

While purists would argue that computer role-playing games (CRPGs) contain very little actual role-playing, games like *Wizardry*, *Might & Magic* and SSI's AD&D line of games have all been highly successful in their own extremely popular niche. In these games, and others of their genre, players assemble a party of elite, hand-picked (or specially created) characters such that each character is a specialist in his/her field: fighter, cleric, magic-user, thief, bard, etc.

Party of Six? Right This Way...

Thus, players would always be in lock-step with the system of "proper party management." The three "front line" characters would always be fighters, or some derivative thereof. As heroic peril fodder (or, alternately, monster chow), these would be the first to melee and would, naturally, receive the most damage in battle. Thus, one would expect them to have the most hit points and not be particularly reliant on missile weapons. In the rear would be the "wimpier" characters such as the thieves, clerics and magic users, who would contribute to the battles and other activities from their positions of relative safety. The phrase "SSDD" quickly came to mean, "Same Stuff, Different Dungeon."

Worst of all, there was no "role-playing". The single player at the keyboard was responsible for the thoughts and deeds of *every* character in the party so, naturally, every character behaved *exactly* as would best benefit the party's leadership. A few exceptions, such as *Wasteland*, threw in a few new twists, but characters generally never really spoke to each other, never really needed to trade a lot of items, never proffered wisecracks on the march or yelled for help in combat. CRPG characters had thus achieved the ultimate in two-dimensionality.

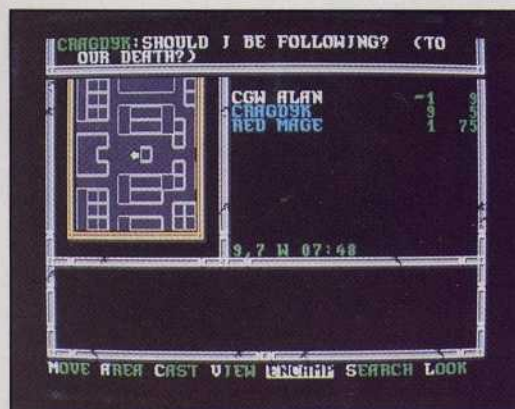
Role-Playing Requires Multiple Humans

What if, though, a highly successful CRPG system, like SSI's AD&D Gold Box series could be put on a telecommunications network, like Quantum's *America On-Line*? What if each person could only control a *single* character in a game? What if players could communicate via a "chat" feature during play? What would happen? The answer: computer role-playing.

Minuet in (AD&)D Minor

America On-Line's Neverwinter Nights

by Alan Emrich



Discovering America (On-Line)

If none of this sounds particularly original, it isn't. Other networks have long had multi-human player adventure/role-playing games in their inventory. To the average "buys the box off the software shelf" computer gamer, news of these on-line role-playing games evoked little interest and a reaction of "so what?" Now that on-line role-playing is expanding the *AD&D* Gold Box universe, however, a keener interest can be sensed from these "off the shelf" computer role-playing gamers.

While several explorers "discovered" America before Christopher Columbus did in 1492, what made Chris so famous is that his discovery "stuck" and the continents were placed on the map and colonized by the "old world." Similarly, *Neverwinter Nights*, the latest *AD&D* Gold Box adventure in **SSI's** hit series of *DragonLance* games, should put on-line role-playing on the map for all computer role-playing gamers. What Dan Buntin (*Modem Wars*, *Command HQ*) did to sell modems to computer strategy

gamers, *Neverwinter Nights* will do to sell modems to computer role-playing gamers.

There's Gold in That Thar Box!

Many people have called an *AD&D* license from TSR, Inc. "a license to print money." True enough, but that's not the only reason **SSI's** *AD&D* product line comes in a gold box. The gold also stands for *quality*. The on-line version is almost identical to **SSI's** classic Gold Box game system. Players who have generated characters, created and changed their icons, equipped, traded, mapped or fought within the *AD&D* Gold Box universe will not have to "unlearn" a thing before beginning play.

For those who've never delved into this system, perhaps a brief description is in order. The Gold Box line is pretty standard fare as most computer role-playing games go in many respects. Players generate a party of characters from fighters to magic users et. al., with each character having a list of attributes (rated on a 3-18 scale) such as intelligence and

dexterity. They proceed to equip these characters with arms, armor and sundry other items prior to sallying forth into the towns, dungeons and wilderness confronting them. They slay monsters, accumulating gold and experience points and unraveling the game's greater puzzles in the process.

Where the Gold Box series is substantially different from the other fare of this genre is in its combat system. Each character sports its own combat icon, which is tactically maneuvered in an arena representing the actual dimensions of the party's present location. A character takes up a single "square" of space, while monsters take up one or more squares (depending on their size). Knowing by sight the ranges for missiles and blast radii for magic spells becomes a useful skill for experienced players. Although a bit time-consuming, the Gold Box combat system is one of its outstanding aspects and is something which this reviewer found generated a lot of spectator interest in his home (particularly with his 5-year old son on his lap saying "Get those monsters, Daddy!").

(Continued on page 70)

A NATIONAL WILL



"A National Will" is a computer moderated play-by-mail game where each player runs an economy of a country. Players make decisions on production, labor allocation, revenue, trade, etc. The strength of a country's military depends on the vitality of its economy.

To order the rule book and take your first turn, please send \$6.50 or \$3.00 for the book only with your name and address to

GRAND ALLIANCE



"Grand Alliance" is a fully computer moderated play-by-mail game which involves the battle of survival between human and alien races. Players represent either a member of the human race or of the alien race with the universe as a setting. The game is played on a map of three parallel levels where each level is composed of 240 planetary systems. Each player must solve military and political problems within their own camp before war can be waged effectively against the opposing race. Each side is faced with the same situations and problems to overcome.

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Minuet in (AD&)D...

(Continued from page 28)

Cool, but Neverwinter

Neverwinter is a town in the northwestern region of the *DragonLance* universe. The people residing in this town, however, are not happy campers. With decaying walls and a severely depressed (literally, rotten) economy (although the inns and merchants which players frequent seem to be doing quite well) are driving Lord Nasher into despair. What he needs, like the Marines, is a few good adventurers to help clean things up, right a few unrightable wrongs, fight some unbeatable foes and generally unravel the mysteries that plague the once prosperous city of Neverwinter.

As befits an on-line role-playing game best, the world of *Neverwinter Nights* is not a finite one; whereas when one purchases a Gold Box game off the shelf, one can rest assured that when the quest is over, so is the replayability of the game. In an on-line world, however, the dungeoneers never sleep. Instead, they keep adding on new grid squares for persistent (and wealthy) players to explore. Fantastic tales of on-line role-players racking up multi-hundred dollar phone bills playing these games for hours and days and weeks upon end are true. Like teenagers, ex-wives and the I.R.S., these "money vampires" can suck one's wallet dry, except in the case of an on-line role-playing game, the phone company is always a willing accomplice.

On-Line Is Role-Playing!

Many things *wrong* with computer role-playing are "righted" when playing on-line. For one thing, role-playing started as a very social interactive pencil-and-paper game for a group of people. Achieving that while sitting alone at one's computer

takes away the single most dynamic element of actual "role-playing."

With *Neverwinter Nights*, this problem is solved by allowing each player to run a single character in the game, bearing that person's sign-on name (look for this author, for instance, as "GamingGuy"). Now, players are presented with *real* role-playing game problems, such as finding others to "party" with. No longer does one person generate six perfectly matched, equal level, A-Team characters. Now, one must use whatever personnel happen to be available on-line at that given time. Sometimes, *any* warm body will do. Many a first-level magic user has built up experience points by following a couple of high-level fighters into the woods surrounding Neverwinter!

Ye Bards and Raconteurs

The mechanics of inter-player communication are about the only thing an experienced "Gold Boxer" needs to learn to play *Neverwinter Nights*. Quite simply, one merely types what to say and hits 'Enter', then everyone within two spaces will read it along the top three "lines" of their Graphical User Interface. By hitting an 'F' key, one can find out who the other players in their area are or, with a shift key added, can find out who's playing *anywhere* in *Neverwinter Nights*. If they are not within two squares, messages can be sent to them (by "telepathy") by simply typing the addressee's name and a colon to precede the message. Even color can be added to one's words (literal color, that is, like green, yellow and grey).

Authentic social interaction is the true beauty, nay, the *soul* of role-playing. For example: This reviewer joined a group one evening and, during the lulls in conversations, kept the party members amused with several one-liners. These barbs garnered responses of "LOL"

(Laughing Out Loud) and "ROFL" (Rolling On Floor, Laughing) throughout the night. When a new member joined our party in the middle of an encounter with some trolls by a major pontoon (dubbed a "Troll Bridge"), she asked what character classes and levels we were. Another party member chimed in that this reviewer was an "8th Level Jester." Folks, moments like that... *that's* role-playing!

Personal Touches For Real Persons

Players assume identities for their characters not only by their banter, however. Where a player might "knock out" a "quickie" when designing a distinctive icon for their Gold Box characters, they are not so hasty in *Neverwinter Nights*. Now, a character's icon is the player's showpiece. Like any other first impression situation, players will want to create icons (through the handy game menus) which truly resemble their characters (or are so wild that others are impressed). It's that personal, "self-portrait" touch that helps this computer game transcend the traditional limits of CRPGs by allowing the "sharing" of one's artistic efforts.

By far, the best aspects of on-line role-playing lie in helping others. Most people like to help out. When new players jumped into *Neverwinter Nights*, this reviewer was moved by the caring and patience showed to them by all. Weak characters were invited to join stronger ones, even on adventures where their survival was problematic. Rich characters were quick to give extra gold and gems to new-found impoverished friends. After each battle, the fighters who came up with magic scrolls would willingly give them to characters whose classes they benefited. Weapons, armor and magic items would find the best of homes, even if with characters who were hitherto virtual "strangers."

Longing For Alwayssummer Nights

Like any popular "chat" area of an on-line network or any solid computer role-playing game, one can quickly become addicted to it and return again and again. With *Neverwinter Nights* possessing *both* of these silicon-narcotic qualities, it is easy to imagine many new enlistees for **America On-Line** who will make this game their "home" and the players therein into their new friends. If this writer were back in school again, when he longed for the summer and staying up late every night, *Neverwinter* would have been his Alwayssummer favorite. **caw**

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