Neverwinter Nights:
Bioware Brings the Tabletop to the Desktop

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“With Baldur’s Gate, we sparked a role-playing renaissance – now a multiplayer revolution!”

These are the words spoken in the opening of an early trailer for Neverwinter Nights, released for the PC in June of 2002. Even at the point when the trailer was released in 2000, anticipation for the game was already running high. In 1998, Bioware, the developer of Neverwinter Nights, had almost single handedly resurrected the ailing computer roleplaying game (RPG) market with its great graphics, excellent implementation of the AD&D 2nd Edition rules, and remarkable story. The aforementioned trailer for Neverwinter Nights, although not the first trailer, was included on the CD of Baldur’s Gate II: Shadows of Amn. The video clearly states Bioware’s goal in its creation of Neverwinter Nights: to recreate, as accurately as possible, the feel and play style of pen and paper (or PnP) roleplaying, Dungeon Master included, on the PC. Were they successful? The answer is a resounding yes. For this reason, Neverwinter
Nights stands as model for future games and stands as a landmark in the history of computer RPGs.

Word of Neverwinter Nights first surfaced in 1999 at GenCon along with an announcement by Wizards of the Coast about the new 3rd Edition Dungeons & Dragons rule set. However, the idea for Neverwinter Nights was created in 1997 as “the ultimate pen-and-paper role-playing game simulation.” Up until this point, computer role-playing games had been primarily single player affairs, or had multiplayer gameplay tacked on at the end of their development to allow groups of people to progress through the single player portion of the game with friends, but there was nothing that allowed them to create their own adventures. This seemed to completely remove the main draws of pen and paper role-playing games: creating and participating in grand stories of adventure and heroic deeds whilst in the company of friends.

Inspired by these tabletop games, Bioware aimed “to capture the subtleties of a pen-and-paper role-playing session in a computer game, including a fully featured Dungeon Master with full control over the game world as it unfolds, and an extremely approachable toolset to allow nontechnical(sic) users to make basic content” (Greig). These two features, the Dungeon Master and user created content, were really what had separated pen-and-paper roleplaying from computer roleplaying in the past and what
would separate Neverwinter Nights from other games in its genre. In addition, Bioware knew they needed a thriving and avid fan community to make the game succeed.

During its development, Jonathan Tweet, the lead designer of the 3rd Edition D&D rules, said of Neverwinter Nights, “[this] is the computer game that we paper role-player game designers have talked about as a concept – and as something of a bogeyman – for years” (Sones, 48). There had been previous valiant attempts at games that allowed users to create their own content, Adventure Construction Set in 1987, by Electronic Arts, and the first for D&D, Unlimited Adventures by SSI in 1993, although both products were plagued by the same two problems.

The first problem was that at the time, there was no real way for people to get their own content out and about and available to other users. Friends could swap disks with homemade adventures on them, but that was about the limit of exchange possibilities (Brockington). Pen and paper adventures (called modules, which is also the moniker that Neverwinter Nights adopted for its user-made content) were routinely published in various fan magazines which often incorporated fan submissions. Computer games didn’t have that possibility, as mailing computer disks to subscribers would not have been a cheap venture.

The second problem was that both of these programs only allowed users to create single-player, pre-scripted adventures. While such modules could be quite good, they could never hope to recreate the feeling of sitting down at a table for hours with a group of friends and having everything be coordinated by a real live person. Part of the problem was that these modules were static and unchanging. Every time a person would play through a module, it would be the same. The Dungeon Master in pen and paper games helped alleviate these problems at the tabletop. The DM could spice up the game at his will, throwing down extra monsters or presenting new
traps and obstacles at his whim. He could also change the story if he wanted. None of these options were available in a computer roleplaying product.

Thankfully, both of these problems were solved, making way for Neverwinter Nights, with one great invention: the Internet. The Internet solved the problem of availability allowing users to transfer their creations electronically and have access to a wider range of people with whom to share. The Internet also allowed multiplayer gaming to take off since people could play with others from around the world. However, Bioware knew none of this would work if their users couldn’t figure out how to make their own stories come to life. They wanted people to be able to create professional quality content, as was being created in the Half-Life community (a first person shooter by Sierra), but in the large quantities that people were able to create their own simple maps for Starcraft (by Blizzard). Bioware knew that in order for the product to succeed, they had to get a significant number of people creating content. If very little content was available, the game would never work (Brockington).

From the beginning, a major goal was to provide a powerful, yet fairly easy to use toolset. “The same tools we use to make our modules, you can use to make your modules," said Trent Oster, the game's producer and senior artist, in an early interview about Neverwinter Nights in Computer Games Magazine (Vanous). In comparison to their previous project,
Baldur’s Gate, Bioware allocated five times as many programmers to the Neverwinter Nights Aurora Toolset, as it would come to be called (Brockington). Because of the focus on user-made modules, the toolset had to be just as much a focus of the production as the official campaign. That meant Aurora had to be a stable, polished product. In order to make the editor more accessible to novice and casual users, Bioware opted to use a tile-based system for laying out areas. While not as flexible as a fully fledged 3D world editor like WorldCraft for Half-Life, it did allow for users to easily “paint” down terrain and features they would like to use. Adding special objects like rocks and trees was a simple matter of plopping them down onto the map. Creatures were added in a similar manner. In this way, users could easily create a village or a forest populated with fantastic creatures and all sorts of visual wonders to explore. Unfortunately, this was about all one could do without delving into the world of scripting. Neverwinter Nights contains a C-like scripting language that defines how everything works in the game. While many things were covered and simplified in wonderful wizards, custom
creature and item creation, dialogue, and so forth, people found out that accomplishing simple
tasks such as trying to get an NPC to walk from point A to point B required an unnecessary
amount of investment into learning the scripting language. Upon hearing the complaints,
Bioware jumped on the problems and created new wizards and shortcuts to streamline the
process. For example, they added the ability to select a creature, and then right click anywhere
on the map and instantly create waypoints for the creature to walk around. Bioware even added
a “Plot Wizard” that allows the users to easily create simple quests like “slay the dragon” or “retrieve
the key to the cellar”.

In addition to creating modules just using the pre-supplied creatures and objects, skilled
modelers can add their own resources to the game via the Hak Pak, which is where all completely new content is kept. Many
of the most popular modules make use of Hak Paks in some way, whether it is for new character
portraits or new monsters, like Beholders. The Hak Pak is easy to “install” for the less
technically inclined user who is trying to play through the module. It is simply placed into a
folder, and the game does the rest. A “Custom Content Installer” was even created by Bioware
to allow users to download modules and Hak Paks in a small executable file that would extract
itself to the proper location. Unfortunately, there is currently no way to automatically download
necessary Hak Paks, although Bioware is working on the issue (Brockington).
Even so, these small shortcomings in the toolset have not served to stymie the creation of user-made modules. The players have jumped onto the content creation scene in droves, with numbers higher than even Bioware could have hoped for. Co-founder of Bioware, Greg Zeschuck was quoted in an interview shortly before the games release saying, “After a year, we imagine we'll have hundreds of really good fan-created modules in a variety of categories” (Neverwinter Nights Q&A). However, the number of publicly available user-made modules swelled to over 500 in just over one month after the game was released (Over 500), and that number swelled to over 1000 available just another month later! "By giving the end user the same tools our developers use here at BioWare, we hoped the Neverwinter Nights community would thrive, and it has!" said Dr. Greg Zeschuk, joint CEO of BioWare Corp. "It’s very exciting to watch the sheer number of high quality adventure modules grow on a daily basis" (Video Game). As of this writing, there are nearly 2200 modules freely available for download from community fan sites, most of which can be played single-player or multi-player. Also, showing their roots in the pen and paper gaming, the community has produced over 100 “PnP conversions” to date of old pen and paper role-playing modules into Neverwinter Nights modules.

Part of the reason for this astounding success has been Bioware’s commitment to the fan community. As a game created out of one of the most popular and recognizable licenses in the world, Bioware had a lot of built in fan base. Add to those, the people that had played their previous D&D games, Baldur’s Gate 1 and 2, and it becomes easy to see why it made sense for a company like Bioware to take on the project. From almost the day that Neverwinter Nights was officially announced, Bioware’s employees were out and about, patrolling the official message boards answering questions, addressing concerns, and taking feedback on their upcoming
Evidence of this can clearly be seen in the Neverwinter Vault (NWVault) site archives dating back to the day that Neverwinter Nights was announced. Nearly every day, they put up a summary of all the messages posted by Bioware employees on the message boards. During Neverwinter Nights’s development, Jonathan Tweet, lead designer of 3rd Ed. D&D was highly impressed by their commitment to doing everything right. They had an answer for every challenge he tossed at them “about how their game would give you what you get at the gaming table” (Sones, 58).

Since the game’s release, Bioware has taken great measures to address the problems the community has faced in creating its own content. They have already added several creatures to the game via patches, such as rats, kobolds, and gnolls which were missing at the game’s release. The aforementioned Plot Wizard and a sign wizard were added to reduce the need for manually scripting menial things. Most recently, support for multiple Hak Paks was added. In that way, content creators could attach several Hak Paks onto their module without having to open them all up and go through the rather tedious process of combining them all into one big Hak Pak.

All of these great user-made modules and a thriving fan community by themselves would have been great, but they didn’t address the final problem computer roleplaying games faced. They didn’t contain the human
element of storytelling. If there were not something else, everything would have to be pre-
scribed. That is why another one of the key features of Neverwinter Nights from the start had
been the DM (Dungeon Master) client.

The DM client was designed to allow players to modify the game in real time, just as a
real live Dungeon Master would in tabletop gameplay. Greg Kasavin, Executive Editor of
Gamespot, wrote in his review of the game, “[The DM client] is one of the key differences that
can separate a Neverwinter Nights module from a player-generated map for some other game.
After all, though you can use the toolset to create a fun-filled stand-alone dungeon hack of some
sort, in conjunction with the DM client, you can truly create a unique role-playing experience for
someone--and for yourself.” The DM client allows people, at its simplest, to add that human
touch, the sense of unpredictability into computer roleplaying. It allows the DM to possess any
creature or NPC in the game, giving it his own dialogue or actions in real time. He can generate
additional monsters, give out gold, take away experience, and basically anything a DM would do
in a pen and paper game, recreating the tabletop experience. The DM is able to adjust the
gameplay and action to suit the players participating in the session.

Finding good Dungeon Masters, as well as good role-players, is the focus of one
extremely popular fan site, Neverwinter Connections. Many Neverwinter Nights players swear
by the free service they provide and for good reason. Neverwinter Connections has a rating
service where members can rate each other’s performances as players and Dungeon Masters in a
variety of different categories. Proficient Dungeon Masters are highly sought after and highly
regarded in the community, highlighting their importance to the multiplayer gaming aspect of
Neverwinter Nights.
With its commitment to fostering the community, the robust and elegant Aurora toolset, and the Dungeon Master client, Bioware has managed to create the closest facsimile to date of pen and paper role-playing on the computer with Neverwinter Nights. The game has managed to bring many old groups of pen and paper role-players together to form new groups of computer role-players who can have the same kind of experience that they have had for years sitting around a table. “Neverwinter Nights is the computer role-playing game that [pen and paper] players have always dreamed of,” says Benjamin E. Sones of Computer Games Magazine (48). This makes Neverwinter Nights an important landmark in the history of role-playing games, and computer games in general, not only for its ability to recreate a cherished offline experience, but also for its amazing toolset and the commitment of its developer to making Neverwinter Nights the closest thing to sitting down at a table with a pencil and some dice.
*Warning: Gamespot conveniently chose *this* weekend to begin changing the layout and structure of their site. At the time of this writing, all of the links have been verified to work by me; however, by the time your read this, it is possible that some of the links provided may not work. It’s out of my control, and I’m not about to sacrifice some sources because Gamespot decided to reorganize. If you’d like me to send updated links in a few days once everything is fixed, please e-mail me.*

**Works Cited**


*Gamasutra.* 6 March 2003.


Neverwinter Nights Q&A. *Gamespot.*


Other Resources:


