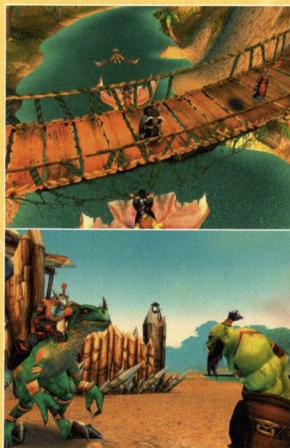


World Of Warcraft

Format: **PC**
 Publisher: **Vivendi**
 Developer: **Blizzard**



Blizzard's decision to give *WOW* a rich, hand-drawn look has drawn distaste from some quarters over its technical simplicity, but it's instantly recognisable (and enticing) in the crowded MMO market



No doubt aware of the inaccessibility of most online RPGs, Blizzard has artfully constructed a persistent universe as friendly and as easy to assimilate as one of the slick strategy titles for which it became famous. Equally, never a developer to be rushed, it's taken its time to let the currently ongoing US beta (and forthcoming European beta) to test every aspect.

The mechanics differ little from the genre norm. You create a character – dwarves, trolls, orcs, gnomes and more – and pick a typical fantasy class. Tasks, quests and crafting are all fairly predictable, but *WOW*'s presentation is what sets it apart. An interface free of clutter and confusion makes it a welcoming experience, allowing you to learn the ropes as you progress, rather than throwing it all at you in the opening minutes.

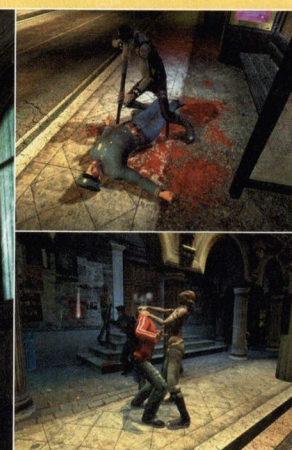
Grouping with other players is positively encouraged by more challenging quests, while race-specific towns and strong overall visual design mean *WOW* is also offering an unusually atmospheric experience. Suffice it to say, it's given the creators of competing titles plenty to think about.

Vampire The Masquerade: Bloodlines

Format: **PC**
 Publisher: **Activision**
 Developer: **Troika**

One of few singleplayer PC RPGs on show at E3, *Vampire* aims to blend elements of the traditional – being based on a pen-and-paper system – with vivid design and impressive technology. Being firstperson, and the first game to have licensed *Half-Life 2*'s Source engine, has certainly garnered a few extra column inches, but RPG specialist Troika certainly hasn't wasted it, with naturalistic animation and lip-synching particularly noticeable.

The *Bloodlines* subtitle refers to the various types of vampire you can choose to play as at the outset. Each is distinct and has certain strengths, so in good old-fashioned RPG fashion you're able to act as you like, whether that's ripping everyone's head off or charming their pants off. Gradually learned and improved abilities facilitate progress, and there seems to be a good balance of dialogue exposition, puzzle solving and combat, with multiple paths to progression. Though guns are available along with most other weapons you can imagine, we hope to use our natural charm to carry the day.



Troika's artists have certainly taken the jump from isometric fantasy to firstperson gutter goth in their stride; we hope the appeal of the *Vampire* universe hasn't gone out with teased hair