

# RPG

## The Role-playing Renaissance

It's the season of the RPG as a number of high-profile games look to rescue the genre from its slump in recent years.

By Daniel Morris

**D**espite the rich history of PC role-playing games, the last couple of years have seen a drought. Heck, the most popular RPG around our offices was probably the *Ultima IV* included on our July/August 1997 CD-ROM. That and *Fallout*.

This year, the starving union of computer role-players can look forward to a treasure chest of exciting new games. Every major publisher seems to be finishing up titles that bring ambitious scope, exemplary graphics, and good old-fashioned classic role-playing back to our hungry hard drives.

A glance at the ones we can't wait to unwrap...

### Asheron's Call

Microsoft ([www.microsoft.com/games](http://www.microsoft.com/games))  
Release: Early 1999

Sony, via 989 Studios, isn't the only gigantic corporation getting into the massively multi-player arena—Microsoft is prepping *Asheron's Call* for play on the Internet Gaming Zone.

Character generation is skill-based in *Asheron's*, allowing for funky characters like a Wizard obsessed with lock-picking and thievery. The 3D texture-mapped graphics render a world spanning 24-by-24 miles. A moveable camera lets you watch from many angles, which will help you in real-time combat.

Two features distinguish *Asheron's Call*. The first is that magic is handled very tightly; there's

a finite amount of total manna, and all magic-casting depletes it. The result is that if you're trying to cast a spell during a period of heavy magic use throughout the realm, you may find yours weak or ineffective. Magic jams, anyone?

In another twist, most of the game's spells have to be discovered through exploration, as opposed to simply being taught to you. Knowledge of rare or obscure spells could fast become a currency of power.

The second intriguing feature is a system of allegiance that allows characters to pledge fealty to other player-characters. In exchange



"If we organize quickly we can defeat these things..." They'd better get started quick. (*Asheron's Call*)



The credits system in *Asheron's Call* allows you to customize character attributes.

for donating a percentage of your experience points, that character will offer benefits depending on their status. (Be sure you pledge yourself to a powerful character!) The result should be a class system of nobility that will dictate such world-sweeping events as wars and trade decisions. At the lower levels, it will be a system of feudal support that provides newbies with a "big brother" to help them through the early levels of the game.

### Baldur's Gate

Interplay ([www.interplay.com](http://www.interplay.com))  
Release: Winter 1998

One of the most buzzed-about games on the Internet, *Baldur's Gate* is Interplay's latest title to use the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*



Forgotten Realms license. Not content to simply deliver a great classic RPG with passable graphics, the design team has crafted one of the most visually impressive games of the year to go along with rich gameplay.



**Baldur's Gate's quests come from many sources.**

"Art and graphics were our third priority at the start of the project," says producer Chris Parker. "But the graphics are so good, it's impossible not to make them a main selling point."

BG is played from an isometric perspective as you command your party in real time. The quest begins with the discovery that precious metals are being weakened by a sinister force, making good weapons hard to come by. The unfolding story takes place over seven "chapters," each hinging on a major plot point, but there are lots of side alleys and subplots to explore before continuing the linear journey.

Extensive NPC interaction is augmented by a romping combat-system that puts an emphasis on real-time excitement. Your combat maneuvering—which includes establishing magic-users in defensive support positions and getting your big fighters to the front line—will be critical to your party's success. Internet multi-player options will let gamers join up in parties to go questing.

Visually, Baldur's Gate looks to be in a class by itself. An astonishing level of detail highlights every area of the vast game-map, creating a highly immersive and real-feeling environment.

## Diablo II Blizzard ([www.blizzard.com](http://www.blizzard.com)) Release: Christmas 1999

Blood, sweat, and tears have been shed arguing over whether or not Diablo is a true role-playing game. Our official verdict: action game in RPG clothes. So why is Diablo II on our RPG watch? Because Blizzard is determined to make its follow-up a memorable role-playing experience as well as a visceral dungeon crawl. And because we couldn't help talking about it.



**Diablo II's new character-classes include the Amazon Warrior.**

Gamers can play as one of five new classes: Amazon Warrior, Paladin, Necromancer, Sorceress, or Barbarian. You'll also have four new towns to explore, each adding its own piece of the puzzle to an evolving quest.

As the game opens, more demons are found in Tristram after a convoy is pillaged. You have to find out whether that king of the bad



**An all-new gathering of big, evil nasties waits in the refurbished dungeons of Diablo II.**

boys, Diablo, has reared his ugly head again. The sub-quests that elevate the role-playing dimension can branch in different directions, with different repercussions later on. Your decision to help one person and not another might result in gaining an NPC ally at a crucial juncture later—or having to realize that you've alienated an NPC when you need his help. Wise choices could even benefit you with the free services of a normally costly mercenary.

A cheating-free environment on Blizzard's Battle.net (we can only hope) would also help human characters interact more cooperatively. For Diablo II, Blizzard plans to set up a persistent economy that hinges on truly rare items and artifacts. With a market for rarities in place, players could undertake quests to find specific items for trade.



**Butt-kickin' for goodness: Your party sets out to tame the Forgotten Realms in Baldur's Gate.**