing took a little longer… "It only took me two weeks to invent, six weeks to write the rules and six years to get it to market," he continues. "I must admit, I was inspired by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 1912 novel *The Lost World*. Hence, the South American plateau became a mythical lost valley, etc. During the six-year wait for a publisher, *LVD* was play-tested by anyone and everyone who wanted to play. I chaired the Hastings Board Games Club, whose members met regularly, and almost everyone there wanted to play *LVD*. As a result the rules were constantly tweaked until the game achieved true balance between chance and skill."

That lengthy play-testing actually worked in *LVD*'s favour, as it has plenty of interesting play mechanics that you wouldn't particularly expect from a game released during the Eighties. Most games during this period were content to simply use 'roll and go' mechanics, meaning you'd roll some dice, make an action and pass the turn, and while *LVD* has a similar structure, the addition of dinosaur movement cards, the ability to place lava tiles and the option to attack opposing players with that rogue pterodactyl, meant the final game design was surprisingly competitive. "I didn't deliberately set out to make *LVD* competitive," Julian begins. "The fact that each player heads up a team of explorers that have to cross through the jungle to reach their objective, while encountering dinosaurs and other hazards, plus losing men on the way, means the game is by its very nature competitive. I prefer games to have lots of interaction. I was fed up with games like *Risk* which took hours to play with long boring gaps between turns. *LVD* is a game, like *Survive!*, where you have to watch what is going on even if it isn't your ▶

> **"Like *Survive!*, you have to watch what is going on even if it isn't your turn"**



▷ turn, in case your meeples (playing pieces) come under attack!"

And when you're crossing a mythical lost valley filled with ferocious tyrannosaurs and a dangerous swamp beast, those attacks are going to come hard and fast, and they'll always be instigated by your friends who are desperately trying to reach that treasure before you. Attacks will typically come through the use of 'Adventure Cards' (which Julian refers to as the 'control pack'), one of which is drawn at the beginning of each player's turn.

> **"It's another deliciously evil way of either trapping friends or potentially closing off a game as explorers are unable to cross it"**

Some cards would allow you to find guns to repel the dinosaurs, while others would see you stumble into the swamp situated in the middle of the playing area, or even trigger the volcano. Many though were designed to move the dinosaurs, and when you drew that card you'd gleefully steer any nearby dinos towards your friends. "I wanted a more random chance element in the game other than rolling a dice," explains Julian. "I found a control pack of cards gave me all the chance factors I needed and more without the need for dice. It was Waddingtons who put the dice in the game, saying children like to roll a dice when playing games."

Moving the dinosaurs around the board was great fun, as it was extremely satisfying to eat up the meeples of your friends, while handling the well-made figurines. As enjoyable as it was to steer those dinos around the board, it couldn't compare with the sheer joy that came from using the nearby pterodactyl to mess up your opponent's plans (or boost your own), by using it to grab an explorer in its movable jaws and place the hapless hero in a completely different part of the board before the flying reptile retreated back to its nest. "I was thinking how I could devise a way of helping explorers move quickly up the valley in search of Inca gold and likewise be moved down the valley, minus their gold, by opponents," reveals Julian. "The pterodactyl plucking up explorers from the valley floor was the solution and originally appeared as an image in the 'control' pack. When a pterodactyl card was played, players could decide whether to advance one of their explorers up the valley or pluck up an opponent's explorer and drop him in a swamp where the 'dinnersaurs' (T-Rex) lived. One day I was in a toy shop and found small plastic pterodactyls in a box of dinosaurs. Hence, the nest on the cliff was created and the pterodactyl playing piece was born! John Price, Waddingtons development manager, liked the swooping pterodactyl and converted the playing piece into an action toy with large teeth, which children found irresistible."

Another memorable aspect of LVD is the imposing volcano situated on the opposite side of the board to the pterodactyl's nest. It sits there lying dormant until it is activated by the relevant cards. Initially each drawn card causes a lava tile to be added to the side of the volcano, but once it reaches the valley everything speeds up and three tiles are placed each turn. It's another deliciously evil way of either trapping friends or potentially closing off a game as explorers are unable to cross it. Interestingly, the lava concept was actually an idea that had been percolating away in Julian's mind for a while. "I had already invented the mechanic in a previous unpublished adventure game called *Damburst*," Julian reveals. "In that game a cargo plane carrying gold ingots crashed into a dam wall causing it to crack up and flood the valley. Players lead a team of mountain men to recover the gold which had been jettisoned by the pilot. Debris from the crashed plane had set the woods alight. I wanted to triple a space's use from just being a single space.

"So, in *Damburst*, a green space on the board was woods. I placed a red 'fire' tile over this which when turned over was a black 'fire out' tile. On each turn a player added a fire tile to one already on the board. They also ended their turn by placing a blue/white flood tile in play. From the invention of the fire tile one can see the development of the lava flow. In the original *LVD* the volcano erupted at random, as this too was an image in the

TEMPLE
■ This old ruin is what you need to reach with your explorers. You'll be awarded a coin upon reaching it, and must then get it home.

PTERODACTYL
■ It might look all harmless while it sits patiently on its nest, but this flying reptile can be a game-changer if it's used carefully.

EXPLORERS
■ These little guys need to traverse the valley and retrieve the temple's gold. Careful, you only have four of them.

control pack. Developing this idea on, I used it to create the land-tiles in *Atlantis!*"

With so many more interesting design mechanics to be found in Lost Valley Of The Dinosaurs, we were keen to learn which one remains Julian's favourite after all this time. Is he a big fan of that swooping pterodactyl, or does he like the carnage that can be caused by carefully placed lava, or manipulating dinosaurs to do your bidding and munch your opponents? "I'm torn between the control pack and lava flow," Julian admits. "The control pack has multiple uses. Every chance element required in a game can be put into a control pack without the need for dice, providing you make sure the maths add up. But I give the lava flow mechanic the edge as this method of play is virtually unlimited. Tripling a hex space's use means one can add tiles to any game to expand its play. I chose hazard tiles like fire/flood, terrain tiles like the island land tiles in *Escape From Atlantis*. In *Survive: Space Attack* these tiles come together to form a space ship. The possibilities are endless."

Interestingly, as enjoyable as LVD is, Julian is keen to point out that the end product that was released is slightly different to what he came up with during those early play-testing sessions. "Waddingtons altered LVD so much for their targeted market that the game didn't play the same," Julian admits. "My family and friends still prefer to play the prototype as there's more cut and thrust in the original. To be fair, Waddingtons were aiming for a younger audience, whereas I was including older players."

Despite Waddingtons changing elements of the game, Julian remains happy with the official release of *LVD*. "Of course I was pleased with its success," he concludes. "*LVD* sold over 350,000 copies. It was launched by Waddingtons in 1985, the same year *Trivial Pursuit* came to the UK. *Trivial Pursuit* was the No 1 board game that Christmas, while *LVD* was No 2." That's a pretty impressive placement for an idea that was dreamt up while waiting for a train to arrive.

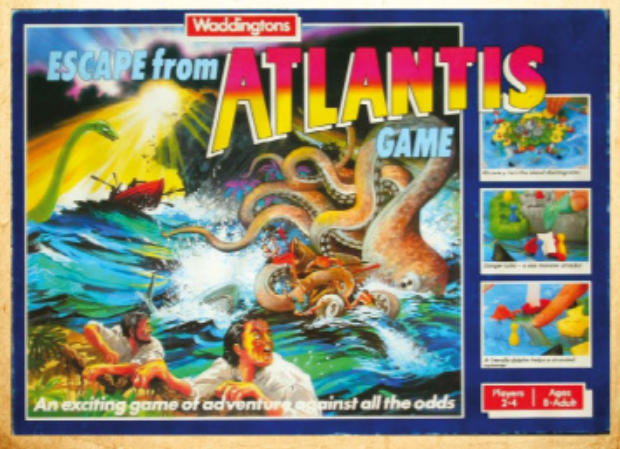


» Julian Courtland-Smith poses with two models to promote *Lost Valley Of The Dinosaurs* at the Earl's Court trade fair

Another Julian Courtland-Smith Classic

If you're interested in more games from Julian Courtland-Smith you might want to track down *Escape From Atlantis*. It's a clever game that involves you trying to escape the fabled city as it slowly sinks into the sea. Along the way you have to deal with deadly sharks, dangerous whirlpools and fearsome sea serpents. It's a highly enjoyable game and we've got fond memories of joining it together with *Lost Valley Of The Dinosaurs* to while away a wet Sunday afternoon. "I've heard some players like to go from *LVD* into *Atlantis!* and vice versa," admits Julian. "I think it's a fun idea for those players who like a challenge!"

Luckily, *Escape From Atlantis* exists today in the form of *Survive: Escape From Atlantis*, which is an updated version of Julian's hit game. If you want to try something with a science fiction theme, then *Survive: Space Attack* is also available.



VOLCANO
■ This dormant volcano will slowly erupt as the game continues. Its flow starts off slow but increases upon reaching the valley floor.

DINOSAURS
■ They initially start off in their lairs but they'll soon dominate the board, meaning you'll have to place your explorers carefully.

ADVENTURE CARDS
■ These cards are extremely useful and allow you to manipulate dinosaurs, discover shortcuts and much more.



DUNGEON MASTER

When tiny San Diego studio Faster Than Light (FTL for short) released Dungeon Master on the Atari ST in 1987, they knew they had created something special. What they couldn't have predicted was the tremendous worldwide success the game would achieve and the impact it would have on future videogame design. Damien McFerran speaks to the creator of this legendary title



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** FTL
- **DEVELOPER:** FTL
- **RELEASED:** 1987
- **GENRE:** ROLE-PLAYING ADVENTURE
- **EXPECT TO PAY:** £5+ (PLATFORM PRICES VARY)

Like so many partnerships forged in the early days of the videogame industry, the team responsible for *Dungeon Master* came together at school. "Andy Jaros and I met during college, attending the University of California," recalls Doug Bell, who worked as director, lead designer and developer on *Dungeon Master*. "Andy had received an Apple II from his parents and we played *Ultima* on it and later *Wizardry*". It was during these mammoth gaming sessions that Doug realized his true calling: "I thought I could write a better game than *Ultima*," he modestly comments. With this goal in mind the two friends founded their own development studio called 'PVC Dragon' (PVC as in the material used to create floppy disc storage wallets). Raising capital by selling shares in the fledgling company to close friends and family the intrepid duo started working on their all-conquering fantasy title, named *Crystal Dragon*. However, after two years of hard slog the company coffers were running dry and a difficult decision had to be made. "We decided to see if another game company was interested in picking up our game," continues Doug. "We had recently moved to San Diego and contacted the local game companies, one of which was FTL, owned by Wayne Holder." FTL, responsible for Apple II classic *SunDog: Frozen Legacy*, took the pair on board in 1983, albeit on a temporary basis. "Wayne decided to take us on for a few months to get the game to a working state," Doug remembers.

A couple of months after joining FTL, Atari sent shock waves around the globe with the announcement of the ST home computer, and at FTL development on the Apple II version of *Crystal Dragon* was brought to an abrupt halt. "The Atari was a much more capable computer than the Apple, and better suited to *Crystal Dragon*, where we were spending a great deal of our time trying to fit it in the Apple's 64K" comments Doug about the new system. Unfortunately there simply wasn't enough time to port the work they





» Drinking fountains become more rare the further you progress.

had already done and complete the game in time for the debut of the new 16-bit machine. "We decided it was important to have a game at the launch of the ST, which was scheduled for late 1984" says Doug. "Wayne, Andy and I decided that porting *SunDog* was a better project than trying to develop a new game for the new platform". The team swiftly updated the sci-fi adventure for the 16-bit generation and the Atari ST version was released on Christmas Eve, 1984. A stunning game on the Apple II, it unsurprisingly replicated the tremendous success on Atari's shiny new home computer.

With one triumph and valuable experience of coding on the cutting edge ST under their collective belts, Doug and Andy became full time members of the FTL team and turned their attention back to *Crystal Dragon* – which had now been re-named *Dungeon Master*. The creative process called upon additional commitment in terms of programming – and the results were encouraging. "We started with a proof of concept to use a painter's algorithm (drawing from back to front) to create the dungeon," says Doug. "We wanted to see what the performance was, and it was okay, but we realized that we needed to switch from Pascal to C. I spend three weeks learning C and rewriting the dungeon crawl in C, and the performance was far better than we actually expected".

Compared to the sprawling development studios of today, the core team behind *Dungeon Master* was minuscule. "There were basically only five of us," recalls Doug. "Wayne did only a little of the programming – his biggest contribution was to figure out how to do digitized sound on the Atari's sound chip. Andy Jaros did all of the artwork. Mike Newton created the tools, including the DCS (Dungeon Construction Set). Dennis Walker and I did 90 per cent of the game programming." Each team member had their own responsibilities, but additional brainstorming was welcome, as Doug confirms: "We all contributed the ideas that set *Dungeon Master* apart from other games. I think some of the biggest conceptual contributions were probably made by Wayne, particularly with regards to the user interface".

"THERE WERE BASICALLY ONLY FIVE OF US. DENNIS WALKER AND I DID 90 PER CENT OF THE GAME PROGRAMMING" DOUG BELL

The team soon became aware that they could expand the concept beyond the original *Crystal Dragon* brief. "The scope of the game was initially going to be less than what we ended up doing," comments Doug. "We had planned on releasing a game at the end of 1985, and in preparation for that, released a demo in May of 1985. Around September we realized that we had the potential to create a landmark game, so we decided to expand the scope of the game and



» Doug Bell was the designer of *Dungeon Master* and also did programming on the hit game.



» *Dungeon Master 2* featured improved visuals and sound.



» *Dungeon Master Nexus* took the series into true 3D.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SUNDOG
SYSTEMS: APPLE II, ATARI ST
YEAR: 1984

OIDS
SYSTEMS:
ATARI ST, APPLE MAC
YEAR: 1987

DUNGEON MASTER II
SYSTEMS: PC, AMIGA, PC-9821, PC-9081, APPLE MAC, MEGA CD, FM TOWNS
YEAR: (1993: JAPAN, 1995: WORLDWIDE)



OTHER VERSIONS

Theron's Quest
This PC Engine conversion is probably the most notable port as it deviated from the original title in a number of ways. Subtitled *Theron's Quest*, it is split into seven small dungeons, each of which contained puzzles and maps from the original home computer versions of *Dungeon Master* and *Chaos Strikes Back*. The most sweeping change is the introduction of an anime intro and storyline – the player assumes the character of a teenage boy proving his worth by defeating an evil force (a plot that should come as no surprise to any hardened JRPG fan). The final product is a very toned-down version of FTL's classic game, but is still worth seeking out.

Dungeon Master Nexus
Released in 1998 by Victor Interactive, *Dungeon Master Nexus* is a Japanese exclusive for the Sega Saturn. Developed entirely in Japan (where *Dungeon Master* has a massive following), the game is an admirable attempt to update the classic formula in 3D, but is hampered by the primitive graphic engine and slow, unresponsive controls. Most of the in-game text is in English and while it's not an especially expensive game, the limited print run means it is extremely hard to find these days.



» Mummy! Help!


» A Screamer from *Dungeon Master Nexus*.

▶ forgo the 1985 release". The extra time meant Doug and his team could achieve almost everything they had set out to do – a fairly unique event in videogame production: "There were some ideas we had to shelve, but for the most part we took the time to make the game as good as we could without being dictated too much by the schedule".

Dungeon Master would prove to be a tremendously immersive experience and boasted a degree of realism seldom seen in role-playing titles before or since. Characters required food, water and sleep to survive, torches were essential to light the dim passageways (and would burn themselves out after a period of time) and some enemies could be eaten once slain. However, as impressive as these elements seemed at the time, most had been on the drawing board since the early days of *Crystal Dragon*'s development and Doug feels that *Dungeon Master*'s merits actually lie elsewhere: "I think the user interface, graphics, sound and gameplay were what set us apart, and to a much lesser extent, the refinements of what previous dungeon games had done". Indeed, FTL's game was one of the first adventure titles to ditch the keyboard in favour of a fully mouse-driven interface. Another massive breakthrough was the fact that the game took place in 'real time' – role-playing games up to this point were almost always turn-based affairs – just like the tabletop games from which they took their inspiration.

> "I THINK IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT NO GAME EVER GOT AS MUCH ONTO A 360K FLOPPY DISK" DOUG BELL

Although the enemies were gifted with only a handful of animation frames, *Dungeon Master* was a masterpiece of spooky set pieces and literally dripped with oppressive atmosphere. "We wanted to create an immersive experience," states Doug. "That was the guiding principle behind having the action take place in the dungeon as much as possible. The scary aspect really just evolved from the fact that up to that point there had not been a real-time 3D dungeon game with the level of graphics and sound in *Dungeon Master*. Once you were sucked into the game it didn't take much to scare you". Anyone who has had the dubious pleasure of playing the game alone in a darkened room will agree.

This level of immersion was so cherished by Doug and his team that they didn't want anything to shatter it. "We were targeting the Atari 520 ST on an SS 360K floppy disk. We didn't want to have to interrupt the gameplay with disk swaps. A lot of the technology in *Dungeon Master* was spent on compression/decompression algorithms. When fully expanded, the game that fitted onto a single floppy disk was about 1.6M. There was a sophisticated memory manager that kept the graphics compressed in memory so that we could fit more." Doug is justifiably proud of his team's achievement in this regard: "I think it's safe to say that no game ever got as much onto a 360K floppy disk or into the Atari 520ST's memory as *Dungeon Master*".

Released in 1987, *Dungeon Master* won a raft of accolades and topped 'game of the year' charts in practically every videogame magazine of the time. It went on to become one of the bestselling 16-bit home computer games of all time and achieved an incredible 50% market penetration on the Atari ST alone. The success of the game was not lost on







» Scrolls reveal handy hints and various spells.



» Japanese advert for *Dungeon Master*.



» That pile of bones is one of your fallen champions.



» Doors can be opened in a variety of ways.

"DUNGEON MASTER WAS DEVELOPED WITH THE IDEA OF CREATING MANY SCENARIOS" DOUG BELL

rival developers, and companies such as Westwood Studios (*Eye Of The Beholder*, *Lands of Lore*), Mindscape (*Captive*), Sega (*Shining* and *The Darkness*) and Mirrorsoft (*Bloodwych*) tried to emulate the winning formula of FTL's title, with varying degrees of success. *Dungeon Master* was converted to different formats including the Amiga, Sharp X68000, PC, FM Towns, PC-9801 and Super Nintendo. An enhanced version with additional animation and sound was produced for Commodore's ill-fated CDTV, but development stalled (and was eventually cancelled) due to Commodore's failure to provide FTL with reliable information regarding save-game options on the machine.

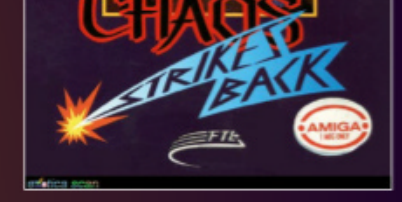
Given the massive success of *Dungeon Master* it was inevitable that FTL would expand on the game in some way. "*Dungeon Master* was developed with the idea of creating many scenarios," continues Doug. The first of these expansion packs was *Chaos Strikes Back* – however, it bucked the trend of the time by being published as a stand-alone game that did not require the original to operate. Although it used the same game engine and many of the same enemy sprites, it proved to be an excellent title and things looked positive for future instalments along the same lines. Sadly, other commitments got in the way, much to Doug's chagrin. "One of my regrets is that we got so busy doing ports of the game that we didn't end up creating enough scenarios," he comments, mournfully.

Chaos Strikes Back was a hit when it was published in 1989 and satisfied the hardcore *Dungeon Master* fans, but what everyone really craved was a full-blown sequel. The wait was to be an excruciatingly protracted one. *Dungeon Master II: The Legend Of Skullkeep* had a lengthy development period and by the time it was eventually released in 1995 the goalposts had not so much been moved, but rather uprooted completely. The game retained the 2D visual style of the original, with the addition of outdoor locations and a more complex game engine. It was an excellent game, but lacked the visual polish to tempt people away from the new breed of 3D first-person adventure titles.

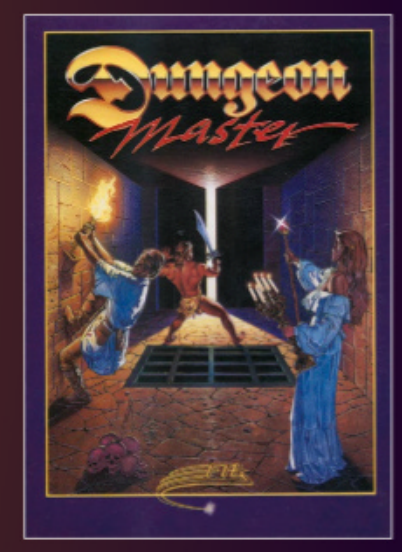
Although the sequel sold well and garnered some positive review scores, it was something of a letdown after the groundbreaking original. It would also prove to be FTL's final roll of the dice and the company ceased operations in 1996. Doug remained with them right up to the bitter end. He has since left the games industry in favour of a career that is more suited to his current lifestyle. "I'm currently a software architect for a company that develops software for the auto insurance claims industry," he explains. "It's quite boring compared to the game industry, but it also consumes far less of my time. I have two sons, nine and 12, and I spend a great deal of time with them… something I'm not sure was possible in the games industry". ✱



» The entrance to the dungeon – anyone with sense would turn back now…



» The first in a sadly unfulfilled series.



» David R Darrow produced the stunning covers for *Dungeon Master* and *Chaos Strikes Back*.



» The SNES port contained the Super FX chip – although it's hard to tell how it was used.



» Tree-like Screamers emit a high-pitched sound to inflict damage on you.

Thanks to Christophe Fontanel of the Dungeon Master Encyclopedia (http://dmweb.free.fr) for allowing the reproduction of several scans and the *Dungeon Master Nexus* screenshots.



Small World

» **DEVELOPER:** PHILIPPE KEYAERTS » **FIRST RELEASED:** 2009
» **EXPECT TO PAY:** £35

Territory control is a basic enough concept to grasp, and *Small World*'s simple mechanics make for a quick and tactical game that can be enjoyed by just about anyone. Its unique fantasy armies are the stars of the show, with each available faction made up of two modular parts at random – each core race has their own ability, with the smaller of the two interlocking tiles that make up an army adding an additional trait and modifying how many troops you get to work with. Stronger abilities are typically offset by offering fewer tokens, and this awesome concept means that the warring forces are unique every time you set up the game.

You grow your territory each turn by pushing into neighbouring spaces (even if that means annexing areas owned by other players), scoring more gold for each space occupied. A little way into the game, its second defining quirk comes into play – the decline mechanic. Once you think you can't spread your forces any further (or if you're left with too small a force to do a great deal), you can use your entire turn to put your active race into decline. You still score for your flipped 'in decline' tokens even though their powers are typically shut down, and get to take a new race-and-power combo the following turn to start your conquest anew. Well-timed declines can win games, and this mechanic adds a whole new layer of strategy. Between this and the unique form of faction randomisation, you'll never play the same game twice!

INSTANT GUIDE

1. Mountains



Difficult terrain and other defensive structures all have tiles that increase stack size for occupying forces, which serves to give a helpful visual indication of just how difficult a territory will be for your troops to conquer.

2. Money



Gold is the game's primary win condition, with the richest player at the end of the game declared the victor. Aside from spending a few coins to skip over a new race or two to get one you want, you keep everything you earn.

3. Board



The core game comes with two reversible boards, offering four unique layouts specially balanced for two, three, four and five-player games. An additional six-player board is available separately, should you want to make things even more chaotic.

4. Token tray



Sick of all your game tokens getting mixed up in bags? *Small World* comes with its own tray with different-sized compartments for all of the different races. Perfect for the base game, but you might need to make other plans when you start adding expansions...

5. Lost Tribes



Lost Tribe tokens represent stragglers from previous generations of conquerors. For most armies, they're just a nuisance, but factions that benefit from combat in some way can sweep these up to get an early head-start without making any enemies at the table.



Or you could try:

SMALL WORLD: UNDERGROUND

Although there are a number of expansions that enhance the original *Small World*, we wanted to bring your attention to *Underground* as it can be played as a standalone game. It's a greatly enhanced version of the base game, because in addition to adding all sorts of new races, including drow, lizardmen and mummies, there are also interesting new game mechanics. These include areas that give you additional bonuses when you control them, powerful new relics and completely different region types. It's an excellent upgrade for fans of the original.

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Steve JACKSON AND Ian LIVINGSTONE

THE WARLOCK OF FIRETOP MOUNTAIN

Steve JACKSON AND Ian LIVINGSTONE PRESENT

BATTLEBLADE WARRIOR



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329

The smell by the water's edge is terrible. Above, you hear the sound of footsteps crossing the wooden bridge. Built into the foundations of the bridge is a wooden hut. Drawn curtains obstruct your view into the hut but you know you are not welcome when you read the words 'Keep Out' painted on the door in large red letters. You draw a deep breath and knock on the door. You hear muttering and the shuffling of feet and suddenly the door is thrown open. Before you stands a white-haired old man with a long beard, wearing white robes. He looks at you sternly and says 'Explain yourself to Nicodemus.' You are elated at finding Nicodemus and tell him about Zanbar Bone's reign of terror in the town of Silverton and why Owen Carralif asked you to find his friend to help them. Nicodemus frowns and walks back inside his hut, telling you to follow him. He sits down in a rocking chair and starts to speak in a calm voice. 'I am old and tired and wish for no more adventure. I live here under Singing Bridge in Port Blacksand to escape the pleas for aid from people fallen on hard times. Hence no one bothers me. But I do wish to help my old friend Owen. I will tell you how to defeat the Nightmare Prince, Zanbar Bone. Listen carefully. Remember, you may defeat him only at sunset. In the night hours he exists on the astral plane. Now, although he will have his servants protect him, but should you get past them, you will need something special to deal with Bone himself. You must protect yourself from his entrancing stare

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STEVE JACKSON
CREATURE OF HAVOC

ADVENTURE GAMEBOOKS
STEVE JACKSON and IAN LIVINGSTONE present
GAMEBOOK 19
DEMONS OF THE DEEP

ADVENTURE GAMEBOOKS
STEVE JACKSON and IAN LIVINGSTONE present
Seas of Blood

A RETROSPECTIVE OF
FIGHTING FANTASY

Thrust upon a youth that was eagerly lapping up anything remotely Dungeons & Dragons related, the Fighting Fantasy choose-your-own-adventure books became a phenomenon of their own in the Eighties and beyond…

To discover the origins of *Fighting Fantasy* we have to go back to the mid-Seventies with Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson, childhood friends thanks to a mutual love of board games, mythical fantasy and sci-fi. When the pair discovered the popular American role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, they spotted a business opportunity and began a mail order company to sell *D&D* rulebooks and other materials; that company soon morphed into Games Workshop. On the back of the role-playing phenomenon, Games Workshop grew quickly and expanded into other areas, selling magazines and more varieties of tabletop games. Recognising the need for its own product, plus the limiting nature of *D&D* – you needed a group of friends, all in one place, to play it – Steve and Ian addressed both issues with a gamebook that would by its very nature be a single-player, RPG experience – although admittedly not on a par with the depth of traditional role-playing games.

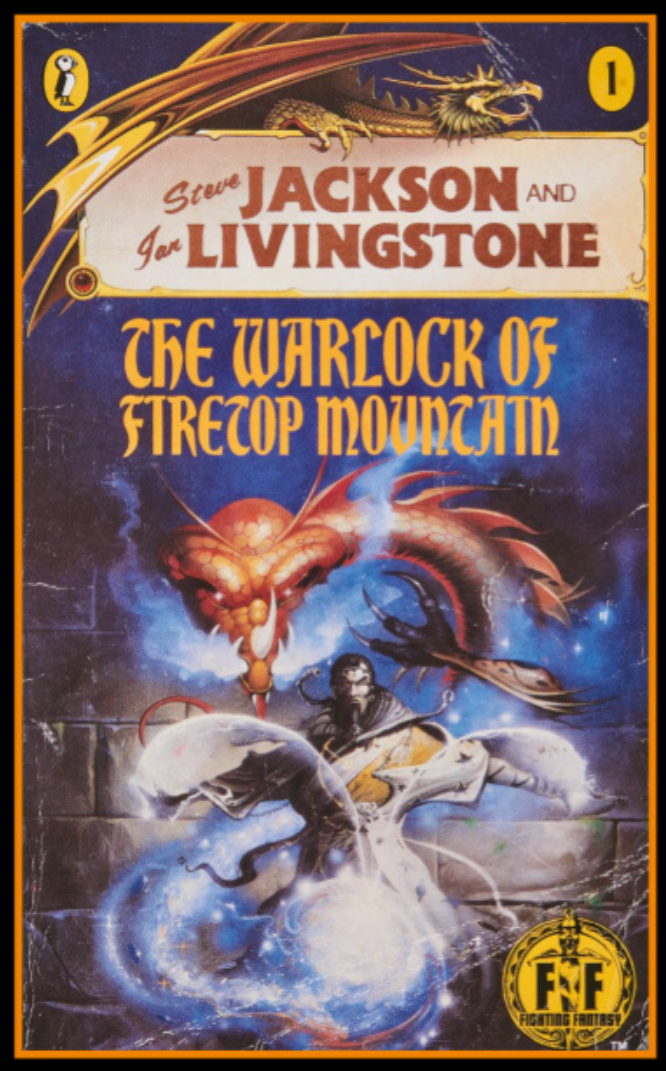
Meanwhile, the enthusiasm and dedication of role-players had been drawn to the attention of publishers, specifically Penguin Books. There was a clear gap in the market for a form of interactive fiction that allowed the reader to decide the direction the story proceeded in, along with a selection of basic role-playing mechanics such as hit points, attack/defence variables and magic. Despite the interest from Penguin, the first book was delayed and only released in 1982, on its sub-label Puffin. *The Warlock Of Firetop Mountain*, written by both Steve and Ian with an evocative cover by Peter Andrew Jones, was a success, and it wasn't long until further books were in the works. The two writers kept it simple: the plot to *Warlock* was a classic dungeon romp as the player negotiated the various denizens and perils of the wizard's domain in order to acquire the treasure hidden within.

Fighting Fantasy quickly became a world of its own, operating separately from traditional role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. Four more books followed in 1983, and another six the following year, including the first, *Talisman Of Death*, not written by Ian or Steve. The books were fast becoming a phenomenon, and subsequent reprints complete with a uniform green spine increased their collectability.

The success of *Fighting Fantasy* was due to several elements, each combining to form entertaining and exciting gamebooks. First, most evidently, and as proudly declared on their front covers, the books allowed the reader to become the hero, influencing the story and making key decisions throughout. But gamebooks along these lines already existed, most notably Bantam's *Choose Your Own Adventure* range that thrust the player into a range of adventure roles. *Fighting Fantasy* became unique by uniting the gamebook with a *Dungeons & Dragons*-esque theme and role-playing structure, using a set of dice and statistics to determine combat results and other factors such as 'testing your luck'. The system was uncomplicated, yet effective, and remained broadly the same for each book in the series, meaning readers could immediately jump into the latest story without worrying too much about adopting another set of rules. And in the days of pre-internet, where reading a book or magazine was your only option to avoid

Most desirable: The Warlock Of Firetop Mountain

■ While the format was honed and refined in subsequent books, this first release by Steve and Ian remains the most memorable. Establishing the dungeon crawl style that would embrace some of the most popular *Fighting Fantasy* books (such as *Deathtrap Dungeon*), the player had the simple mission of acquiring the eponymous wizard's treasure, stored within a locked chest, deep within the bowels of a huge mountain. Official book sequels followed, as did a board game and ZX Spectrum videogame, published by Crystal Computing. The first-edition cover, displaying the white-haired warlock conjuring up a fearsome dragon, remains an iconic image today.



boredom on the bus, the single-player nature of *Fighting Fantasy*, the ability to engage directly in a mythical world at any time without the need of a dungeon master or fellow party members, was a powerful draw, increasing their popularity via word-of-mouth with each release.

After *The Warlock Of Firetop Mountain* came Steve Jackson's *Citadel Of Chaos* and Ian Livingstone's *The Forest Of Doom*. Each book contained a number of outstanding illustrations, which stir just as many nostalgic memories as the written passages themselves. These black and white line drawings punctuated the stories at significant points: remember the hydra from *Citadel Of Chaos*, perched on a pile of the dead bodies of its previous victims? Or perhaps the notorious *City Of Thieves* pair Sourbelly and Fatnose? Or most infamously, artist Russ Nicholson's ghoul from *Firetop Mountain*, a poor zombiefied individual, reaching out at the player with its deadly poisonous hand.

After the first three gamebooks cemented *Fighting Fantasy*'s position, Steve and Ian branched out the themes and stories. Book four gave us the inevitable sci-fi story in *Starship Traveller*, taking its cue from classic *Star Trek* and foreshadowing the *Voyager* series that would branch away from the same TV show. Book ten, *House Of Hell*, gave horror fans a treat with its satanic cult and other spooky goings-on, while *Appointment With F.E.A.R.* introduced the fictional Titan City and superhero Jean Lafayette, AKA the Silver Crusader. Yet despite these and many more excellent examples, it was the traditional dungeon crawl-style adventures that continued to be the most popular stories.

The final *Fighting Fantasy* book of its original run, *Curse Of The Mummy*, was published in 1995, 12 years and 58 books after the release of *The Warlock Of Firetop Mountain*. The success of the series – a reported 20 million books sold in the Eighties and Nineties – inspired a mini-industry around it. The Penguin-published

"The system was uncomplicated, yet effective, and remained broadly the same for each book in the series"



magazine *Warlock* printed abridged stories, interviews and maps, while would-be adventurers had help thanks to the *Fighting Fantasy Quest Pack*. Incredibly sought-after today, this shallow box contained official merchandise never sold separately: an iron-on shirt transfer, two *Fighting Fantasy*-embossed pencils, a badge and an adventure sheet pad, essentially 50 crisp sheets of the standard sheet included with every book. There was also a range of official computer games in the Eighties, and most of these took on the predictable form of graphic text adventures such as *Rebel Planet* and *Temple Of Terror*.

The notable exceptions here are Crystal Computing's 1984 maze game of *Warlock Of Firetop Mountain* and *Deathtrap Dungeon*, a third-person dungeon hack 'n' slash released on the PC and PlayStation in 1998. Steve Jackson expanded the series into his own *Sorcery!* books, a set of four connected adventures that included an additional spell book as well as a host of new gameplay mechanics. A similar size and design was given to Puffin's own *Cretan Chronicles* books

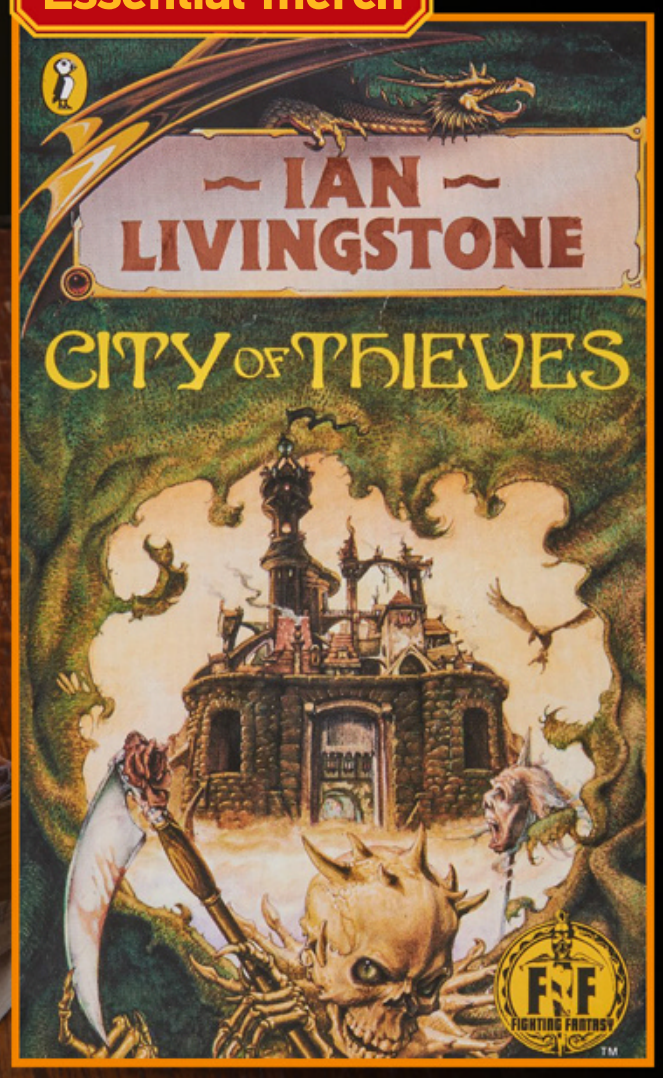
"Each book contained a number of outstanding illustrations, which stir just as many nostalgic memories as the written passages themselves"

which placed the reader into the world of mythical ancient Greece, while Ian and Steve presented *Clash Of The Princes*, a two-player gamebook set by Andrew Chapman and Martin Allen. And the gamebook's popularity didn't end with Puffin. Other popular series included Knight Books' *Way Of The Tiger*, Joe Dever's *Lone Wolf* books and *Grailquest*, a short-lived set of three gamebooks set around the time of Arthurian legends.

Today, there's much nostalgic love for *Fighting Fantasy*, which remains by far the most successful and well-known of gamebooks in the UK. Despite the blip of the mid-Nineties (no doubt incited by the increasing popularity of videogame RPGs), in 2002, Wizard Books purchased the rights to the series and began republishing many of the original books with new covers and artwork. New titles were also added, including Ian Livingstone's *Blood Of The Zombies*, a book that marked the 30th anniversary since Warlock's release. The latest entry, *The Port Of Peril*, was published by Scholastic in 2017 and features a return to Darkwood Forest (*Forest Of Doom*) and Port Blacksand (*City Of Thieves*) as well as an encounter with an old foe.

Whether young or old, nostalgic or discovering them for the first time, it's clear that there's plenty of life left in *Fighting Fantasy*.

Essential merch



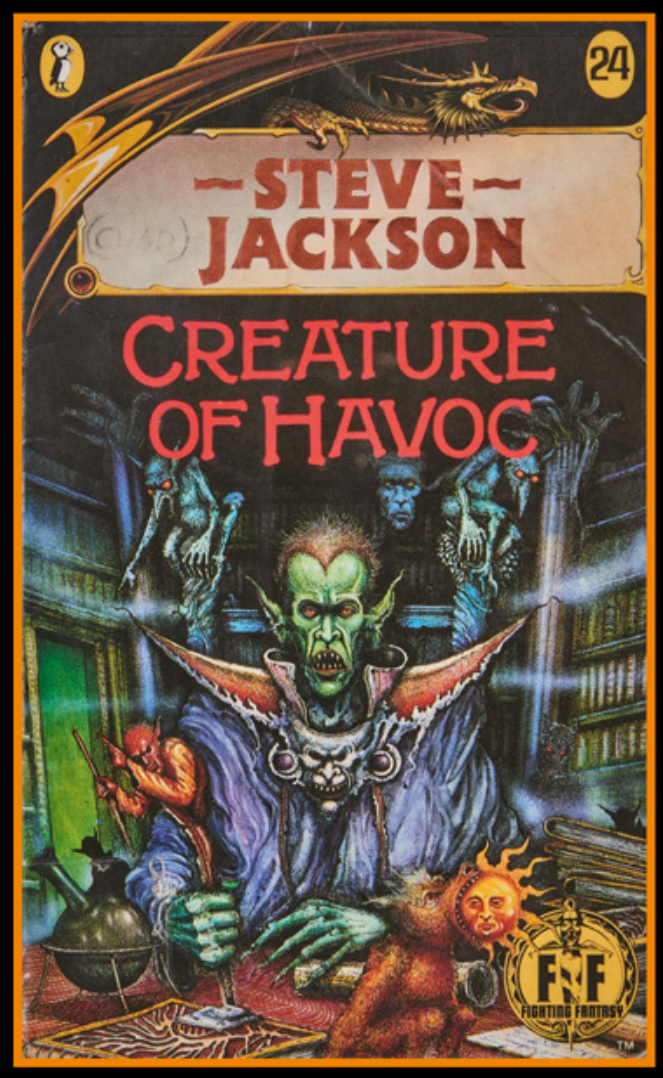
City Of Thieves

■ Book five gives readers the chance to experience two new fantastic and enigmatic characters. The skeletal Zanbar Bone is the effective chief antagonist while the city of Port Blacksand, a wretched hive of scum and villainy that makes Mos Eisley look like Cambridge, forms the deadly backdrop to the hero's quest of saving their village by finding the wizard Nicodemus, the only man who knows the secret to defeating Bone.



House Of Hell

■ Unusually set within our own world, *House Of Hell* takes a formulaic setup – broken-down car, dark rainy night, middle of nowhere – and thrusts the player into a horrific scenario where, initially at least, the only objective is to merely escape. In addition to its terrifying storyline and illustrations, *House Of Hell* introduces a new mechanic in 'fear' points. Clearly owing a debt to H.P. Lovecraft, should the player gain too many of these they go insane, and it's game over.



Creature Of Havoc

■ The series has often blurred the line between hero and villain, and this has never been more obvious than in book 24. Playing the titular beast, decisions cannot initially be made deliberately, instead relying on the roll of a dice. Slowly, powers are gained that help add reasoning and communication to the creature, but not before you've had the opportunity to despatch numerous do-gooder adventurers in this ingenious role-reversal story.



PLANESCAPE TORMENT

With its epic story, unique characters and dark themes, Black Isle Studios' epic adventure is rightly hailed as one of the greatest RPGs of all time. Craig Ritchie speaks to the project leads who brought us this landmark role-playing title

It was the mid-Nineties in Irvine, California, and the long-standing and successful Interplay Entertainment was just setting up its dedicated RPG division that would come to be known as Black Isle Studios. Among the talent hired to work on its original games was one Chris Avellone, a writer and freelance game designer. Chris recalls being asked in his initial interview how he would begin a game set in one of the licences Interplay had the rights to but was simply sitting dormant: the *Planescape* universe. "I told him I'd start with the player waking from the dead in the Mortuary," says Chris. "It was many years before that was put to paper, however."

Interplay's Feargus Urquhart and Brian Fargo had recognized the missed potential of the unused licences they had paid so much to acquire, and Planescape, being a truly unique world that had never yet been the setting of a videogame, was officially given the go ahead. They hired a young programmer Dan Spitzley, who had only recently finished an undergraduate Computer Science degree.

"When I started at Interplay," recalls Dan, "Black Isle didn't exist yet, but various *Dungeons & Dragons* licenced games were already in the works. I spent two years working on the computer version of TSR's *Dragon Dice* collectable dice game. Shortly before it shipped, Feargus Urquhart (head of the then-fledgling Black Isle division) walked into my office and asked if I wanted to be the lead programmer on *Torment*, which was entering pre-production. The answer was pretty much an immediate 'Yes'. I must admit that I was surprised that Feargus approached me with the offer. I was still quite junior at the time and *Dragon Dice* wasn't exactly shaping up to be a huge hit. Presumably, someone I'd been working with told him I wasn't too offensive-smelling, and that was good enough for him."

For those unfamiliar, the dark, bleak, and far off centre campaign setting of *Planescape* is based across a set of planes of existence in the larger *Dungeons & Dragons* universe, with an unusual look and feel, distinct locations, factions and an entire cosmology that is a far cry from the standard Tolkienesque high-fantasy fare.

"Like just about every game I've worked on in my career," says Chris, "the franchise or premise was mandated, and then I worked within the parameters given. To *Planescape*'s credit, the 'parameter' of the franchise is that there are no parameters. So in many respects, it was the most free-form franchise I've had the opportunity to work with."

Chris took to the task with a near obsessive dedication, diving into the source material and spending his days crafting the plot and characters of what would become *Planescape Torment*. Tim Donley, who was given the role of lead artist, recalls his early time on the project: "All I knew about Chris is that he never came out of his room," says Tim, "a tiny half metre by half metre space, full of books, and all he was ▶

ROLL CALL

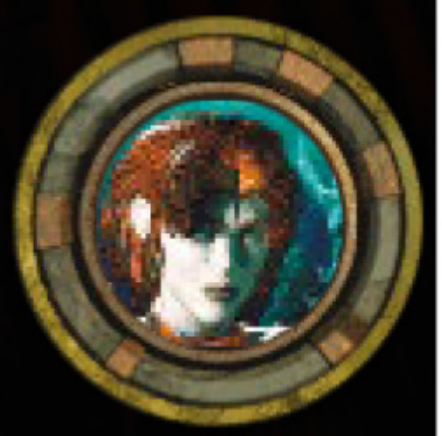
The key characters of Planescape: Torment

NAMELESS ONE



■ The game's protagonist, once human but now an immortal with no memory of who he is or how he ended up in the Mortuary. Able to play as a fighter, mage or thief thanks to training in game (and not character creation), the Nameless One has a wide-open potential path of discovering his mysterious past through his adventure in Sigil.

ANNAH



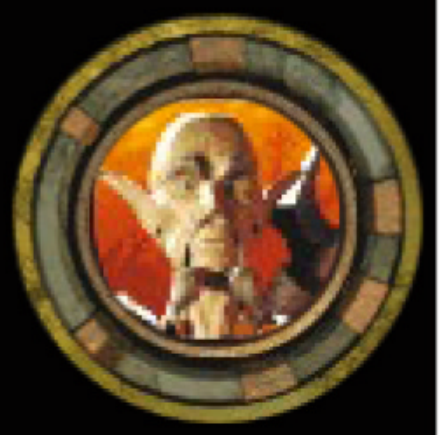
■ A young Tiefling woman whose language and demeanour do not hint at years spent in Swedish finishing school. This fighter-thief is an invaluable companion both for trap detection and a lethal backstab, and is a potential romantic interest for the Nameless One. She was inspired by Betty from the *Archie* comics, of all places.

MORTE



■ Your floating skull companion with a far longer history with the Nameless One than he originally lets on. Comic relief, guide, skeletal encyclopaedia, and a decent fighter (albeit limited to biting only), this ambiguously trustworthy character somehow manages to have a full inventory despite nowhere to put anything. As the game says, "Don't ask".

DAK'KON



■ A disciplined and dedicated Githzerai warrior carrying his trademark karach sword, the blade shaped from a substance that embodies chaos. A follower of Zerthimon, Dak'kon is both wizard and fighter, and proves a crucial ally for the Nameless One. He is integral to both the Nameless One's future, and his enigmatic past.

IGNUS



■ With one of the most interesting back stories in the game, this not entirely mentally sound mage has an unhealthy affinity for fire which led to him being confined in the Plane of Fire due to an unscrupulous attempt to burn down part of Sigil. He now gives the Smouldering Corpse bar its namesake, and can join the party if freed from his flaming prison.



» You're going to want to buff Wisdom and Intelligence for this game.

doing was writing, writing, writing. I didn't know Chris too well and I was always asking what he was working on. Everyone was hyped because no one was really doing anything with the *Planescape* universe, at least videogame-wise at the time."

Tim remembers reading what Chris had worked on and thinking that it was amazing. Chris presented a pitch, introducing Tim to Sigil (*Planescape*'s main city) and the idea of the *Planescape* universe, and he got into it immediately. "Chris had a very big passion for the game and the licence," recalls Tim. "He was a very open and easy to talk to guy, and really okay with suggestions to change his ideas – he was very chilled with this stuff. It benefited us to have this liquid working environment where you could suggest something and see it happen as long as you kept to the spirit of what they were trying to do. The team loved it and we all just had a lot of fun."

At the time, a developer called BioWare was working on a Forgotten Realms project that would eventually become the classic *Baldur's Gate*. Beneath the hood was the now renowned Infinity Engine, which BioWare shared with the fledgling group at Black Isle. Even the early toolset provided to the team was mature enough to bring Avellone's vision to life, and thanks to great communication and a good working relationship with BioWare, Dan and his team learned how the tools and code worked and were able to create background art, character animations and dialogue without having to wait for a final version of the iconic Infinity Engine.

"As time went on, BioWare would flesh out things like its combat timing system and its implementation of the *D&D 2nd Edition* rule set," says Dan, "and we'd integrate those into *Torment*. However, we did take some liberties with the *D&D* rule set. For instance, the Nameless One and his ability to level up across several disciplines wasn't standard for *D&D*, but it made sense in the context of the game. We had to write a lot of that code from scratch, so we could still make forward progress alongside BioWare's engine work."

"*Planescape: Torment* took time because we didn't understand the engine," adds Tim, "and the game itself requires you to get in there and discover what works. A lot of it was theory and we didn't know if it could happen – like Chris wanted the Lady Of Pain [Sigil's ruler] to fly over the city if you did bad things: "Do five bad things and the Lady Of Pain will appear and wallop you", but we were like 'How's that going to work?' We didn't know. We had this giant sprite of the Lady Of Pain at like 512x512 and it could hardly fit on the screen, but we were just like, who cares, do it! Tried things, some worked, some didn't, we fixed what didn't. Not a day went by where there wasn't some new thing we had to learn."

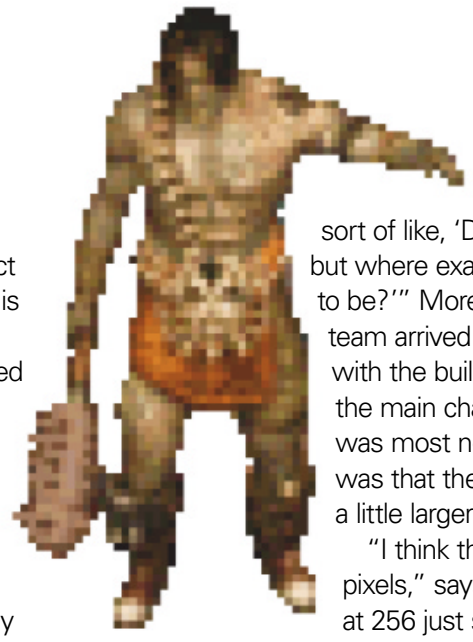
The team ended up doing a lot with the engine that BioWare had never anticipated, the *Planescape* setting requiring game aspects that players wouldn't expect in a standard Forgotten Realms adventure. "If you're familiar with it," explains Tim, "its whole point is that it's wacky. Everything's wacky! Nothing is what you expect. Like, you pick up a sword and it can talk to you, and now suddenly you've got to have a sword character, and BioWare didn't expect this and so the Infinity Engine is not really made for that. We modified it where we could and where we couldn't,



» Combat was more an also-ran than a star attraction.



» The turnout for the *Thriller* auditions was excellent.



we worked around it. The engine is amazing and the fact that they made it at the time is just unbelievable."

Part of this can be attributed to the fact that the Infinity Engine made use of LUA, a scripting system that allows designers and scripters to perform game tasks without having direct access to the code – especially handy when developing a game build on an engine that is itself still a work in progress. Dan recalls how the Infinity Engine provided a range of functions for LUA to do things like setting story variables, manipulating inventory and stats, creating AI behaviours, and laying out cutscenes.

"This let the scripters handle building a lot of necessary game logic safely (read, not as likely to crash the game) while freeing up the programmers to work on engine-level changes and new features," he says. "I wouldn't say that LUA itself made role-playing games awesome, but anything that allows content to be created without programmer intervention radically increases iteration time and productivity. For a large RPG, this is vital. That's why the Infinity Engine was so important to the success of *Black Isle*. BioWare created a workflow that was geared towards generating an enormous amount of complex content in a fashion that prevented programming from becoming a bottleneck. It had a lot of quirks, like any game engine, but it did was it set out to do very well."

Once *Planescape: Torment* had been in development to the point that the Nameless One had been created and the team had built the Mortuary (which, incidentally, was going to be a standalone demo before becoming the first part of the game itself), Feargus informed the team that BioWare heads Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk were keen to see the progress on the game. The core crew were sent off to BioWare's offices, hearts in hand and nervous about showing off their work.

"At the time they were working on *Baldur's Gate*," says Tim. "It was not released yet but we'd seen a copy of it and could tell it was going to be *huge*! Even then we knew it was giant and people were going to go crazy because it was straight, raw *D&D*. We were sort of like, 'Dang man, ours is good but where exactly is the audience going to be?'" More than a little nervous, the team arrived at the BioWare offices with the build ready to demo. One of the main changes to *Planescape* that was most noticeable over *Baldur's Gate* was that the characters had been made a little larger than the latter's sprites.

"I think the *BG* guys were 96x96 pixels," says Tim, "and we did ours at 256 just so they'd look bigger. We also brought in the camera a bit: where *Baldur's Gate*'s was a little pulled back, ours was closer to the ground. BioWare at the time was 50 or a 100 people, and they have these insane art team guys, and we're working on their engine and sort of going in there showing them what we'd done with it. So we'd always be complaining about 'Stupid BioWare, they can't make an engine, blah, blah, blah', but we got up there and we're all totally humbled and see how they were just so organised. I mean, we thought we were organised but they just made us look like school kids – we didn't know what we were doing! (laughs) I was trying to write everything down as they were explaining how everything is done, like how they do their animations and so on. Add to this that everyone's a genius, and the worst part is they're all super nice and like totally the friendliest guys we've ever met!"

One of BioWare's artists got the build loaded onto his machine and ready to run, and Ray Muzyka decided to call all his staff in and dim the lights for a proper preview screening of the title, doing no favour for Tim and the team's nerves…

"Now we're all like 'Oh my god', I'm sweating and really nervous and saying 'Woah, maybe you will want to look at it before we show it to everyone, I don't want to show it to *anyone* let alone the whole team!' Anyway, all of these people come into the room and we're all huddled around this tiny little monitor… the lights finally go down and everyone is staring up close to see what's going to happen, and the thing opens up. It fades in from black and the Nameless One starts by climbing off the table and it's a 500-frame animation of a 250-pixel sprite.

"Now, remember that that's probably more animation than what was used in an entire party in *Baldur's Gate* at the time, and Ray looks at his lead engineer and goes 'Is that our engine? Because that doesn't look like our engine! How come their sprites are so big? How come we don't have sprites so big?' and the engineer is going 'Well, I don't know, they've changed something!' At this point Dan said, 'Yeah, we went in and whatever your little editor said, we just changed the number to make them get bigger and they got bigger.' And they were

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** INTERPLAY ENTERTAINMENT
- **DEVELOPER:** BLACK ISLE STUDIOS
- **YEAR:** 1999
- **PLATFORM:** PC
- **GENRE:** RPG

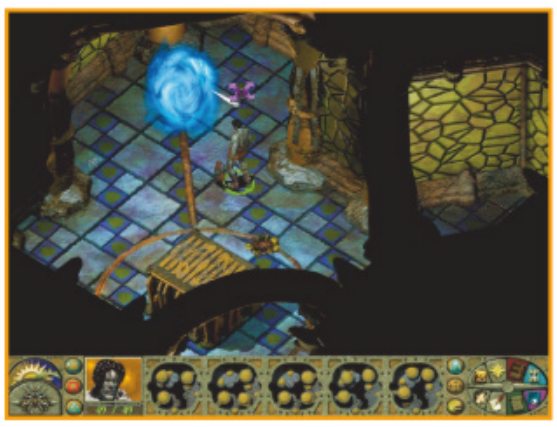


» Concept work of Annah from the *Last Rites* (working title of *Torment*) vision statement.

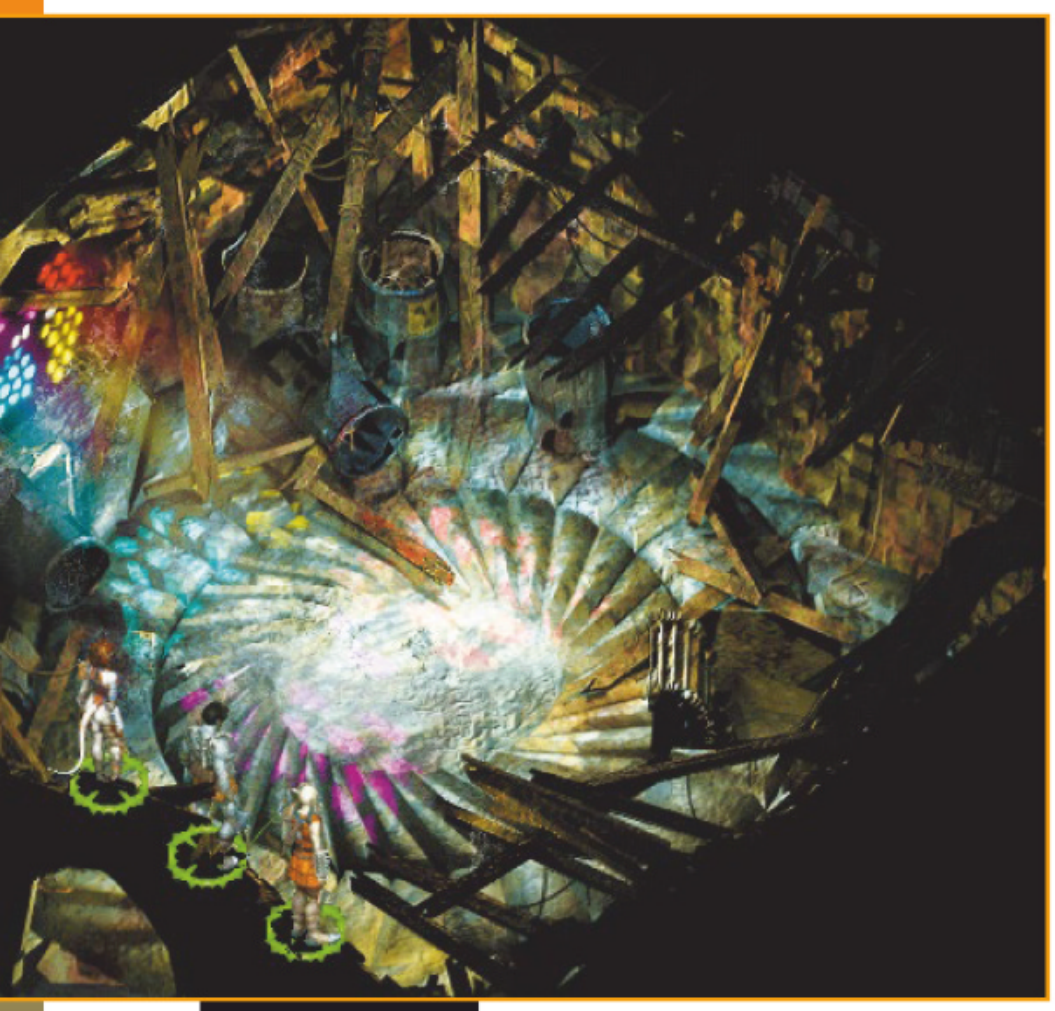
» The entire first area of the game was originally going to be a standalone demo.

WE THOUGHT WE WERE ORGANISED, BUT BIOWARE JUST MADE US LOOK LIKE SCHOOL KIDS!

TIM DONLEY, LEAD ARTIST, ON VISITING BIOWARE



» Magical portals could be triggered by just about anything.



» www.gog.com is one of the few places still selling this fantastic RPG.



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

FALLOUT 2
(PICTURED)
SYSTEM: PC, MAC
YEAR: 1998

ICEWIND DALE
SYSTEM: PC, MAC
YEAR: 2000

BALDUR'S GATE: DARK ALLIANCE II (2004)
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX
YEAR: 2004

all going 'what? You can just change it like that? Aren't you using more memory?' And we were just like 'Yeah, but we don't care, whatever'! They just thought what we were doing was crazy, but they liked it, and we got such a positive response. When we left there we were on cloud nine because we'd really wanted them to like it."

With great feedback from BioWare, the engine set up and being tweaked to their needs, an egalitarian development environment in place at Black Isle and a lead designer so open to suggestions and fresh concepts, new talent and ideas appeared in the form of individuals whose potential had not been realised until then. One new face, Dave Maldonado, started off as a tester on *Planescape* before impressing Chris so much with the bugs he was pointing out that he was brought on board to produce entire areas of the game.

"His bugs were great and showed that he had a good editorial sense and was able to critique pacing, flow, grammar, and logic," says Chris. "I asked if he'd be willing to write a zombie for me as an impromptu writing test. In short, he wrote a great zombie. So I asked if he could write more and be brought on, so then he took on more and more responsibility until he was a full-blown area designer. He was largely responsible for the Clerk's Ward and its many sub-areas."

The same was true in the graphics department, where Tim was working with a concept artist named Eric Camponella. Originally unimpressed by Eric's concepts, and especially how they transformed to finished models on the screen, Tim let Eric get hands on with the character modelling to see if he could produce a better finished product than what his concept allowed the modelling team to build.

"He'd never modelled a character before," recalls Tim, "and it was like somebody had just said 'Hey, why don't we let Michelangelo try to sculpture?' because I don't know how the guy's brain worked, but for some reason once he had translated it into a model, it looked *nothing* like that squiggly drawing he'd originally done! You've seen the game – *all* those characters are his. There's a hundred and something characters in the game and he modelled every one of them, producing as many as five a week."

And a good thing that he could, because when it came to populating the game, Chris and his team took full extent of what the campaign setting allowed and clearly were having a lot of fun coming up with offbeat characters and items. "I love short stories and characters that tell short stories," he says, "thus, a lot of the inventory items such as the Fanged Mirror of Yehcir-Eya and minor NPCs like Crier of Es-Annon have quite a few *Planescape*

» Floating text was not supported by the engine before Black Isle got hold of it.



» *Project Eternity* is a Kickstarter project that will feature heavy involvement from Chris.



IN SHORT, HE WROTE A GREAT ZOMBIE. SO I ASKED IF HE COULD WRITE MORE

CHRIS AVELLONE, WRITER, ON DAVE MALDONADO



STRANGE NEW WORLDS

Other fantastic settings from the D&D universe

GREYHAWK

While Forgotten Realms holds top spot as the most well-known and adapted *D&D* licence, Greyhawk was in fact Gary Gygax's original high fantasy campaign. The setting is brought to life brilliantly in Troika's *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, widely regarded by fans as having the best implementation of 3.5 Edition D&D rules.



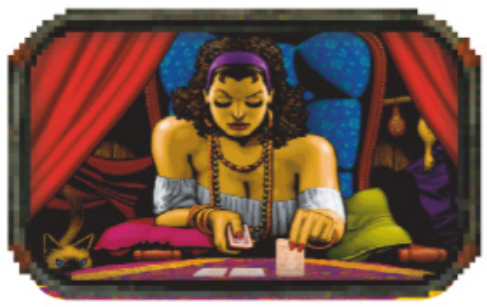
DARK SUN

Dark Sun is *D&D*'s bleak campaign set on the harsh and desolate world of Athas. SSI's loved-or-hated *Shattered Lands* saw players assume control of a band of gladiators set on freeing the city of Draj from a megalomaniacal sorcerer-king. The use of Psionics instead of standard magic added something new to the formula.



RAVENLOFT

The first of only three videogames set in the *Dracula*-inspired D&D campaign, *Strahd's Possession* saw an early blend of first-person 3D adventuring and real-time combat interspersed with beautiful hand-drawn cutscenes and portraits. An immersive soundtrack helped this unique if occasionally cumbersome game along.



AL-QADIM

Based on *The Arabian Nights,* with flavours of *Aladdin*, *Ali-Baba* and *Sinbad*, *The Genie's Curse* is the only computer game adaptation of the Al-Qadim campaign setting. Veering away from traditional RPGs and playing much more like an action-adventure, this was a really fun and all too often overlooked title.



stories to tell. I tried to keep these stories interesting by keeping player hooks in them, and training players to recognise that even seemingly minor quest givers and items may likely to have an insight into something you've done in the past, which is a designer bribe to make people pay attention for selfish reasons."

The depth of the characters, the extent of the backstory and the intricacy of the plot resulted in a script totalling a massive 800,000 words. But this focus on storytelling and characterisation came at a cost: combat. While functional and definitely *Dungeons & Dragons*, the game's combat paled next to *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale*, the team's follow-up dungeon crawler.

"Combat took a back seat to character advancement, creation, quests, areas, and the narrative," admits Chris to us when we ask. "I regret this, and wish we had a systems designer assigned to the project. Focusing on a narrative is one thing, but if the moment-to-moment gameplay is lacking, then you've failed as a game designer. Sometimes a game can shine by one thing it does really well, and in *Torment*'s case, I think the narrative elements were that One Thing™. So if you enjoy narrative from a moment-to-moment experience, great, but the combat was pretty weak, and I did feel it could have used more dungeon crawling areas for players to explore and have fun in addition to having fun exploring the conversations in the game."

While maybe not all Chris had hoped for, his concerns over the combat had little effect on the success of the game, nor its lasting appeal. *Planescape: Torment* was released in December 1999, receiving great critical praise and immediately racking up awards. The game was an instant fan favourite, and although the sales numbers did not reflect it, *Torment* still has a huge following to this day. Widely regarded as having one of the best storytelling methods of any RPG, it truly is a fantasy role-playing literary achievement, with much deserved praise that continues well over a decade after its release.

"It's hard for me to believe sometimes," says Chris of the game's persisting popularity. "It was hard to think at the time that people would like playing this game so much, which is a sign that maybe you're not realising the potential of your game design correctly. It's definitely been the most popular game people have cited, and when they cite it, it's often clear they played the game extensively ('Where did you get the idea for the bronze sphere smelling of custard?'), which makes me happy, and I know it makes the *Torment* team as a whole very happy to see it referenced so much."

"I'm proud to have been involved in making *Torment*, and it's very heartening to know that people are still playing and enjoying it after all of these years," concludes Dan about the game's appeal. "If nothing I ever do in my career reaches those heights again, I can still be content saying I was part of something lasting and incredibly special."



THE AVELLONE TOUCH

Other games Chris has been involved with

FALLOUT 2

■ Post-apocalyptic adventuring in one of the greatest RPG sequels of all time. Moody, atmospheric and funny, it's more of the same goodness that only improves upon the excellent original.

ICEWIND DALE

■ Where *Planescape* was story and dialogue driven, *Icewind Dale* – also powered by the Infinity Engine – was pure party-based dungeon-crawling fun set in the frozen north of the Forgotten Realms.

LIONHEART: LEGACY OF THE CRUSADER

■ Avellone helped out on this action RPG by writing some dialogue in Barcelona and providing samples of dialogue reactivity and how a conversation can react to a player's choice.

STAR WARS: KOTOR 2

■ This classic *Star Wars* RPG suffered terribly by being rushed out the door. Thankfully, a fan patch now allows for a gaming experience much closer to the designer's vision. A must-play game.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2

■ To some, *NWN2* represents the pinnacle of *D&D* computer role-playing thanks to an excellent adaption of 3.5e rules, epic storytelling, and a vibrant modding community.

FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

■ More post-nuclear fun in the same engine as *Fallout 3*, but with Obsidian rather than Bethesda at the helm, *New Vegas* is a vast, epic adventure and easily one of the best RPGs of the past decade.

CLASSIC GAMES

Mage Knight

» **DEVELOPER:** WIZKIDS » **FIRST RELEASED:** 2000
» **EXPECT TO PAY:** £100



» *Mage Knight* has some fantastic looking art and solid production values.



» While the game is expensive, it does include two expansions with it.

There are some games that really demand an investment from its players, and *Mage Knight* epitomises that. You'll be moving a miniature character around the board as you seek adventure, but there's also a deckbuilding system that underpins everything, or the Fame or time of day boards that require consideration, too. And say nothing of the sheer hours of playtime a single session can take up. This might well sound frustrating, but get three friends together on a quiet Sunday afternoon and you'll soon find the sun setting without ever realising. It's a totally absorbing experience, in part because of how all these different interacting mechanics manage to sit on your mind.

But, in fact, you don't even need friends. The scenarios that are provided with *Mage Knight* have plenty of objectives to aim for, but some are competitive, others cooperative, and there even some that can be played solo – and it's actually one of the best solo games available.

But even outside of the main objectives, there are plenty of things to get your teeth into. It's sort of like a memory game, because on one hand you'll need to try and keep track of your ever-increasing deck of cards and the various pieces on the board, but you'll also need to devote to memory everything from the rulebook. And there's a lot. But after that personal investment has been paid and the rules are mentally set in stone, *Mage Knight* has that very rare skill of happily syphoning away hours of your life, regardless of whether you do it alone or with friends.

INSTANT GUIDE

1. Tile pieces



Exploration is a big part of *Mage Knight*, and these hexagonal tile pieces especially create the world that you'll be taking back from the Atlantean Empire. The way that these tiles are placed will basically affect the way that you'll tackle each scenario.

2. Miniatures



Whether it's the characters that move about the board or the cities you'll be looking to conquer, the miniatures add a good amount of quality to the overall package. They're not the most ornate or well-painted of miniatures, but are still great to feel and move.

3. Cards



As a mage knight, it only seems right that you have access to spells and abilities to make you powerful, right? These will stick with you throughout a session and can be a little hard to keep track of, but are an integral part of the experience.

4. Enemy tokens



There is a large number of different enemies available to face in the game, especially with the expansions added in. The tougher foes often come with their own powerful abilities or resistances that means having to adapt to certain situations.





Or you could try:

GLOOMHAVEN

There's no avoiding it, *Gloomhaven* is an expensive board game, but if you're willing to pony up the cash then it likely won't feel all that off-putting; it's a huge box with really high-quality pieces. *Gloomhaven* takes the idea seen in games like *Mage Knight* to another level, with an overarching story to follow, a board that scales well for difficulty, character level or number of players, and a constantly evolving scope that really helps it stand out from its peers..

Digital Card Classics

Hearthstone

» **DEVELOPER:** BLIZZARD » **FIRST RELEASED:** 2014
» **EXPECT TO PAY:** FREE-TO-PLAY WITH IN-GAME PURCHASES

Blizzard is a master at adapting its *Warcraft* lore into new, exciting mediums. First, it transformed its series strategy games into the world-conquering MMORPG *World Of Warcraft* in 2004, and then, a decade later, the veteran developer set its sights on tumbling into the world of digital collectable card games with *Hearthstone*. Delightfully easy to pick up and devilishly hard to master, the rules are simple: reduce your opponent's life to zero utilising monster, weapon and spell cards. Each player has a resource of mana that ramps up from one to nine, increasing by one each turn, and each card costs a set amount of mana to play.

The cards in your deck are dependent on the class you play as. Mage Jaina, for instance, has an exclusive set of powerful spell cards that can freeze opponents, among other things; meanwhile Rexxar the hunter specialises in calling forth beasts to rush down his opponent early on. Along with this, each class has their own unique Hero Power which you can use once per turn for two mana.

One of the primary reasons behind *Hearthstone*'s popularity is it's completely free to play. You earn gold by winning games and fulfilling daily challenges; you can then use that gold to buy card booster packs. Any cards you don't want you can turn into 'Dust', which you can then use to craft cards you want. People who are willing to pay can also use their real-world money to buy packs, but you can get by without spending a single penny.

It makes for a delightfully friendly game. It conjures up images of peacefully sitting down in a firelit tavern and challenging others in your downtime, and at its core is an impressive amount of polish and heart.



Or you could try:

ASCENSION: DECKBUILDING GAME

This excellent card game was originally created by former professional *Magic: The Gathering* players, including Justin Gary and Brian Kibler. As with many deckbuilding games you start off with a small amount of cards, slowly buying more with resources that allow you to expand your deck. It's received numerous expansions since its release in 2011 and became one of the first digital card games to appear on the iOS format. It's also available to play on Steam for both PC and Mac owners.

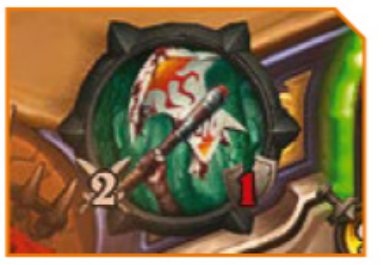
INSTANT GUIDE

1. Hero



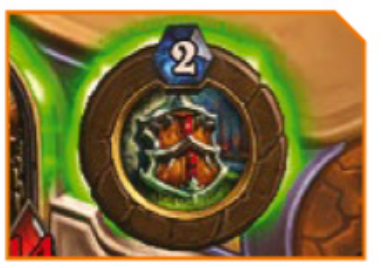
These are arguably the most important aspect of *Hearthstone*. Heroes are an extension of the player, and must be protected, otherwise you'll meet a quick end. Each hero has a unique, reusable power and exclusive cards.

2. Weapon



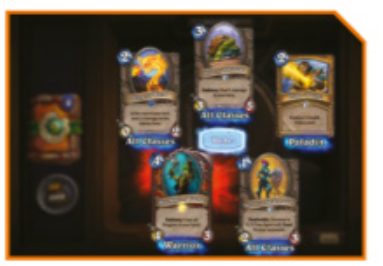
You can equip certain cards to your hero as weapons and then use them to attack, like you would with a monster card. Be careful, though, if you strike a monster with a high attack power, you're hero's life force is going to take a sizeable hit.

3. Hero Power



This ability, costing two mana, is always a useful tool, no matter which hero you choose. You can use it once per turn, and it's usually important to use in a game's early stages. Some cards can even modify and enhance your hero's power.

4. Cards



Each card has a rarity rating: white is common, blue is rare, purple is epic and gold is legendary. Legendary cards can usually turn the tide of an entire game, but they're difficult to find in boosters, and are expensive to craft.



It only lasted for five short years but HeroQuest still managed to make a huge impact on everyone that played it. Discover why it's still worth seeking out today

Chances are if you were a fan of *Fighting Fantasy* books or *Dungeons & Dragons*, there's a strong possibility that you would have played this classic and highly popular board game. Created by Hasbro's Stephen Baker and released in 1989, *HeroQuest* was effectively a more accessible version of *Dungeons & Dragons*, TSR's highly successful role-playing game, which had risen to prominence in the late Seventies and early Eighties. Like *Dungeons & Dragons*, one player controlled the game – playing the role of the evil wizard Morcar – while the others took on the roles of mighty adventurers, hoping to plunder the treasure of whatever enemies they faced in Morcar's dangerous dungeons. The available heroes were typical archetypal classes and included a powerful barbarian, a ferocious dwarf, and a wizard and elf that both had access to deadly spells that made them dangerous adversaries.

Created in collaboration with Games Workshop, *HeroQuest* featured a number of familiar monsters from GW's universes, including fimirs and chaos warriors, as well as more traditional fantasy-based monsters that ranged from skeletons and mummies to orcs and goblins. In total, 31 well-detailed monsters were included with the core set, along with many pieces of furniture that ranged from tables and cupboards to an alchemist's bench and treasure chests.

The actual game board was also worth mentioning as it consisted of 22 rooms and numerous passageways, which could then be reconfigured to create brand new dungeons thanks to the clever placement of doors. Add in a large number of tiles, which represented everything from pit traps and falling blocks to blocked passageways, a huge number of different spell cards and the long list of various treasure items for the heroes to use and *HeroQuest* represented incredible value for money. It was by no means the most original of games, but its timing was perfect, leading to a great many expansions in the following years.

Although *Dungeons & Dragons* was extremely popular the world over, numerous controversies during the early Eighties meant that its influence began to shrink, particularly in the UK. Whereas it was once available for sale in many prominent retailers, it instead began to get distributed into smaller, specialist hobby stores. *HeroQuest* on the other hand had no such issues and it was available from virtually any prominent retailer that was selling



board games at the time. Baker's game sat proudly aside the likes of *Hungry Hippos*, *Monopoly* and *Mouse Trap*, where its distinctive packaging instantly stood out.

Another reason *HeroQuest* became so popular was due to its sheer accessibility. While its rules were rather expansive for the time, they were nowhere near as intimidating as those for *Dungeons & Dragons*, meaning that everyone could begin playing with very little preparation. Whereas a dungeon master for *D&D* might spend hours creating the framework for their adventure, before the first moves even took place, the person controlling Morcar needed to do little more than reconfigure the game board as the players entered new parts of the dungeon. Simple die mechanics for combat kept things nice and straightforward, while the use of different spells meant that players could try out different combinations

"It was by no means the most original of games, but its timing was perfect, leading to a great many expansions in the following years"

Its success in the UK, Australia and Europe saw it getting released in the US and Canada during 1990, with several changes made to the gameplay that made it much more difficult that its UK counterpart. Many of the dungeons featured far more monsters than before, some of them harder to defeat due to having more hit points. Heroes were rewarded with more gold upon clearing dungeons, so it wasn't all bad news.

HeroQuest's popularity resulted in the release of numerous upgrades and expansions in the following years, ensuring that players always had exciting new quests to participate in. *Advanced HeroQuest* was a greatly enhanced game that appeared the same year as *HeroQuest*, published solely by Games Workshop. It featured a more complicated rule set than the original game, added completely modular board pieces and henchmen, and pitted the adventurers against the Skaven, a vicious tribe of evil rat-men. A brand new version of the core game, called *HeroQuest Advanced Quest* was released in 1990 and added a new



HeroQuest II: Legacy Of Sorasil

The original computer adaptation of *HeroQuest* was extremely popular, appearing on several 8- and 16-bit computers at the time of release. The sequel is equally good, featuring brand new missions and the same flexible icon system that was used to control everything from moving to fighting monsters.



Essencial Merch

Advanced HeroQuest

This was released the same year as *HeroQuest*, but was published by Games Workshop. It's a far more complicated game than the original due to RPG-like rules, better quality tiles and more detailed models. It lacks the variety in its monsters, though, as all the enemies are Skaven.



HeroQuest: Wizards Of Morcar

This and *Against The Ogre Horde* were the last expansions to be released for *HeroQuest*. Packaged in a larger box than the earlier expansions, it features a number of new monsters and significantly enhances the spell capabilities of the elf and wizard characters. It's continually rising it price, particularly if it's complete in box.

"You'll need deep pockets if you want to own the Advanced Quest edition of the game and all six expansions"



13-part adventure called The Dark Company, as well as the use of henchmen. It was known in Germany as *HeroQuest Master Edition*.

Keller's Keep was the first expansion released for *HeroQuest*, adding additional monsters, tiles, board overlays and a brand new ten-part quest, while *Return Of The Witch Lord* was more of the same, but had a distinct undead theme and a further ten new quests for the heroes to embark on. An *Adventure Design Kit* was also released early in *HeroQuest*'s lifespan and was designed specifically so that players could create their own standalone adventures (although there was nothing stopping players from using their own pen and paper to achieve the same goal). Two additional expansions were introduced in the US and Canada, but never made it to Europe, and as a result are now quite rare. *Mage Of The Mirror* added ten quests, including three designed solely for playing as the elf character, while *The Frozen Horror* was designed for the barbarian.

While several of the above expansions appeared in 1991, the year was also notable for introducing a surprisingly good videogame adaptation that was created by Gremlin Interactive and released across a number of popular platforms at the time, including the Amiga, Spectrum, Commodore 64 and PC. A planned conversion was also in the works for the NES, but it never reached completion. A sequel, *HeroQuest II: Legacy Of Sorasil* arrived in 1994 for the Amiga 1200 and CD32, but it never reached the same large audience as its predecessor.

In 1992 *HeroQuest* won the coveted Origins Award for 'Best Graphic Presentation Of A Boardgame In 1991', which further added to its appeal, but the success wasn't to last and just two more expansions were created for the *HeroQuest* line. Fortunately, both of them were rather excellent, ensuring the short-lived franchise went out with a suitable bang. *Against The Ogre Horde* was a far larger expansion than previous one, which introduced a variety of different ogres to battle, additional double-sided room tiles and an excellent new quest book featuring seven tough adventures, while *Wizards Of Morcar* suitably expanded the abilities of the elf and wizard characters and introduced several new spells and treasure cards. Three novels were also released, which took the style of *Fighting Fantasy* adventures, but also included additional standalone quests for certain characters. They're now highly collectible, although the same can be said for all of *HeroQuest*'s products. In fact, such was its popularity that a number of unofficial expansions exist, ranging from *Dungeons Of Peril* to *The Mountain Keep* during the early Noughties, which were created by fans to keep the love of *HeroQuest* alive.

> "Ultimately, HeroQuest remains highly collectible today, because it's still fantastic fun to play"

***HeroQuest* may have only lasted for five short years, but it was massively popular during that time, which means a fierce collector's market has now sprung up for it in recent years.** The sheer number of components that were released for the core game means that many collectors will pay a lot of money for a 100 per cent complete version of the game – more so if the original figures remain unpainted. The expansions, which were released in ever smaller numbers than the core game, are even more coveted and we've seen non-boxed add-ons sell for silly amounts online, meaning you'll need to have rather deep pockets if you want to own the *Advanced Quest* edition of the game and all six expansions. The *Fighting Fantasy*-style adventures continue to rise in price, while more and more people seem to be seeking out *HeroQuest*'s computer spin-offs, particularly the CD32 version of the sequel.

Ultimately, *HeroQuest* remains highly collectible today, because it's still fantastic fun to play. Sure, it lacks the complexity of more modern dungeon crawlers such as *Descent: Journeys In The Dark* and *Wrath Of Ashardalon*, but it's as enjoyable now as it was in 1989, and that's what matters to its many fans found all over the world.



Most Desireable
HeroQuest Quest Packs

The most sought-after *HeroQuest* items are the two standalone quest packs released for the elf and barbarian characters. It's unclear why the dwarf and wizard never received their own spin-off adventures, as the two expansions were excellent additions which significantly enhanced the core board game. Unlike other *HeroQuest* expansions, neither set simply reprinted monsters found in the base game. Instead they added numerous new enemies that ranged from yetis to giant wolves, as well as female characters, a first for the series. Sadly, both expansions are now extremely hard to get hold of, meaning you'll need to spend £300 to £800 to own them.

THE HISTORY OF BLOOD BOWL

You've heard of fantasy football, but not like this! Discover Games Workshop's unique take on the popular sport, set in the Warhammer Fantasy universe

A lot of us play tabletop games to get away from outdoor activities such as sports, but Games Workshop thought differently. It took the game of American Football, added the tongue-in-cheek fantasy tone from its miniatures wargames, and *Blood Bowl* was born.

Games Workshop is best known for *Warhammer* and *Warhammer 40,000*, but over the years it has created spin-off boxed games set in these universes. Games like *Mordheim* and *Space Hulk* have their fans, but these came and went; none of the company's games has matched the cult following that *Blood Bowl* managed to create. Set in the *Warhammer Fantasy* universe, the various races occasionally stop fighting their chaotic wars to compete in something just as bloody – orcs, humans, undead, ogres and anthropomorphic rats known as Skaven, among others, compete in a sport that is best described as American Football turned up to 11.

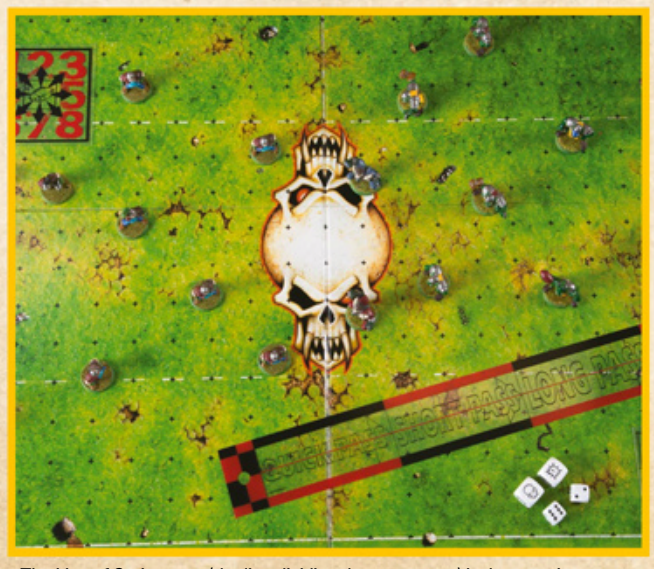
> **"The original box game had several teams with players made from illustrated cardboard"**

The player in a game of *Blood Bowl* is referred to as the coach. Each team is made up of 11 players with some reserves and the goal is to grab the ball (despite it having numerous spikes in it), then carry it to the end zone to score a touchdown. The winner is either the team with the most touchdowns at the end of 16 turns or the first team to completely incapacitate the other. During a turn each team member can do one of a variety of actions from moving, throwing or blocking. But being in the *Warhammer* universe, things are not so simple. If they think they can get away with it, a player can attempt to kick the other team while they are down, literally. Teams can employ secret weapons such as giant mechanic vehicles known as Deathrollers to crush players, pogo sticks can be used to leap over the opposite team, and bombs or poison daggers can be brought onto the pitch. As long as the referee doesn't see it, anything goes in this game. The world of *Blood Bowl* is full of tongue-in-cheek references and gags: pre-made teams are often named after real-life sports teams such as the 'Orcland Raiders'; 'Bloodweiser' sponsors many games; and the deity of the game is 'Nuffle'.

Jervis Johnson created the first edition of *Blood Bowl* in 1986 and he would go on to work



» Each team can hire Star Players, players with either exceptional stats or unique abilities. These freelancers can be expensive to use though!



» The Line of Scrimmage (the line dividing the two teams) is the most important aspect when it comes to your team's positioning.


FANTASY



» Dead and Injured players may not be a big deal during a standalone game, but for tournaments and leagues this is more important



» Catchers can run far and re-roll for one failed catch per turn, but they are more prone to injuries

on every subsequent update so far. The original box game had several teams with players made from illustrated cardboard, but metal figures were released later the same year. The game did not have its own unique set of rules but instead copied numerous rules and gameplay elements from the *Warhammer* fantasy miniature wargame of the time. This was to put emphasis on the violent nature of the sport, but when playing it the game seemed like less of a sport-based board game and more like a miniature warfare akin to Games Workshop's other titles of the time.

The second edition was released just two years after the first and made an effort to move away from the old style of gameplay by introducing a whole new set of rules. While it did give the game a different feel, these additions made it far too complicated for the average coach. A standard game could go on for hours with players stuck in deadlocks for turns on end, and numerous special rules were introduced that were hard to keep track of.

In 1991 Games Workshop hoped to bring a younger audience to the game with *Kerrunch*, a spin-off that simplified the rules. However, this spinoff was extremely unbalanced and was quickly replaced with the third edition of *Blood Bowl*. Today, *Kerrunch* is only sought out by those who want a complete *Blood Bowl* collection.

The third edition of *Blood Bowl*, released in 1994, is what most people who play the game today will be familiar with, as the game has largely remained the same since it was introduced. Actions were simplified, and most importantly a turnover rule was introduced. A turnover can occur for a variety of reasons, for example, if a team is called out for an illegal move or a moving team's player is knocked over, but it can also occur if the player doesn't meet the turn's four-minute time limit. This changed the game drastically as it meant that coaches had to think quickly, but their actions could also be costly. Dice rolls were as a result more exciting and the game moved at a brisk pace.

> **"What has kept *Blood Bowl* alive for so many years and hooked so many fans has been the tournaments"**

Jervis Johnson continued to tweak *Blood Bowl*'s rules regularly and would include these changes in the bi-monthly *Blood Bowl Magazine*. These updates were then collated in the *Blood Bowl* annuals along with some of the magazine's best content. Johnson would also regularly talk to fans and would actually take their ideas into consideration when making any changes. In his designer's notes published in 2002 he mentioned that to him it felt like the game took a life of its own. It is no surprise then that shortly afterwards he would call the collection of his updated rules the 'Living Rulebook.'

Games Workshop staff, along with dedicated coaches of the game, came together to form the Blood Bowl Rules Committee (BBRC). They would work on the 'Living Rulebook' annually between 2002 and 2009 and update it with any changes they felt were necessary, then make it available online as a PDF.



END ZONE
■ Get the ball to either end of the pitch to score a touchdown, but this is harder than it sounds.

TEAMS
■ The box comes with two teams: the human Reikland Reavers and orc Gouged Eye. Each team has 12 miniatures that come unassembled and unpainted.

PASS RANGE RULER
■ There are four types of throws. Check the throw type with the player reference sheet to determine the dice roll needed.

In 2009 the BBRC disbanded, but it wasn't all bad news as that same year a videogame adaptation of *Blood Bowl* was released, which was simply the tabletop version brought to PCs and consoles. For five years it seemed that Games Workshop had given up on the game, however in 2015 a sequel to the videogame was released and then to the surprise of many, the following year a new edition of the tabletop game was introduced. Known as *Blood Bowl 2016*, the rules are largely the same as when the BBRC left it, but it brought new miniatures and a modern look.

What has kept *Blood Bowl* alive for so many years and hooked so many fans has been the tournaments and leagues. Games Workshop would run four major annual tournaments themselves including the titular *Blood Bowl*, which was held at Warhammer World, Nottingham from 2003 until 2010. The other three tournaments were held in Germany, Canada and USA with some still being hosted today by the NAF, a real-life organisation named after a rules body in the *Blood Bowl* universe.

While playing a standard game is fun, for a lot of *Blood Bowl* fans leagues and tournaments are where the real game lies. Rules for leagues were introduced after the third edition and they were developed in a way that allowed everyone to join in. Those who are dedicated can play as much as they like, while someone who can only spare the odd weekend can still participate even if it is only in the occasional game. A number of teams play a series of games and over time coaches need to keep up with their player's abilities, injuries and more. Thanks to the internet and the 2016 reboot, *Blood Bowl* is more popular now than it has ever been. Coaches have the resources to find a local league, set up their own or join one with people from all around the world.



» These books collected all of the updated rules from the *Blood Bowl Magazine*, including some experimental ones and teams you could try in your next game. There are two books, 2002 and 2003, and they are not too difficult to find on online auction sites

SCATTER TEMPLATE
■ Ever dropped a rugby ball? The bounce is always unpredictable. Use this template along with dice to determine where the ball goes when dropped.

BLOCKING DICE
■ Blocking may be the most common action you make in *Blood Bowl*. These dice show if the result is a pushback, attacker down, defender down or both down.

Digital Card Classics

Gwent

» **DEVELOPER:** CD PROJEKT RED » **FIRST RELEASED:** 2018 » **EXPECT TO PAY:** FREE-TO-PLAY WITH IN-APP PURCHASES

If you've ever played *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, you'll have encountered *Gwent*, the card game of choice in Andrzej Sapkowski's fantasy world. The RPG's version of the game was so popular with players that CD Projekt Red decided to turn it into a full game, and it has quickly become a rival to the likes of *Hearthstone*.

The goal of the game is to win two out of three rounds by accumulating more power than your opponent, using battlefield units, spells and special leader abilities. The game is easy to learn thanks to a useful tutorial story that features the series' star Geralt, and is extremely well presented, with an attractive 3D battlefield and animated cards. What makes *Gwent* stand out compared to its rivals is the game's reduced emphasis on luck – there's no resource system dictating which cards you can play and you don't draw cards between turns. This means that you'll rarely be stuck with unplayable cards, and you'll never lose out to an opponent's lucky draw. Instead, the game emphasises skills such as generating card advantage, sequencing your plays correctly and identifying synergies.

The game offers plenty to do, including casual and ranked matches, the Arena mode which challenges players to build decks with random cards, and missions that provide rewards such as extra cards. *Gwent* also forms the battle system for the single-player RPG *Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales*, and the very best *Gwent* players can compete for major cash prizes in the Gwent Masters tournament series.

INSTANT GUIDE

1. Leader



Each faction has its own selection of leaders, which can be unlocked as you play more games. They each have unique abilities – Crach an Craite here is capable of dealing minor damage to an enemy unit, once every few turns. Use them wisely and success will be yours.

2. Faction



The backs of your cards show the faction you're playing with (or against); forest-dwelling Scoia'tael, Nilfgaard's diplomatic masters, the seafaring warriors of Skellige, the armies of the Northern Realms and the primal Monsters. Each faction has exclusive cards and leaders.

3. Battlefield

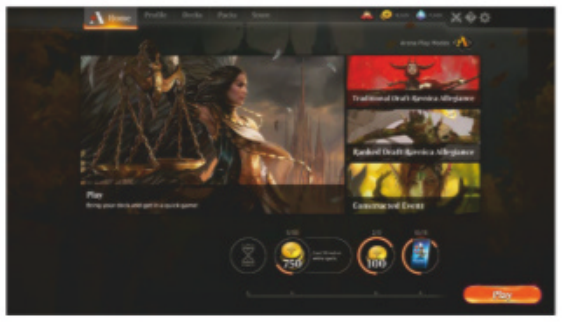


This is where you play your units and artifacts. The field is divided into two ranks for each player, ranged and melee – card effects change based on where they're placed. Some units can execute additional orders while they're in play.

4. Spells



Not every card goes onto the battlefield. Spells provide one-off effects like power boosts for your units, damage to enemy units or retrieving cards from your graveyard. Ideally you want a few of these in your hand each round, while maintaining a majority of battlefield units.



Or you could try:

MAGIC: THE GATHERING ARENA

The original name in trading card games has recently made the move into the free-to-play digital world, and the adaptation is a strong one. The quality game design is a product of over 25 years of refinement, and it has its own unique worlds and characters. However, there's no console version available and there are some big luck elements to the game – you'll definitely win or lose games based on lucky topdecks and not drawing land.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS

Many fantasy books have been adapted for the videogame market, but few have been as successful as those set in Middle-earth. Darran Jones is your guide on a journey that's far less stressful than actually travelling to Mordor…

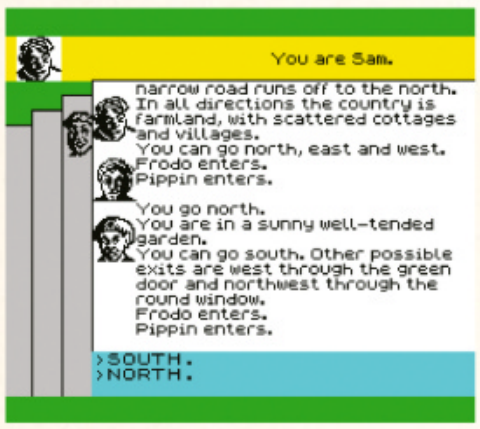
No set of books has been immortalised as often in videogames as the works of JRR Tolkien. Ever since the official release of *The Hobbit* in 1982, gamers have been impressed by the digital worlds based on the popular set of books. The quality, as we'll discover, has varied greatly over the past 30-odd years, but it's a testament to the original books that so many gamers continue to buy into Tolkien's incredible universe. We recently returned to *Middle-earth: Shadow Of War*, so it felt like a good opportunity to look back at the many games, good and bad, that have been created over the years. Enjoy.



THE HOBBIT 1982

DEVELOPER: BEAM SOFTWARE **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

Fittingly, for a videogame based on a world famous novel, the very first official game was a text adventure. In fact, it went one better, using slick graphics to more accurately portray the world that Tolkien had lovingly crafted some 45 years earlier. Created by Australian developer Beam Software, *The Hobbit* was notable for its impressive parser, which was surprisingly complex for its time. Known as Inglish it allowed the player to create advanced sentences that far outstripped other text adventures and gave the player a surprising amount of flexibility while adventuring. Massively ahead of its time, it featured all the key plot points and characters of the book (which was also included with the game) and offered numerous solutions in reaching its ending. Little wonder that it went on to sell over 1 million copies.





LORD OF THE RINGS GAME ONE 1985

DEVELOPER: BEAM SOFTWARE **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

It took Beam Software three years to come up with a sequel to its innovative adventure. Using similar tactics to *The Hobbit*, *Lord Of The Rings Game One* came with a novel, *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, and continued to blend a solid parser with effective visuals (which had admittedly lost some of their impact over the three-year period). Spread across two cassettes, Beam Software expands on the book by adding original content, but stumbles badly with its attempt at humour. It lacks the impact of *The Hobbit*, being only a decent adventure.



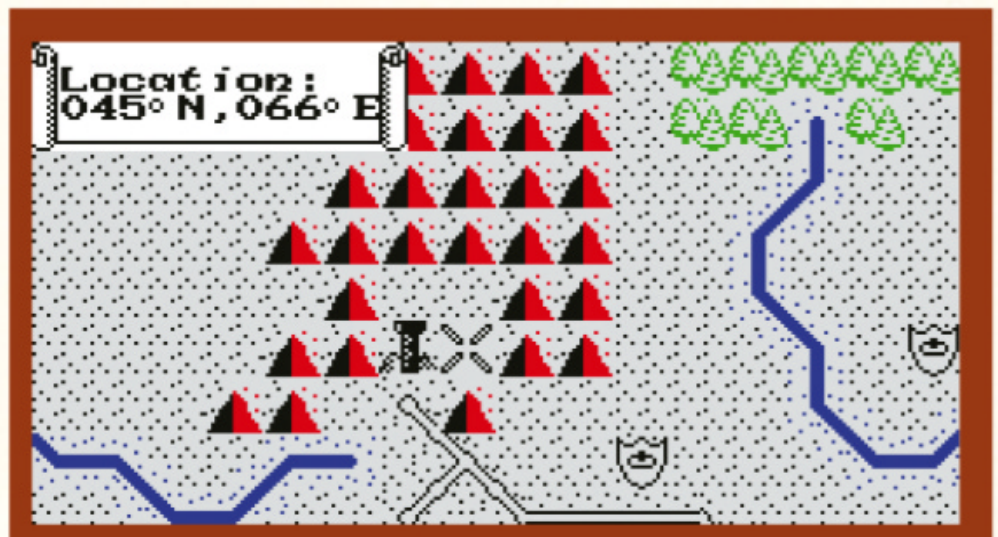
SHADOWS OF MORDOR 1987

DEVELOPER: BEAM SOFTWARE
PLATFORMS: AMSTRAD CPC, SPECTRUM, C64



While *Shadows Of Mordor* improves on the first part of the Rings trilogy, it remains a poor second to *The Hobbit*. While the 128K offerings are the versions of choice due to their support of in-game graphics, the game suffers from poor loading times and the need to constantly save. The parser still feels clunkier after the sheer ease of using *The Hobbit*'s and it's telling that Beam Software never released volume three.

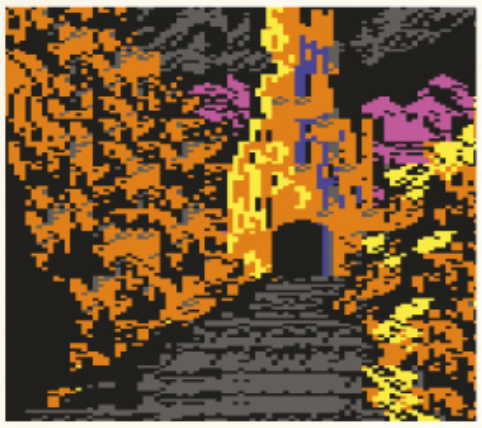
> **"The 128K offerings are the versions of choice due to their support of in-game graphics"**



WAR IN MIDDLE EARTH 1988

DEVELOPER: MELBOURNE HOUSE **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

Many claim this to be the best strategy game to be based on Tolkien's work. Those people are stupid Hobbitses who clearly thought computers stopped evolving after the 8-bit generation. *War In Middle Earth* is actually a solid strategy game that's let down by crushingly slow battles (due to the game being crammed into a single load. It fares far better on 16-bit formats thanks to more involved combat elements and has additional elements not found in the 8-bit outings. It's a solid effort from Spectrum stalwart Mike Singleton, but there were far better strategy games to come…





CRACK OF DOOM 1988

DEVELOPER: BEAM SOFTWARE **PLATFORMS:** COMMODORE 64, PC

Beam Software's *Crack Of Doom* looks rather nice, building on the static graphics it had created with previous text adventures and enhancing the Inglish parser. You start off as Sam Gamgee, and it closely follows the plot of Book VI, but it's a far tougher adventure than previous games in the series, which can make it a little too frustrating to play. A disappointing end to Beam Software's text adventures, particularly when you consider the inroads made by *The Hobbit*.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS VOLUME 1 1990

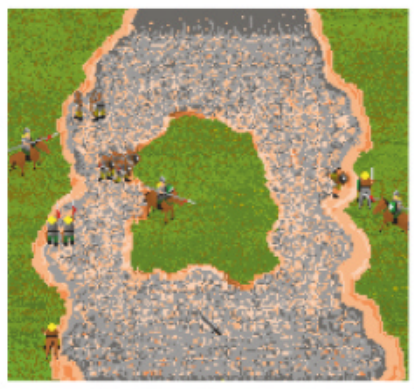
DEVELOPER: INTERPLAY/CHAOS STUDIOS **PLATFORMS:** AMIGA, PC

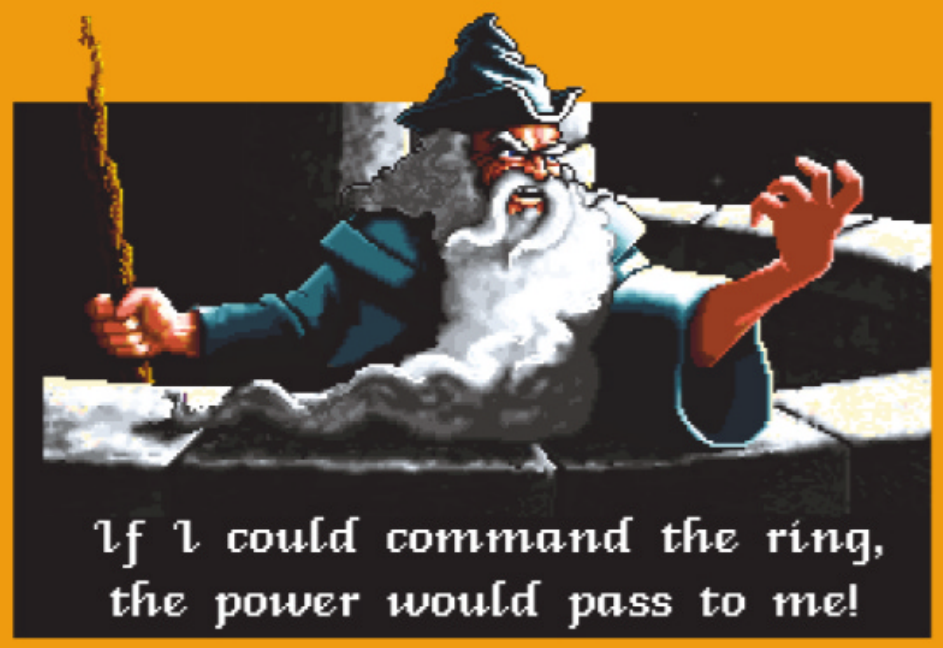
One look at Interplay's game is enough to tell you that the *Ultima* series is a huge inspiration. What the screenshot doesn't tell you however is that this is one of the slowest RPGs around, particularly on the Amiga, which really strains to run the game. It's a shame that both *Volume 1* and its sequel are plagued by so many technical issues as there's an okay game with a good inventory system hidden beneath the surface.

RIDERS OF ROHAN 1990

DEVELOPER: BEAM SOFTWARE **PLATFORMS:** PC

Set around the events of *The Two Towers*, knowledge of the book can benefit you during the adventuring sections, as it allows access to allies that can really swing the game in your favour. The combat is fun, if a little basic, while the strategy elements are surprisingly enhanced for the time, even if they look like rubbish stick-men having battles. An interesting adaptation.



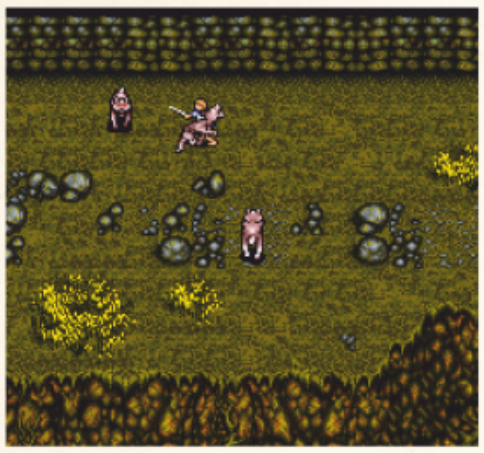




AND THE REST...

Other official games and expansions to consider

- **THE LORD OF THE RINGS VOLUME 2 (1991)**
  DEVELOPER: INTERPLAY **PLATFORMS:** PC
- **THE LORD OF THE RINGS: TACTICS** (2005)
  DEVELOPER: AMAZE **PLATFORMS:** PSP
- **THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH II: RISE OF THE WITCH-KING (EXPANSION)** (2006)
  DEVELOPER: EA LOS ANGELES **PLATFORMS:** PC
- **THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: MINES OF MORIA (EXPANSION)** (2008) **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC
- **THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SIEGE OF MURKWOOD (EXPANSION)** (2009) **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC
- **THE LORD OF THE RINGS: ARAGORN'S QUEST** (2010)(2008)
  DEVELOPER: HEADSTRONG GAMES/TT FUSION **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS
- **THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: RISE OF ISENGARD (EXPANSION)** (2011) **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC
- **THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: RIDERS OF ROHAN (EXPANSION)** (2012) **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC
- **GUARDIANS OF MIDDLE EARTH** (2012)
  DEVELOPER: MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS **PLATFORMS:** PS3, PC, XBOX 360
- **THE HOBBIT: KINGDOMS OF MIDDLE-EARTH** (2012)
  DEVELOPER: KABAM **PLATFORMS:** ANDROID, IOS
- **THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: HELM'S DEEP (EXPANSION)** (2013) **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC
- **MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR** (2017)
  DEVELOPER: MONOLITH PRODUCTION **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS



THE LORD OF THE RINGS VOLUME 1 1994

DEVELOPER: INTERPLAY
PLATFORMS: SNES

Despite the Volume 1 suffix, there was never any additional sequels to this 1994 SNES game. It's a standard top-down action RPG with a heavy reliance on fetch quests that run the wrong side of boring. You'll be wanting the two unreleased sequels just so you can reach Mount Doom and throw yourself in it. The music at least impresses, with plenty of atmospheric tunes, but the weedy-looking visuals and clunky combat would endear only the staunchest of fans. Little wonder there was an eight-year gap before another official game appeared.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING 2002

DEVELOPER: VARIOUS
PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

There were two versions of *The Fellowship Of The Ring*. The home console outings are easily the best being a 3D adventure with fun real-time combat. While released after Peter Jackson's first *Rings* movie, it's instead based on Tolkien's book, as the film licence had passed to EA. Although it's showing its age, it's a decent adventure, which somewhat predictably, due to the loss of the licence, never received a sequel. Pocket Studios' GBA game on the other hand is a terribly bland, buggy turn-based RPG that we've already wasted too much time talking abo…



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS 2002

DEVELOPER: VARIOUS **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

Now this is more like it. EA decided to take a leaf from the book of Jackson, leaving Tolkien to not so much turn in his grave, as rapidly spin in it. And yet it works, more so when you realise that the source material is the work of Jackson, not Tolkien. Effectively a steroid-fuelled version of *Golden Axe*, *The Two Towers* boasts a selection of different characters, plenty of big bosses to take down and an entertaining combat system. The presentation is of a high standard as well thanks to voice work from the original cast that goes a long way to capturing the spirit of the film. It suffers from repetition like all scrolling fighters do, but this remains a fun adventure. The GBA version is its own game, being another capable scrolling fighter that, unlike it's bigger peer, supports multiplayer.





THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING 2003

DEVELOPER: VARIOUS **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

EA again released two different games, a more basic hack-and-slash for the GBA and a suitably fuelled brawler for home consoles. *The Return Of The King* is a more enjoyable game compared to *The Two Towers* thanks to its less linear level design and interactivity with environments. There's a multiplayer mode as well, making for a far superior sequel that still remains great fun to play. It's just a pity it looks so drab.





THE LORD OF THE RINGS: WAR OF THE RING 2003

DEVELOPER: LIQUID ENTERTAINMENT
PLATFORMS: PC

Interestingly, while EA had secured the rights to the licensed films, games based on the books were still up for grabs. As a result Sierra Entertainment was able to secure the rights for an RTS based on the popular trilogy. The end result was an okay strategy game that managed to capture the scale of the epic battles that Tolkien described, but lacked depth. The presentation is glorious, but its generic gameplay makes it more suitable for beginners and Tolkien fans only.

BORED OF THE RINGS

There are plenty of unofficial games based on Tolkien's assorted works…

Considering the influence Tolkien's work has had in the world of fantasy, it should come as no surprise to learn that a great many unofficial videogames have been made over the years.

One of the earliest examples is *Shadowfax* by Mike Singleton, which had you playing as Gandalf riding the titular horse, avoiding as many riders as possible while dispatching them with magic. Singleton was a big fan of Tolkien, and his 1984 hit *The Lords Of Midnight* took its inspiration from his work.

There were additional text adventures as well, with Delta 4 releasing the parodies *Bored Of The Rings* in 1985 and *The Boggit* the following year, featuring delightfully offensive characters like Bimbo Faggins.

Moria on the other hand was released in 1983 and was a roguelike where you had to delve deep into the Mines of Moria to defeat the Balrog. It became extremely popular, leading to a version called *Umoria*, which was created for Unix computers. This in turn led to *Game Of Angband*, a dungeon romp that was first released in 1990. *Moria*'s influence can still be felt today as it was the inspiration for Blizzard's *Diablo*.

Numerous MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon) have also taken their inspiration from Tolkien's books, while there are a huge number of mods available. *Medieval II: Total War*, *Warcraft III*, *NeverWinter Nights* and even *Skyrim* have unofficial mods and maps available for them proving just how much of a reach Tolkien still has.





THE HOBBIT 2003

DEVELOPER: INEVITABLE ENTERTAINMENT/SAFFIRE
PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

Another LOTR game where the handheld version was completely different to the home console outings. The GBA game is a fun riff on *Zelda* with nice visuals and a good mix of exploration, stealth and action. The home console versions are a little weaker, being a 3D third-person adventure with more prominent stealth sections, an irritating camera and less precise combat. Fans will find that both games are worth playing but Saffire's GBA game definitely has the edge.





THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE THIRD AGE 2004

DEVELOPER: ELECTRONIC ARTS **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

EA's first attempt at a Rings-based RPG is surprisingly good. Interestingly, it gives you new characters to control, whose paths run parallel with the events in the films/books. Utilising similar combat mechanics to *Final Fantasy X*, it's a challenging adventure, that's only really let down by some unfair difficulty spikes and some quirky plot points. There's some great boss battles to be had, while character levelling again borrows heavily from the *Final Fantasy* series. The end result is a surprisingly good RPG, even if it does deviate from the original novels. The Game Boy Advance version by Griptonite Games is a completely different game, playing more like Nintendo's popular *Fire Emblem* series, but it's equally worth tracking down.





THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH 2004

DEVELOPER: EA LOS ANGELES
PLATFORMS: PC

EA Los Angeles primarily worked on *Medal Of Honor* games, but you'd never have guessed it after playing this excellent RTS. While it's not the most in-depth example of the genre, it offers two well-balanced campaigns, great looking visuals and a superb soundtrack. It certainly feels conventional compared to more modern examples of the genre, but it remains a great game that effortlessly captures the sheer scale of the battles from Jackson's movies.







BEHIND THE SCENES INTERVIEW: THE MINI-MAKING OF THE HOBBIT

Veronika Megler on making the works of Tolkien a digital reality

Tell us about the design of *The Hobbit*

I put down the whole concept of having a network or a replaceable database of locations, animals that each had a character that they played themselves, and how all of that would work. I designed it in such a way that rather than hard-coding everything, we could pull out and replace the database of characters and locations and end up with a different game.

How did you go about choosing key elements from the book?

We all knew *The Hobbit* and *The Lord Of The Rings* books – I had read the entire series several times by that point. [With that in mind] I went through the entire book, picking out key locations and pieces of the adventure that I could imagine how to turn into a suitable puzzle or an interaction between characters and the player.

Why code in Assembler?

It meant we had more power available than BASIC games. Also, Phil encoded the message database, so you couldn't dump memory to read the game's messages. This gave us the ability to have a richer vocabulary, because we just had a dictionary of words and sentences were built up out of pointers to those words. We could substitute in whatever subject or object that we needed just as a little placeholder that allowed us to identify where the subject, the object and the verb went.

Why were Gollum's riddles a struggle to recreate?

I used several that were in the book, but then I had to come up with others that were like enough that they didn't stand out as having been written by someone else, but different from ones Gollum already used. I remember that taking a bit of time and a few attempts before I came up with something reasonable.

Interview extracts taken from issue 101 of Retro Gamer.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH II 2006

DEVELOPER: EA LOS ANGELES
PLATFORMS: PC, XBOX 360

EA Los Angeles' sequel is a far better effort, introduces additional factions, enhances the graphics and once again features members of the film crew. There's far more depth to the campaigns this time around, while the new game mode 'War Of The Ring' cleverly mixes turn-based play with real-life skirmishes, greatly adding to the already solid game mechanics. It's also notable for being the first time the series was on Xbox 360. While it obviously suffers in the control department, the system used is surprisingly slick, with one of the best console interfaces ever seen in the genre. It was followed by the expansion *The Rise Of The Witch King* which was only released on PC.







THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SHADOWS OF ANGMAR 2007

DEVELOPER: TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC

This remarkable effort from Turbine Inc is arguably the best digital interpretation of Tolkien's work that we're ever likely to see. The developer had already proven it understood the world of D&D when it had released *Dungeons & Dragons Online* a year earlier, so who better than to be in charge of the very thing that had inspired *Dungeons & Dragons* in the first place? No one. That's who. *Shadows Of Angmar* rarely puts a foot wrong and has gone from strength-to-strength since Turbine embraced its new free-to-play model. The game is surprisingly accessible, but offers plenty of depth for veterans. There's an excellent range of classes on offer, while the levelling-up never feels unfair. It's been supported by five expansions, with the latest, *Helm's Deep*, increasing the level cap to 95 and letting you take part in epic battles.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: CONQUEST 2009

DEVELOPER: PANDEMIC STUDIOS **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

This had the potential to be a great combat game. After all it's based on the robust Battlefront engine and armies and fighting go together in Tolkien's Middle-Earth like Hobbits and elevenses. There was even assistance from Weta Digital with the lending of digital models used in the film. Sadly for *Conquest*, it was about as much fun as a riddle contest with Gollum, with its bland combat and lack of variety hurting it greatly. EA realised its mistake and the online side of its last *LOTR* game was pulled just 14 months after it was released.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: WAR IN THE NORTH 2011

DEVELOPER: SNOWBLIND STUDIOS **PLATFORMS:** PS3, PC, XBOX 360

War In The North took the robust combat found in EA's games, but married it to a flexible skill tree. The end result is a highly entertaining adventure that expands on the action-RPGs that Snowblind Studios first experimented with while creating *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* and *Champions Of Norrath*.

LEGO THE LORD OF THE RINGS 2012

DEVELOPER: TRAVELLER'S TALES **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

Ignore the fact this Lego-branded game is guilty of letting its heroes talk with actual voices and you'll discover another fun game that will appeal to fans of the films. Traveller's Tales tells the whole film trilogy here, wisely sticking to its core Lego template, but introducing new mechanics like crafting items and a selectable character wheel. The voices jar a little with the slapstick nature of the cut-scenes and there's no denying that the Lego formula is beginning to run thin, but it remains an entertaining adventure that offers huge amounts of replay value for those with a need for collecting every last stud.





MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR 2014

DEVELOPER: MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

Monolith Productions' second Rings game (the first being MOBA *Guardians Of Middle-earth*) is a big change of direction. It takes elements from many more popular games like *Assassin's Creed* but has plenty of its own cool ideas like the excellent Nemesis system, which makes *Shadow Of Mordor* very unique.

Dark Souls

» **DEVELOPER:** STEAMFORGED GAMES » **FIRST RELEASED:** 2017
» **EXPECT TO PAY:** £95

When Steamforged Games announced that they were raising funds for a *Darks Souls* board game, Kickstarter exploded. Raising a total of £3,771,474 from over 30,000 backers, *Dark Souls: The Board Game* marked the beginning of tabletop gaming's meteoric rise as one of the dominating markets on the crowdfunding platform.

Finally released in 2017, *Dark Souls: The Board Game* delivered on its promise of lavish miniatures and deep, tactical combat, while honouring the brutally challenging nature of From

Software's popular videogame. The game pits up to four players against a series of increasingly difficult encounters – from the numerous Hollow Soldiers and Silver Knight Swordsmen, to the towering boss encounters. After choosing one of the four included character classes, players will spend their time fighting, levelling up and acquiring new items as they continue to trudge onwards to a final boss encounter.

Like the videogames, failure drops you back at the bonfire. All enemies are re-spawned, forcing players to learn from their mistakes and adapt their play styles. Unlike many other dungeon crawl-style games, *Dark Souls* regularly has players shifting and manoeuvring the figures on the board, with enemies constantly changing facing, lunging forward, or pacing back. This tactility is especially apparent during the boss fights. It's genuinely tense facing the Gargoyle as it swings its huge axe and springs across the board.

Fortunately, all this tabletop dynamism functions under an accessible set of rules, perfect for those who are looking to make the jump from the screen to the board.

INSTANT GUIDE

1. Player boards



Boasting handy punched-out slots for tracking health, stamina and level-up stats, these boards also provide space for your character's items. Red cubes indicate damage while black cubes track your stamina. If ever the two should meet then it's game over!

2. Dice



The combat system uses four different colour dice. Green dice are used for evading while the others handle attack and defence. Different weapons and armour indicate which dice to use, with black being the weakest and orange offering the greatest chance of success.

3. Enemy cards



These cards show enemy health, attack values, movement patterns and preferred targets. Bosses have their own behaviour decks, allowing players to predict upcoming attacks. If dealt enough damage, new devastating attacks are added to the deck before it's re-shuffled.

4. Miniatures



As well as taking control of the Knight, Warrior, Herald or Assassin miniatures, players will also spend plenty of time moving the impressive roster of enemies around the board. The game's clever AI adds a level of tactility that keeps play immersive and exciting.





Or you could try:

THE WITCHER ADVENTURE GAME

If you're tempted by the idea of your favourite videogames being played out across the tabletop, then take a look at *The Witcher Adventure Game*. Originally released in 2014 it features four key characters from *The Witcher* universe, including Geralt Of Rivia and Dandelion who all have their own unique skills and abilities, including their own distinct Development Cards. Just be aware that it can now fetch a high price online as it's becoming harder and harder to find.



SKYRIM™

The fifth game in the long-running Elder Scrolls series has been remade and re-released more than any other in the entire franchise. Why? Because it's one of the deepest, most immersive role-playing games ever made – and it deserves to be played by all

It felt like an aeon had passed between the announcement and launch of Bethesda's latest core *Elder Scrolls* game, *Skyrim*. In reality it was 11 months from confirmation to it being in our hands, but the hype had reached such instant fever pitch it was hard to go a day without talking about the damn thing.

It was going to be the biggest open world, with the most freedom – you could fight against *dragons*! How could any other game possibly compete? How could we sleep easy knowing we still had to wait for *Skyrim* to launch? How could it *possibly* live up to the hype? Well, come November 2011, it... didn't.

There was no way any game could live up to the sheer power of the build up behind *Skyrim*, so it was little surprise we heard detractors and naysayers from its release day – and we still hear them today. But while it wasn't 100 per cent perfect, *Skyrim* still ended up an absolute masterclass in the world of immersive, deep action-RPGs – and we still hear *that* today, too.

Starting out as any other *Elder Scrolls* game does – you're a prisoner and you end up freed – *Skyrim* asks you to customise your character with choices of name, race and looks all factoring in, before setting you loose in the midst of a dragon attack. You see, dragons have returned to *Skyrim* for the first time in ages, and this is bad news for any native of the realm who doesn't want to be set on fire and eaten.

From there your quest begins – visit this person, they can tell you where to go next, the prophecy can be revealed, the power of the dragons can be yours via the dragon's language, you can



» It's not just dragons – vampires became a big part of *Skyrim* thanks to the *Dawnguard* add-on. And yes – you could be one.

Children of Nirn

The playable races of Skyrim



Altmer

■ The high elves, as other races know them, are skilled in magic – as well as arrogance. 'Haughty' is a fair descriptor for the lanky, golden ones.



Argonian

■ Not only are the lizard-like argonians great at lockpicking, their natural immunity to disease and ability to breathe underwater is a great boon for *Skyrim* newbies.



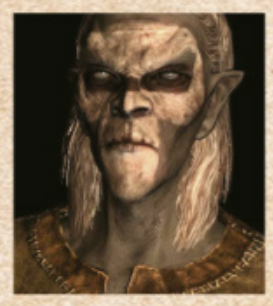
Bosmer

■ Our diminutive forest-dwelling friends, the wood elves are so good at archery they've become a meme in many an online community. Archers are OP, yo.



Breton

■ Powerful magicians, bretons are also able to absorb or resist magical damage thanks to their natural abilities. Unsurprisingly, they're usually mages.



Dunmer

■ Morrowind's natives, the dark elves are proficient in destruction magic – all the better for smiting those who make snide comments about them, which is common.



Imperial

■ The closest to a default human you can get in Skyrim. Based off Romans, imperials have the gift of the gab – as well as increased ability to heal wounds.



Khajiit

■ Nobody trusts a khajiit on Nirn – well, they are gifted at sneaking – but our (sometimes) friendly cat people don't have to be thieves. They're just really good at it.



Nord

■ Give a nord a mace, and they'll be happy. Give a nord a two-handed warhammer, and you'll be their friend for life. Skyrim's natives love a good ruckus.



Orsimer

■ Commonly known as orcs, the orsimer's large frames lend themselves to a fine capacity for handling heavy armour. They're not too shabby at the forge, either.



Redguard

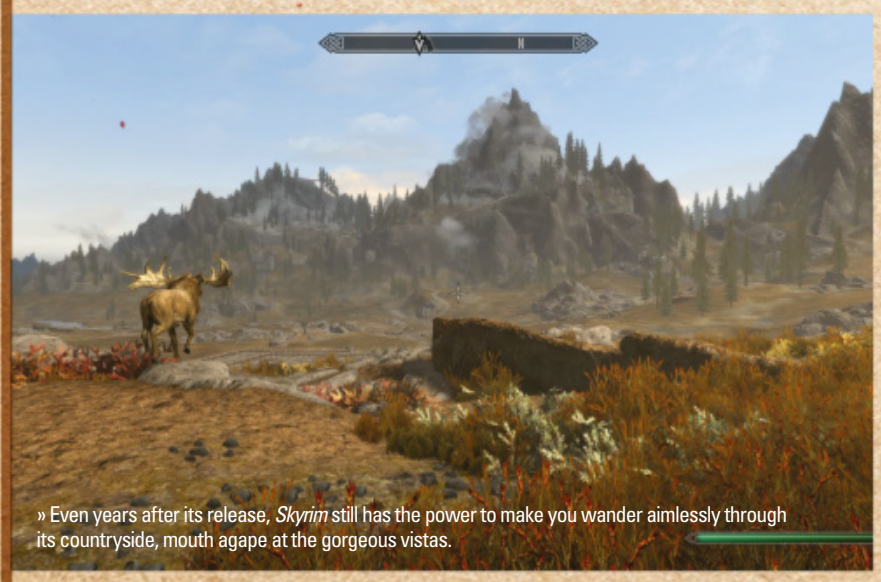
■ They're not the biggest, but the redguard are easily the most naturally talented warriors in all of Skyrim – with blade and shield in hand, they're hard to beat.



» Battles with dragons are far more common than you might expect, but they're always good fun. Even if they do get a bit easy towards the end of the game.



» The College of Winterhold is home to some of *Skyrim*'s best quests – but if you enrol as a mage, you won't necessarily be trusted in these lands.



» Even years after its release, *Skyrim* still has the power to make you wander aimlessly through its countryside, mouth agape at the gorgeous vistas.

> "The key thing is freedom; freedom to explore, to role-play, and to mod the game into something else entirely"
>
> Nick Pearce

battle against the actual beasts, take a side in a rebellion, and generally save the world in an epic, dozens of hours-long adventure.

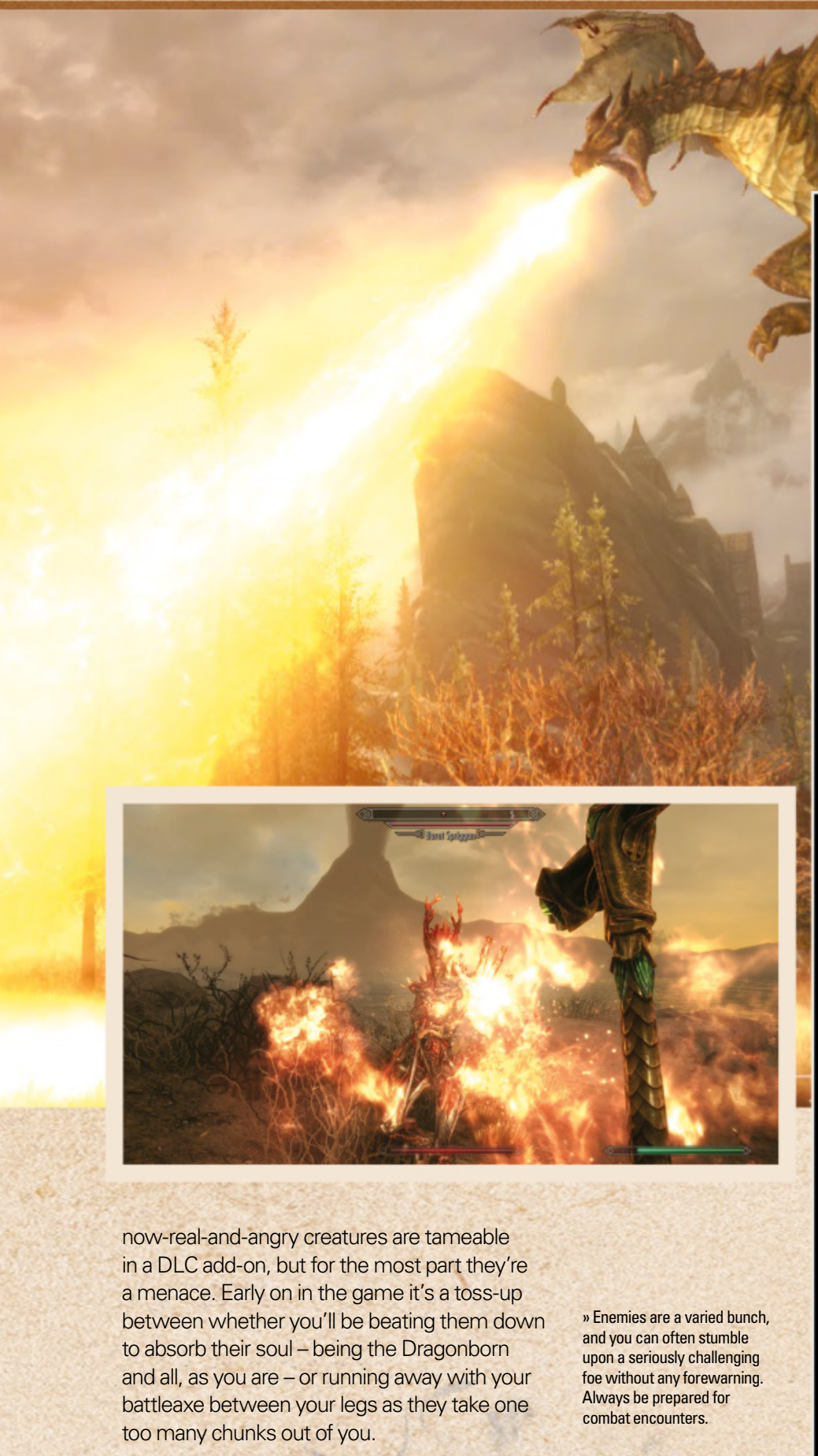
What makes *Skyrim* so very special, though, is that you're just as likely to do all of the above as you are to go on a flower-picking escapade, or to learn new recipes for horker stew. The end of the world can wait – we mean, it literally can wait: if you choose not to bother with the main questline, the random dragons prowling the giant world map won't appear and you'll be able to play through the majority of *Skyrim*'s side-quests without being hassled by the gigantic scaly fire-breathers.

In any other game it might have been seen as a negative that some players might immediately lose track of the central plotline and go off to do their own thing. But it's easy to see how Bethesda planned for this – you're not railroaded in a set direction or chided, or hurried on for dawdling. You can take your own time, do your own thing, live your own life, and pickpocket as many innocent farmers as you like.

This freeform approach to playing the game extended into *Skyrim*'s RPG systems – 2006's *Oblivion* had already made steps to make things less rigid, and in *Skyrim* it was even less so. Sure, you could concentrate on one or two sorts of powers, skills, or abilities – but at no point were you ever condemned to having to use them for the length of the game. Don't like how your character plays? Play a different way. Bored of being a bosmer archer? Be a bosmer with a warhammer.

It was layers on layers of freedom for the player, and while this lack of rigidity upset some of the RPG old guard, the fact is most of us fell in love with the opportunity to experiment *Skyrim* put in front of us. And then, as soon as you've learned its systems and explored its world, there's a large core story experience to play through. And it kept on giving.

There were two main stars of *Skyrim*. First, naturally, was the dragons – the once-mythical,



» Enemies are a varied bunch, and you can often stumble upon a seriously challenging foe without any forewarning. Always be prepared for combat encounters.

now-real-and-angry creatures are tameable in a DLC add-on, but for the most part they're a menace. Early on in the game it's a toss-up between whether you'll be beating them down to absorb their soul – being the Dragonborn and all, as you are – or running away with your battleaxe between your legs as they take one too many chunks out of you.

The battles with dragons never stop being fun, and – thanks to Skyrim's incredible orchestral soundtrack – feel like truly epic clashes every single time that they take place. They're also helped along by the fact that they're always taking place in *Skyrim*'s second main star: Skyrim itself. This is a truly beautiful, varied land in the north of Tamriel (the continent on which the *Elder Scrolls* series is set) that could have gone down the lazy path of just being cold and snowy, but it ended up being so much more. That's not to say there isn't much of the white dung on show – your treks through the many mountain peaks of Skyrim will present more than a few blizzards to contend with along the way. But from Solitude to Riften, Markarth to Winterhold, you're always seeing something different: arctic tundra, alpine forests, swamps, rolling meadows; giants tending to their mammoths,

Conversion Capers



Xbox 360

■ While the PC was the superior original version, the 360's *Skyrim* wasn't half bad at all. Like playing the game on a midrange home computer of the day, it ran well, loaded quickly enough and didn't have a habit of destroying hard drive contents. Unlike the PS3's version...



PS3

■ Of the original batch of *Skyrim* releases, it was the PS3 that fared poorest. Owing to the system's tricky architecture, Bethesda wasn't able to produce a flawless port out of the box. In fact, it took a few patches to get the game up to par with PC and Xbox 360.



Special Edition

■ Five years after the original's 2011 release, Bethesda brought out a remaster – complete with 4K resolution textures and other tweaks and requiring the Creation Club for mods to be used. Owners of the PC version received a free upgrade – a nice gesture for existing fans.



Xbox One

■The Special Edition also made its way to the Xbox One, again seeing the first time Bethesda had allowed mods on a console version. Microsoft was more than open to the idea of players creating their own content, so Xbox One mods have seen some huge upgrades, changes and conversions.



PS4

■ A different generation and version of *Skyrim* arrived on PS4, with the *Special Edition* bringing with it the first taste of *Elder Scrolls* mods on console... to an extent. Sony's refusal to allow new assets to be introduced to the game means all mods have to use existing in-game elements.



VR

■ Both PC and PS4 received a virtual reality version of *Skyrim*, and surprisingly it is the full, complete experience. It's unclear just how many people have played through hundreds of hours with a headset on, but there's no doubt the scale of a dragon's scales is seriously impressive up close.

Switch

■ Initially laughed off as a bit of a '*Skyrim* on everything' joke, on release it soon became apparent this was the version a lot of people had been waiting for without even knowing. Adding in *Zelda* loot was a nice touch, but portable *Skyrim* was more than enough of a lure by itself.





» You, the Dragonborn, must put a stop to Alduin The World Eater's efforts to resurrect the dragons.

Best Skyrim Mods

Immersive Citizens

■ Immersive Citizens fixes one of *Skyrim*'s most notorious issues: unrealistic non-player characters. Improving their AI, the mod makes the regular folk of Skyrim much more like actual people – they run from fights they can't win, have better schedules, even travel from town to town at times. It's small, but essential for immersion.

The Forgotten City

■ An intelligent, smartly written mod that adds a new city full of a new voiced cast, quests, soundtrack and a storyline wrapping it all up very neatly. It even has time travel. When it comes to mods that add something special while remaining utterly faithful to the base game, the Forgotten City is up there with the best.

Enderal: The Shards Of Order

■ A total conversion five years in the making, Enderal is effectively a new game, completely free, that you plaster over the top of *Skyrim*. It offers dozens of hours of questing and exploring, new characters, races, powers and abilities, and offers brand-new graphics, sounds and voice acting.

Falskaar

■ Adding around a quarter of the landmass of vanilla *Skyrim* and about 25 hours of content might seem like a job for a team of at least a dozen. So obviously Falskaar was made by a single 19-year-old – with the help of volunteer voice actors, writers, and some artists/designers, naturally. It is a brilliant mod, and well worth your time.



Stones of Barenziah Quest Markers

■ Some mods create new realms – even new games on top of *Skyrim* – but some of the best mods just fix something. The Stones of Barenziah quest requires you gather 25 gems, without any idea where they are. This mod adds quest markers to them. Cheating? Maybe. Useful? Definitely.



Open Cities Skyrim

■ Open Cities is a mod that brings the feel of *Skyrim* back to that of its precursor *Morrowind* – not by changing a huge amount, but by tearing down walls. It's shocking how much more immersive the world becomes when you can walk in and out of cities without having to travel through a door, and it makes exploration all the more fun.



sabre-toothed cats hunting stags, a babbling brook. It was easy to get lost in Skyrim, even when you knew exactly where you were.

It was also – sometimes – easy to get lost in Skyrim through no fault in your own, or to glitch through the world, or lose a saved game. It's not something that would usually be brought up in a piece like this, but it's fair to say *Skyrim* – just like previous Bethesda titles – had more than its fair share of bugs. But the playful, open nature of the game lent itself to a happier reaction than might have been expected – giants whacking the player hundreds of metres in the air was accepted as funny; flying horses were encouraged as brilliant; and setting a pot on a shopkeeper's head so you could rob them without them seeing a thing was a stroke of genius Bethesda never did bother to fix. It's fair to say that a lot of *Skyrim*'s quirky bugs actually made it an even more memorable experience.

Released in 2011 on PC and consoles of

> "I don't think any game has ever done 'freedom' so well"
> Nick Pearce





» The dunmer are native to the island of Morrowind, which is a close neighbour to Skyrim.

Meet The Modder

Nick Pearce – creator of the Forgotten City



What do you think is the appeal of *Skyrim*?
The key thing is freedom; freedom to explore, to role-play, and to mod the game into something else entirely. I don't think any game has ever done 'freedom' so well.

And what do you think it is about *Skyrim* that's made it a legend?
I think because of the immense freedom that the game offers, it can be all things to all people, or near enough. Want to be a hero fighting zombies and dragons? No problem. Want to be a villain skulking about in the shadows? Cool. Want to pick flowers and brew potions and sell them so you can by a house and marry a spouse? You're catered for. Want to write a narrative adventure game of your own? The Creation Kit's got you covered.

How has *Skyrim* impacted you on a personal level?
It has changed my life, no doubt. When I started modding *Skyrim* I was working as a legal and strategy advisor to a tech company. It was a good job, but it left me with a lot of unused creative energy, which I started pouring into my passion project in my spare time. After the mod took off and started winning awards, it opened up some really exciting new opportunities I hadn't expected; I was lucky enough to receive some mentoring from some awesome local developers (League of Geeks), and I landed a grant from the wonderful Film Victoria to set up a studio and develop a new game of my own. So I've taken a break from my legal career to pursue those opportunities. It has been fantastic so far.

What's your favourite area of vanilla *Skyrim*? Why?
I like Falkreath the best, because it's beautiful; nestled into a picturesque valley among lush trees. I'd be happy to live some place like that IRL, as long as it had fibre internet.

On a broader level, how much impact did modding have to the success of *Skyrim*?
It's common to see people in forums say that *Skyrim* was broken or incomplete and modders fixed it. I strongly disagree with that. *Skyrim* was awesome on its own; just ask the tens of millions of console players who enjoyed it without mods for many years. Mods certainly increased the freedom and provided an extraordinary stream of new content – and I think this is why *Skyrim* has enjoyed such longevity.

What would you say is your favourite thing about *Skyrim*?
The freedom to role-play your character. Personally, one of my favourite things to do in *Skyrim* is to play permadeath. Using a mod 'Live Another Life', I like to start with nothing at a random location, and see how long I can survive on Very Hard difficulty. Knowing that death is permanent for that character makes it really intense and gets the adrenaline going. I recommend it if you haven't tried it!

the day, *Skyrim* never did really go away and has seen re-releases and ports across many platforms in the years following its original launch. It's testament to the quality of the game, to the depth of experience on offer, and to the sheer replayability of *Skyrim* that every single time it comes out on another format, you'll find an army of players complaining – because they 'have to play through it all again'. Quick clue: that's not a complaint. Nobody actually dislikes playing through *Skyrim*.

For all the volume of its detractors, for all the jokes about remake after remake being released on every format imaginable – plateauing with Bethesda itself cracking a gag about *Skyrim* on Amazon's Alexa, only to then actually release it on that very format – and for all its genuine, pernickety issues, *Skyrim* is a genuine classic. Its scope, breadth, depth, imagination, and immersion has yet to be beaten and, frankly, there are few other places we'd want to spend as much time. Oh, and you can actually ride the dragons, too – what more could you want? ✱



» Orsimer – *Elder Scrolls'* orcs – are naturally strong, so they're good with a two-handed murder stick.

Lords Of Waterdeep

» **DEVELOPER:** PETER LEE AND RODNEY THOMPSON » **FIRST RELEASED:** 2012
» **EXPECT TO PAY:** £30

If you've ever played a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign set in The Forgotten Realms then chances are you've heard of the famous bustling city of Waterdeep. This huge cosmopolitan city is a landmark of the North and is a place filled with danger, espionage and treachery, which makes it the perfect setting for Wizards Of The Coast's worker placement board game.

Players in *Lords Of Waterdeep* each take control of one of the city's secret lords and attempt to gain influence of the city by earning the most victory points. Points can be earned by completing dangerous quests, but you'll need a certain amount of heroes in your party in order to do this. As a result each player takes it in turn to add their agents to locations on the board, which will earn resources in the shape of gold, thieves, fighters, wizards or clerics. Some adventurers are harder to acquire than others and many locations only have space for a single agent, so careful planning is required each turn. Houses can also be built, which grant bonuses for their owners and anyone that uses them.

The quests themselves come in five different styles: Arcade, Piety, Warfare, Commerce and Skullduggery, and most lords receive bonus points at the game's end if they complete quests of certain types, which adds further to *Lords Of Waterdeep*'s overall strategy. Well-paced and with plenty of chances to stitch up your opponents due to the game's special Intrigue cards, *Lords Of Waterdeep* is a fantastic worker placement game that deserves a place in anyone's collection. ✱





» Square pieces represent one gold piece, while the half moons represent five.



» These cubes represent your heroes and are critical for completing quests.

INSTANT GUIDE

1. Quests



Although you'll get Quests at the beginning of the game you can gain more by visiting Cliffwatch Inn. Be careful though as it's possible that someone will give you rubbish Mandatory Quests, which have to be completed first.

2. Intrigue cards



These powerful cards can greatly influence the game and as a result they can only be used in Waterdeep Harbour. Some cards offer beneficiary bonuses to your opponents, but most are designed to give you the upper hand while stitching the other players up.

3. Agents

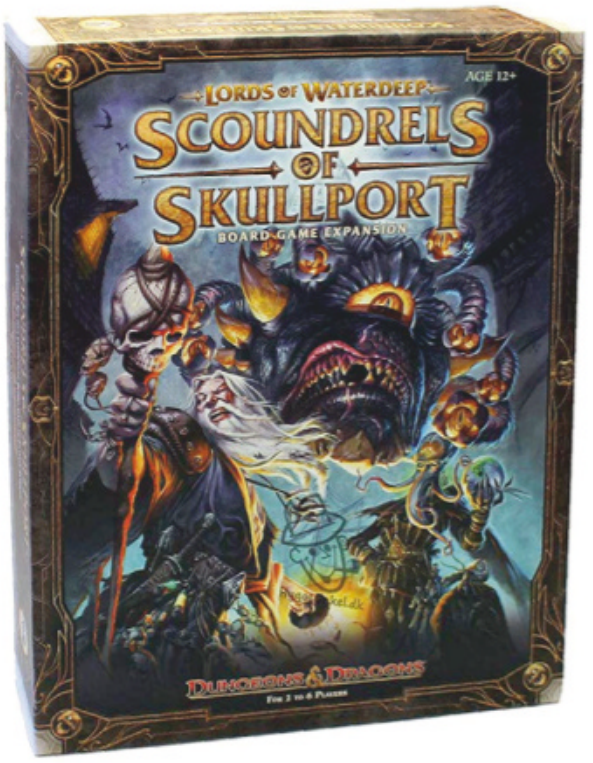


There are five different colours to represent each player. You're given a certain amount of agents at the start of the game based on the number of players, with a final agent being awarded upon reaching the fifth turn of play.

4. Buildings



These handy locations are added by buying them from the Builder's Hall. They grant bonuses for the owner and those that visit them. One lord also gets bonuses for building them, which makes her very powerful if she's picked.



Or you could try:

LORDS OF WATERDEEP: SCOUNDRELS OF SKULLPORT

If you've enjoyed *Lords Of Waterdeep* then we heartily recommend its superb expansion. Set in two new locations, Skullport and Undermountain, it features game boards for these new areas and a new mechanic called Corruption, which introduces penalty points that will affect the player at the end of the game. Six new lords are introduced, there are some extremely powerful Intrigue cards to mess around with, while buildings tend to have far more impact in the game this time.

THE HISTORY OF YS

With over 30 years of history behind it, Ys is an elder statesman of the Japanese RPG scene – but it's not nearly as well known as some of its contemporaries. Nick Thorpe speaks to Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo to discover its complete history...

We occasionally have a problem with RPGs here on Retro Gamer, and we're sure many of our readers can relate to it. As adults, sometimes it's just hard to juggle work, life and the latest epic adventure. We don't want to avoid them, but we do sometimes find ourselves wondering if we'll see them through to the end, such is the trend towards large and complex games in the genre. Thankfully, we're not the only ones who have struggled like this, and it's not a new problem – and that's why Nihon Falcom chose to develop *Ys*, a different kind of RPG.

Falcom had already had a major RPG hit in Japan in 1984 with *Dragon Slayer*, an action RPG for a variety of Japanese computer systems. The following years saw the company follow up with *Dragon Slayer II: Xanadu*, *Xanadu Scenario II: The Resurrection Of Dragon* and *Dragon Slayer Jr: Romancia*. *Romancia* is particularly interesting, as it was an attempt at simplifying the genre, featuring just one attack button, no customisation and very few statistics.

This philosophy of simplifying the RPG carried forward to *Ys*. In an interview for the book *Challenge!! Personal Computer AVG & RPG III*, programmer Masaya Hashimoto explained that *Ys* was created with a desire to make an accessible game that wasn't aimed at hardcore RPG fans. There was a conscious effort to avoid lengthy level grinding processes, and players were allowed to save anywhere to avoid losing progress. However, the biggest simplification was the use of the 'bump' combat system. When playing *Ys*, you never need to hit an attack button – you simply run your character into an enemy to deal damage, preferably slightly to the left or right rather than head-on.

The bump system was a huge key to the early appeal of the series, as we're told by Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo. "You can blow through enemies really quickly, and it's really fun," he begins. "Practically





» *Ys* took advantage of the high-resolution modes of early Japanese computers to simulate a high colour palette.

everybody who plays the game brings that up and says how much fun it is to blast through enemies. The people who came before me at Falcom told me, when I first started working on the *Ys* games, 'You know the feeling of popping bubble wrap? It feels really good and you can't stop. That's the way *Ys* should be.'" Indeed, that's a lot of what players will do until they discover the main thrust of the game – guiding hero Adol Christin to gather the six books of *Ys*, following a doomsday prophecy from Esteria's local seer, Sara.

Of course, the team also had challenges to contend with. One of the biggest was the small size of the characters – Hashimoto found that he was unable to enhance storytelling with the use of facial expressions and designer Ayano Koshiro had wanted to make them larger, but it wasn't possible within the framework that had been built. Map design also proved problematic, as the perspective that had been adopted meant that it was impossible to display doors leading to the east or west. Somehow, all of these were overcome and the game was completed in just five months.

Ys: Ancient Ys Vanished launched for the NEC PC-8801 in June 1987, and ports for other popular Japanese computers followed throughout 1987. The game was a hit and made its way to the Famicom and Sega Mark III in 1988, and the latter version was translated for English-speaking Master System owners, giving *Ys* its first exposure outside of Japan. The game then appeared on computers in North America thanks to the Kyodai publishing partnership. Critical reception was positive – *Computer & Video Games* awarded the Master System version 92%, with Julian Rignall describing it as "massive and thoroughly engrossing," while *The Games Machine* compared it favourably to *The Legend Of Zelda* in a 90% review.

Ys II quickly followed in 1988, and was a direct sequel to the first game which used much of the same technology, though it did offer improved graphics. The plot followed immediately from the ending of the original game and followed Adol's journey to the floating land of Ys. The big change in this game was the addition of a magic system, with a number of spells available including a fire spell which was essential to defeating most bosses. Despite the critical acclaim received by the first game, *Ys II: Ancient Ys Vanished – The Final Chapter* didn't receive an international release in its standalone form. It was instead introduced to English-speaking audiences as part of the PC Engine game *Ys I & II*, a key driver of Turbografx CD sales in North America and the first release to adopt the now-common practice of combining the first two *Ys* games. The two games are now so closely linked that they even placed as a single entry in Famitsu readers' top 100 games ranking in 2006.



» *Ys III: Wanderers From Ys* switched to the side-scrolling perspective you see here, and brought more complex combat with it.



WHO IS ADOL CHRISTIN?

Toshihiro Kondo explains how Falcom develops the hero at the heart of Ys

The first rule of writing for Adol Christin is that you don't write for Adol Christin. The character has a number of key traits – his red hair, his friendship with Dogi, and his terrible luck with boats – but the most important one is that he doesn't speak – and that's a conscious choice. "Just so you know, within the company there have been many times when people have said, 'Let's drop this and have him talk,'" says Kondo. "When I first started taking over the *Ys* series, what I was told is that the reason Adol doesn't speak is because he is an avatar for the player. The instant Adol talks, the player takes on a very passive role because the player is essentially being spoken to."

"The difficult part is that we don't necessarily know who Adol is either," Kondo continues. Where the creators behind other such long-lived characters might have a wealth of dialogue to refer to when looking to confirm a character's values or motivations, Falcom has no such luxury. "Sometimes when we're creating the game we have to think "what *is* he thinking?" or "how *would* he respond to this situation?" because we don't necessarily know." However, there are some basic traits that Adol has – or at least, that he's expected to have. "Even though Adol might not speak, he definitely has a personality or characteristics that make him Adol," Kondo confirms. "For one thing, we know that he's a nice person. We know that he has pretty good luck with the ladies, as it were! But the interesting thing about these characteristics is that they're things that the fans have attributed to Adol, not something that Falcom put into him."

As a result, Adol's character is something of a collaborative work – even though his portrayals all come from a single source, he's subject to many interpretations. "Something I often say about the character of Adol is that he's similar to historical public domain characters," Kondo muses, "in that there's these characters that exist in history that we look at from our perspective and have an idea of who they were and what they did, that might be at odds with what actually happened from a historical perspective. Adol is similar to that in that people have attributed things to Adol that might not necessarily have happened or been intended. That's a really special thing – not every character is able to have that kind of background."

TRANSLATING THE BOOK OF YS

Let's take a look at the many formats that the first book of Ys was translated for…



NEC PC-8801 1987

■ This is the original version of *Ys*, and the one most other Japanese computer versions are based on. The game makes use of a high-resolution 640x200 screen mode and somewhat jerky character-based scrolling. The soundtrack is a thing of beauty, and it set the bar high until the CD versions arrived.

SHARP X1 1987

■ This is visually identical to the PC-88 version, save for slightly smaller numbers in the HUD. The main compromise here is the soundtrack, which has been pared back to just a few PSG channels. Falcom was accused of laziness by fans, but it was very clearly limited by the hardware.





NEC PC-98 1987

■ This is basically identical to the PC-88 version, if you have the expansion sound board. If you don't, you'll lose a lot of the amazing soundtrack – beeper renditions of just two tracks are included, and to be honest they probably shouldn't have been, because they are pretty weak.

FUJITSU FM-7 1987

■ If nothing else, the Fujitsu FM-7 version of *Ys* shows off Falcom's incredible porting prowess – it looks like the other Japanese computer versions and runs just as well. The music is a step above the Sharp X1 version, but it doesn't quite reach the heights of the FM-enabled NEC versions.





MSX2 1987

■ The graphics have been redrawn for this version of the game as the MSX2 offered superior colour handling, alongside a lower resolution, than the Japanese computers it was competing with. The PSG soundtrack is serviceable, but not as rich as the NEC, FM-77AV or Apple IIGS versions.

FAMICOM 1988

■ The first home console version of *Ys* makes some pretty substantial changes to the game's overall design, revising a number of maps, adding a whole extra quest and increasing the overall speed. There's also smooth scrolling here, which isn't featured in any of the computer versions.





MASTER SYSTEM 1988

■ The first English language version of *Ys* to be released is pretty good. It features smooth scrolling and a decent pace of play. Some weird renaming of characters has gone on, though – in particular: why is Adol suddenly called Aron? The Japanese version also supports the FM sound module.

PC (DOS) 1989

■ This version was retranslated by the trans-Pacific publishing outfit Kyodai. It offers graphics that have been redrawn at a lower resolution than the Japanese computer releases, and there's a beeper rendition of the soundtrack. It's still enjoyable, but poor compared to other versions.





PC ENGINE 1989

■ This particular version was the first to include both *Ys I* and *Ys II* as part of the same package, and was considered a real killer app at the time. The game has been rebalanced and some nice new character portraits are shown on the screen, but it's the voice acting and CD sound that steal the show here.

SHARP X68000 1991

■ This version of *Ys* received a full overhaul, with all-new graphics (including some decidedly odd realistic character portraits) and revised maps. The town of Minea is now much bigger than the original, and a lot busier, but the field is considerably smaller. The soundtrack is well represented here.





SATURN 1997

■ Appearing as part of the Falcom Classics compilation, this version features redrawn graphics and a new arrangement of the soundtrack. Better yet, Adol can finally dash and move diagonally. This one depends on your tastes – the sprite work is nice but the colours are drab compared to other releases.

PC (WINDOWS) 1997

■ *Ys Eternal* is a full remake, featuring new and expanded areas, greater story depth, and the ability to choose a difficulty mode. Very attractive high-resolution sprites replace the old artwork, and there's a newly arranged soundtrack alongside the original. This version forms the basis of all subsequent releases.





PS2 2003

■ *Ys Eternal Story* takes the PC game *Ys Complete* as a base, however it adds a combo system to combat, granting progressive bonuses as long as Adol doesn't take damage. Voice acting is added to the game, and you can choose to play *Ys* and *Ys II* together as a single experience.

DS 2008

■ *In Legacy Of Ys: Books I & II*, 2D sprites are used against 3D backgrounds (all of which are still based on *Ys Complete*), and Adol must attack manually by pressing a button unless you're using the new stylus controls. There's also an extra area included in this version, with a new boss and equipment.





PSP 2009

■ Owners of Sony's portable system were treated to another updated version of *Ys I & II Eternal* in the form of *Ys I & II Chronicles*. This revision enhanced things with some new character artwork and another new arrangement of the soundtrack, but the older versions can still be selected.

PC (WINDOWS) 2013

■ *Ys I & II Chronicles+* is the most current version available on PC, which has all of the lovely features of the PSP version and adds a variety of achievements. If you own one of the prior versions based on *Ys I & II Eternal*, it's an almost inconsequential upgrade. Still, it's the easiest way to play *Ys* today.





FUJITSU FM-77AV 1987

■ The FM-77AV version of *Ys* is completely identical to the FM-7 version, with the exception of improved audio that brings the game to parity with the NEC versions. If you can't find this particular version, the computer will, of course, run the standard Fijutsu FM-7 version of the game just fine, too.



APPLE IIGS 1989

■ Apple owners get a massive one over on their PC-owning cousins when it comes to *Ys*. The Apple IIGS version looks practically identical to the DOS version and it runs just as well, but the sound is absolutely worlds apart, making this version of *Ys* easily the better choice of these two versions.



PC (WINDOWS) 2001

■ *Ys Complete* is a relatively small revision which adds an FMV intro, some revisions to the graphics and wholly rewritten dialogue. All characters now have names and biographies, too. When you complete the game, a Time Attack mode is unlocked.

"When I first started, I died really early, and I can remember thinking, 'Man, this game is hard"

Toshihiro Kondo

If the first two *Ys* games are notable for their similarity, the third is notable for how it departs from the initial games. "*Ys III*, unlike *Ys I & II*, is a side-scrolling game. When I first started, I died really early, and I can remember thinking, 'Man, this game is hard!' I'd been told that the *Ys* games were friendly to newcomers and beginners, but I didn't end up feeling that way at all," recalls Kondo. Indeed, *Ys III: Wanderers From Ys* took the game mechanics from the previous games wholesale, and simply translated them into a platformer-style format akin to the *Wonder Boy* games and *Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link*. This necessitated the inclusion of an attack button for the first time, as 'bump' combat was no longer possible.

Having resolved the problems of Esteria in the first two games, Adol chose to travel with his new friend Dogi in *Ys III*. The pair went to Dogi's homeland of Felghana, where the townspeople were being threatened by soldiers from Valestein Castle. Lord MacGuire was scheming to acquire a set of mysterious statues, and would seemingly stop at nothing to get them – so naturally, Adol felt the need to step in.

Ys III: Wanderers From Ys appeared on NEC computers in 1989, and soon followed to a wide variety of console formats including English versions for the PC Engine CD, Mega Drive and SNES. While it isn't a terrible game, *Ys III* is considered to be something of a black sheep of the series, largely due to the move away from the top-down perspective. However, Mieko Ishikawa's soundtrack is considered to be one of the very best in a series renowned for great soundtracks. A faithful side-scrolling remake with rebalanced gameplay and high-resolution 2D graphics was released for PS2 in 2005, but sadly only in Japan. That isn't the end of the story for *Ys III*, as we'll discover later, but the game did mark the point at which the series took an extended leave of absence from Western markets.

Ys IV appeared on the PC Engine CD and SNES, and was a confusing project, as Kondo can attest: "One thing I remember vividly from this time is wondering, 'Why are there two versions of this game?' What I learned when I entered the company is that Falcom is not a large company. We only had the resources to



» Every version of ***Ys IV*** is very different, but *Mask Of The Sun* was the one closest to Falcom's original intentions.

come up with the game design document, then give that to somebody else." Hudson Soft took charge of *Ys IV: The Dawn Of Ys* on PC Engine, and Tonkin House developed *Ys IV: Mask Of The Sun* for the SNES.

The two games turned out to be quite different, but they did both return to the top-down perspective. "[With *Ys III*] people were happy that a new *Ys* came out, but by that point they associated *Ys* with the 'bump' system. The fact that we returned to that perspective was something that fans were really happy about," says Kondo. *The Dawn Of Ys* reverted to the system used in *Ys II*, while *Mask Of The Sun* revised the magic system by including the likes of harnessing elemental swords as a means of casting spells.

The two games also shared a plot and setting, with Adol making a journey to Celceta, where he first encounters the deadly forces of the Romun Empire.

However, the two games differ on a number of key points, and fans have their own views on which is better – fans of *The Dawn Of Ys* contend that it is more enjoyable to play, while those who champion *Mask Of The Sun* note that the plot was closer to Falcom's design document. However, the two were able to exist side by side. "One of the cool things about having multiple versions of the same game is the fan reaction, in that all of the *Ys* games are purported to be Adol's journals, and we as the players are reading through them," Kondo explains. "The fan theory was, 'Maybe they're just different translations of the source material?' So the fans took care of it, creating a solution."

The final *Ys* game of the Nineties was *Ys V: Lost Kefin, Kingdom Of Sand*. *Ys V* chronicled Adol's first adventure on the continent of Afroca, where he searched the Xandria region for the mythical lost city of Kefin. This was Falcom's first attempt at developing a *Ys* game for home consoles, and a game which sought to add more involvement to the combat element of the game. The 'bump' system was abandoned for good in favour of a more traditional setup – attacks required the player to press an action button, and you could also jump and even actively defend with your shield. The traditional visuals were also abandoned, with characters given more realistic proportions compared to the cartoonish characters of earlier games.

The transition to console development might not have gone as smoothly as Falcom had hoped, as



» ***Ys V*** doesn't carry the characteristic *Ys* style, looking much like any other SNES RPG. The desert setting is new, though.





BONUS CHAPTERS

Ys has given birth to a few spin-offs over the years – let's take a look at them



YS STRATEGY 2006

■ Released exclusively for the Nintendo DS in Japan and Europe, this game brings real-time strategy to the *Ys* series. On the surface this isn't a bad idea, but problems soon arise – the touchscreen interface works well in place of a mouse, but the hardware struggles with large battle scenes and the game generally lacks the pace required of a portable game. It's a decent RTS game for the format, but that's largely due to lack of competition.



YS ONLINE 2007

■ This relatively standard MMORPG was launched at a time when every RPG franchise with any heritage was being snapped up for the MMO treatment. Korean developer CJ Internet tackled development and turned in a game rich in *Ys* lore but short on distinguishing features. The game never made it out of beta in Europe, and by 2012 the last remaining servers in Taiwan were shut down for good, making this a dead game.



YS VS SORA NO KISEKI: ALTERNATIVE SAGA 2010

■ This spin-off pits the heroes of *Ys Seven* (and older characters, as assistants) against the characters of Falcom's popular *Trails* series of RPGs. Combat is based on *Ys Seven* and though it's often described as being similar to *Super Smash Bros*, it's closer in style to Capcom's *Power Stone* series. This is the best of the *Ys* spin-offs, but it was only released in Japan.

Ys V was quickly succeeded by *Ys V Expert* in early 1996, just a few months after the original was released in December 1995. The game had been criticised for its lack of difficulty, resulting in this second release. Neither game is amongst the top tier of action RPG games for the SNES, and at present, *Ys V: Lost Kefin, Kingdom Of Sand* remains the only chapter of the story without an official English translation. It was also the last brand-new *Ys* game for eight years.

What was it that stopped the flow of new games after *Ys V*? "This is only speculation, but I believe that there was nobody at Falcom championing the game, to say, 'I want to make the next *Ys*,'" Kondo reveals to us. But by that point, *Ys* was already considered to be a heritage series in its home of Japan, and even a lack of new games couldn't keep the series off the shelves. "The thing about *Ys* is that it's a milestone in Japanese game development history and it's a game series that nobody doesn't know about," the president explains. "For the people that entered the company around the same time I did, all of them probably entered with an affection towards the series. When I first entered the company, what I did for a while was to create remakes of the old *Ys* games."

When the *Ys* series reached its tenth birthday in 1997, the first two games were remade in the form of *Ys I & II Eternal*. This kicked off a major project of remaking and updating the older *Ys* games for modern platforms – not only would *Ys I & II Eternal* be continuously updated and revised, but external developers gave *Ys III* an enhanced 2D remake, and both *Ys IV: Mask Of The Sun* and *Ys V: Lost Kefin, Kingdom Of Sand* received full 3D remakes. The third and fourth games have since been internally remade again, resulting in *Ys: The Oath In Felghana* and *Ys: Memories Of Celceta*.

While most companies have embraced making their back catalogues available in some form, few have shown such commitment to modernising their classic releases. "The thing I was told is that a great movie is a great movie, no matter when it was made, and you can do the same thing with games," responds Kondo when asked about the philosophy behind this approach. "The content of these games, the core of what made them good, is still there. Because of that, we can remake them. That

TIMELINE

All the main games, major remakes and spin-offs in one handy list



YS I: ANCIENT YS VANISHED

1987



YS III: WANDERERS FROM YS

1988



YS IV: MASK OF THE SUN

1989

YS II: ANCIENT YS VANISHED – THE FINAL CHAPTER



1993

YS I & II



YS IV: THE DAWN OF YS





» Moving into 3D with *Ys VI: The Ark Of Napishtim* put an end to the bump system, but combat remained simple and satisfying.

way the person who wants to play again can do it, but because it's modernised and updated for new hardware, that allows new fans to get into the series – and that's also important."

According to Kondo, it was tackling these remakes that gave the team the sense of ownership needed to finally push the *Ys* series into the future. "As a matter of course, during making these remakes, the team gained a feeling that 'we want to make a new one too, we want to see what Adol's next adventure is'," he explains. "We'd just made *Ys I & II Eternal*, and we were told, 'Okay, it's time to make *Ys III Eternal*.' And we said, 'No, we've accumulated a lot of knowledge of game development and design – let us make *Ys VI*, please.' We were finally able to convince the founder to allow us to do that, and that's where *Ys VI* came from. So this was a natural progression of working on the series, and my team was the one which took on *Ys VI*."

Ys VI: The Ark Of Napishtim took Adol to the furthest reaches of the *Ys* universe seen so far, the Canaan Islands, where he awakens after being attacked by Romun ships. It also introduced a new graphical style, featuring 3D environments and prerendered 2D sprites, and retained the more involved combat of *Ys V*. The game was initially released for PC in 2003, and Konami picked it up for a PS2 release in 2005 – bringing the series back outside of Japan in the process. Reception to the game was mixed, but broadly positive. Eurogamer offered it 6/10, noting that it had "really quite nice graphics, lovely artwork in parts and fantastic music", but complaining that "it's hard to escape just how old-fashioned some of the game mechanics seem to be". This didn't matter, as the return of *Ys* quickly picked up into overdrive.

By the mid-Noughties, the *Ys* series was as active as it had been at its peak in the late Eighties. This led

"I was told is that a great movie is a great movie, no matter when it was made, and you can do the same thing with games"

Toshihiro Kondo

to the first ever prequel in the series, 2006's *Ys Origin*. As it was set centuries before the events of the original game, Adol doesn't star in the game – instead, you can choose between three characters with their own combat styles. The plot concerned the original battle between the land of Ys and demonic forces. The twin goddesses Reah and Feena had disappeared from Ys and returned to the surface, having seemingly gone to Darm Tower. Convinced that Ys would not survive without the goddesses, the six priests of Ys organised a search party to find them, and that's where the player comes in. The game was a PC exclusive for over a decade before coming to PlayStation Vita and PS4 in 2017, and the game received a better critical reception than its predecessor.

However, it's unlikely that we'll see a game like *Ys Origin* any time soon. "*Ys I & II* are iconic games and *Ys Origin* was a love letter to them, so I'd like to make *Ys Origin II* and continue that story because I really like exploring that aspect of the lore," Kondo admits. "However, the general consensus in the company is 'let's do something new' so I don't know if or when I'll have time to do it again. Of course, the setting of the *Ys* lore is that there are over 100 of Adol's journals, and we're only at eight, so we need to get going!"

Indeed, the next Falcom-developed game in the series was the next numbered instalment, simply titled *Ys Seven*. This was the first game in the series to be developed primarily for a handheld system, as it made its debut on the PSP in 2009. Adol and Dogi travel together once more, this time visiting Altago, where strange earthquakes have been disturbing the population. However, the fact that Adol wasn't travelling alone would become significant beyond plot points for the first time, as he is accompanied by other party members during battle. "When developing for consumer systems, we needed to keep the whole screen lively, and that's what led to the party system," Kondo explains. "Adol is obviously the focal point while playing, but you have other characters on the screen doing other things as well to create this really vibrant, interesting look." *Ys Seven* was well-liked by the press thanks to its addictive combat, with an 8/10 score from *games™* broadly representative of its reception.

The most recent game in the series is *Ys VIII: Lacrimosa Of Dana*, which was released for PlayStation Vita in 2016 in Japan, and worldwide for Vita and PS4 in 2017. The game has placed a broader emphasis on other characters than any *Ys* game before, in particular thanks to a new character called Dana, a mysterious girl who appears in Adol's dreams. "One thing that we discussed is that for 30 years, Adol has been the main character, and for 30 years we've been seeing things ▶





» Many of Adol's adventures begin with some kind of accident at sea, leading to Dogi's playful jab here.



> "We needed to keep the whole screen lively, and that's what led to the party system"
>
> Toshihiro Kondo

from his perspective," explains Kondo. "The big focal point when developing *Ys VIII* was how to overcome this problem, if you can call it a problem. So the solution was to have sequences in the game where Adol is dreaming, and seeing the world through somebody else's eyes. That allows us to do something new with the perspective while still being faithful to the idea that this is Adol's story."

But Dana isn't the only other character who matters in *Ys VIII*. "Up until now, it's been Adol's tale by himself," says Kondo. "In *Ys VIII*, you're on a passenger liner that sinks, and Adol has to find the rest of the passengers so you get to see all of them and their stories. The amount of people that are involved in the story and have their own arcs through it is much greater than in previous Ys games." This plays into the game design in the form of side quests too, according to Kondo. "Because you're searching for companions who were with you on the boat, in addition you're on a deserted island that you're mapping, so when you find these people they come together and build a village, and you're able to grow that village throughout the course of the game." *Ys VIII* has done very well with critics, with the recent Switch release holding a commendable score of 82 on Metacritic. Praise for the game is focused on the engaging characters, the large amount of additional content besides the main game's quest, and a combat system which allows for fast and satisfying battles.

Despite the ups and downs of Falcom itself and a lengthy period outside of the international spotlight, the *Ys* series has endured because it maintains its status as an approachable entry point to the Japanese RPG scene. With easy-to-learn combat and self-contained stories, it's not hard to jump into a *Ys* game – yet for the long-term fan there's plenty of interesting lore to discover, and depth to the combat systems that ensures that they remain satisfying over the whole course of the game. That satisfying feeling of popping bubble wrap has never gone away – and so long as it remains a fixture of the *Ys* series, the *Ys* series will remain a fixture of videogaming.

THE WORLD OF YS

Adol's adventurous nature means that he rarely stays in one place for too long – just check out the locations he's explored



VORTEX OF CANAAN

YS VI: THE ARK OF NAPISHTIM

■ Within this dangerous storm lies the Canaan Islands, a civilisation cut off from the rest of the world. Pirates have long been interested in rumours of treasure here.



YS

YS II: ANCIENT YS VANISHED – THE FINAL CHAPTER, YS I & II

■ The floating land is the setting for the second game. According to *Ys Origin*, it was raised from the ground to guard against demonic attacks.



The Vortex of Canaan



» Later games allow you to partner with other characters, and even experience their unique combat styles for yourself.



CELCETA

YS IV: MASK OF THE SUN, YS IV: THE DAWN OF YS, YS: MEMORIES OF CELCETA

■ Dense forests cover this land, which is officially claimed by the Romun Empire. Most of the settlements in Celceta are so isolated that there is no de facto Romun control.



ESTERIA

YS I: ANCIENT YS VANISHED, YS I & II

■ Located in the French-inspired region of Gllia, access to Esteria by sea is blocked by a permanent storm, which Adol miraculously survives at the beginning of the game.



FELGHANA

YS III: WANDERERS FROM YS,
YS: THE OATH IN FELGHANA

■ Dogi's home is much like the man himself: mountainous. Because of this, it's an area that is isolated from much of the continent.

Britai

The Eresia Continent

Esteiror

Steldum

Felghana

Promalock

Garman

The Alp

Celceta

Gillia

Barenoia

Romn

Greek

Ispani

Europe Region

Cdiz

ALTAGO

YS SEVEN

■ Though rich and varied in its geography, Altago's unique distinction is having 'Dragon Energy' flowing through everything that's living and non-living.

SEIREN ISLAND

YS VIII: LACRIMOSA OF DANA

■ Located off the coast of Greek, these islands are said to be a place where ships go missing. Adol winds up shipwrecked here after an all-too-predictable mishap at sea.

Altago

Xanaria

he Afroca Continent

XANDRIA

YS V: LOST KEFIN, KINGDOM OF SAND

■ Drought blights this formerly prosperous land, with much of the formerly verdant area turning to desert. Rumour has it that a lost city was once here too...

CLASSIC GAMES

Talisman

» **DEVELOPER:** ROBERT J. HARRIS
» **FIRST RELEASED:** 1983 » **EXPECT TO PAY:** £50+

Just a little familiarity with role-playing games will stand you in good stead when playing *Talisman*. Conceived in the heyday of *D&D*, it bears all the hallmarks of classic fantasy gaming but without the intimidating complexity of some modern *D&D* board games (like *Wrath Of Ashardalon*, for example).

Your ultimate goal in *Talisman* is to obtain the Crown of Command from the inner region of the board, and using the awesome power this relic endows you with, bend the other players to your will (read – kill them). To do that, you have to navigate the pitfalls and traps of the outer and middle regions, fighting monsters, acquiring artifacts, collecting gold, and improving your character's primary and secondary stats – craft, strength, fate and lives.

New players (up to six of them) will quickly get a feel for *Talisman*'s mechanics, even if veterans will have the upper hand in knowing generally how it's going to play out in the latter stages. Starting in the rolling fields and bustling towns of the outer region, your character moves according to your die roll in either direction around the board. With a few exceptions, most squares require you to pick up one of the dozens of adventure cards and follow the instructions of the event described on it, or fight an enemy, or discover an item.

Despite the simplicity of the board movement, the huge variety of encounters and adventure cards make for an excellent storytelling game with a surprising number of permutations. It's a very repeatable and authentic-feeling *D&D* experience. Just be aware that the latest version is now becoming highly collectible. ✱



» There are 14 different characters available in the base game of *Talisman*.



» Some locations will require you to roll dice to determine an outcome.

INSTANT GUIDE

1. Gold



Do not underestimate the power of money in *Talisman*. The gold you accumulate along your journey can be used to pay for services or to purchase some incredibly useful game items, such as a raft, a mule, or a weapon from the market.

2. Characters



Vanilla *Talisman* has you draw one of 14 player characters at random, with preset stats and special abilities that radically alter your game. The dwarf, for example, is at home in the mountains and doesn't have to make the deadly encounter rolls in the crags or chasm.

3. Regions



The risks and rewards of moving around the board increase as you head into the central regions. You can travel via the raft from the outer region across the river, or through the black knight's portal to reach the middle region where enormous power can be gained.

4. Adventure cards



One of *Talisman*'s main mechanics is picking up adventure cards. These are often combat encounters or events similar to those found on board spaces. Unresolved combat cards – battles the character dies in or flees from – stay on the space for other players to land on.







Or you could try:

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: WRATH OF ASHARDALON

Wrath Of Ashardalon fully embraces the archetypal *D&D* dungeon crawl and all its complications. It's a co-operative game in which you and three other characters (for a classic fighter-thief-wizard-healer party setup) venture into a procedurally generated dungeon in search of death or glory. But mostly death, because it's hard, and no small measure of frustration, because the rules are dense and in places quite ambiguous. It takes a few slow games and a dedicated group to get value out of this game.

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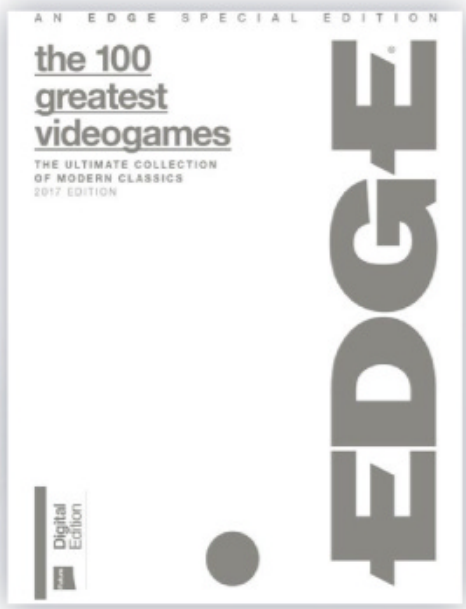



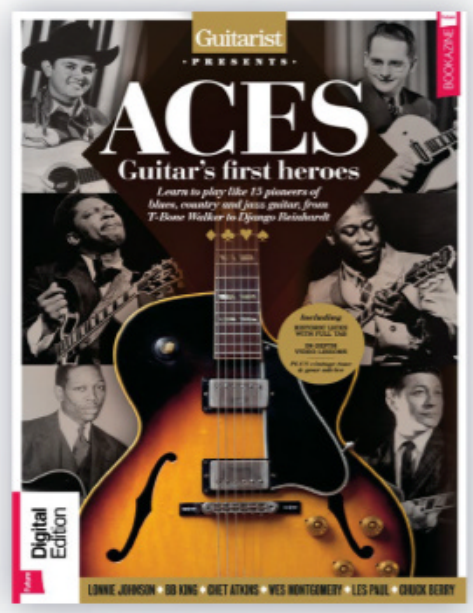

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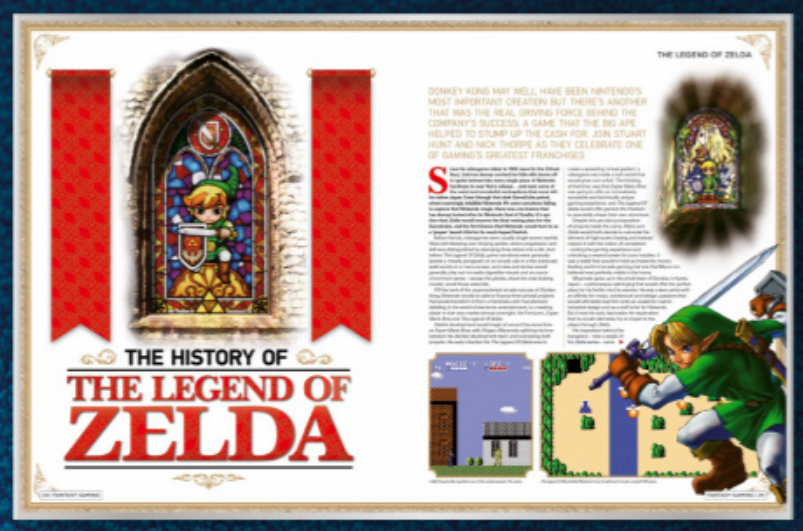

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

We take a look at Nintendo's most popular adventure series, from its origins on the NES to the latest Switch classic, *Breath Of The Wild*



WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Blizzard's world-conquering MMORPG changed the genre forever. Here we reveal everything that makes the premier fantasy game so good



MAGIC: THE GATHERING

Mark Rosewater explains how Wizards Of The Coast's collectible card game has evolved over the ages to become a global sensation







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