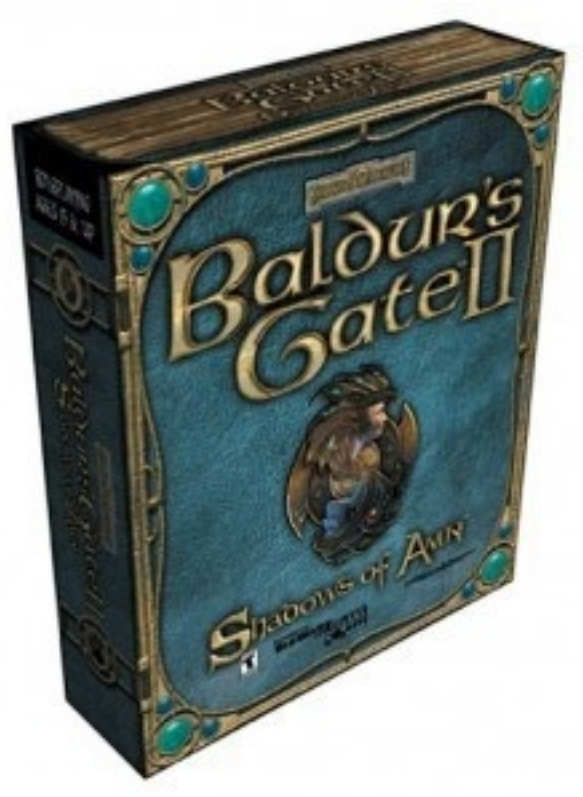
Life Bytes: Baldur's Gate 2



I'm only doing this because I lost a bet by winning a raffle. It was one of the great coincidental tragedies of my life, and I don't want to talk about it. All I'll say is that I made a wager that something that had never happened before and that had the most statistically improbable chance of happening than it had ever had before right when I said it wasn't going to happen…happened. And now I'm stuck doing another one of these playthroughs on the sequel to the game I said I'd never play. So yay me, I guess.

Anyway, I already wrote a lengthy introduction to my issues with the Baldur's Gate series when I did this for the first game, so if you want to catch up on current events, go read that . But if you're up to speed, let's just jump right into my struggle.

Oh, and if you want to play this classic game, you can go pick up the original version (with all expansions) DRM-free for a cool $9.99 over at GOG.com , or the Enhanced Edition for $19.99, also at GOG.com and DRM-free. I'll be playing the Enhanced Edition here, if you're curious.

Part One
DAMMIT, IMOEN. AGAIN!

BONUS FEATURE: Baldur's Gate 2

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I loaded up the game and imported my character from the first Baldur's Gate, or at least I would have if that feature had worked at all. But of course it didn't, which means I had to hit the Googlebot up to reveal its secrets to me, and then I had to track down my save folder from the first game in the impossible file structure of OSX putting files wherever the hell it wants. Then, I had to copy my final save from the first game into the save folder of the second game, which didn't exist yet because I hadn't started playing, so the game hadn't bothered to create a save folder for me. So, I loaded up Baldur's Gate 2 again, then started a new game with a pre-generated character so that I could save it and let the game create the folder I needed. Then, I had to quit and copy my Baldur's Gate 1 save over to the Baldur's Gate 2 save folder so I could launch the game for a third time and finally import my character.

Already, we're off to a great start.

The game begins with a lengthy introductory sequence wherein a disembodied narrator tells me about all the things that happened in the first Baldur's Gate that I didn't know had happened in the first Baldur's Gate because I wasn't paying attention. It tells me that Imoen was a kindred spirit of mine, for starters, which was news to me. Gorion was my foster father, and Sarevok was my brother. And our daddy was apparently the god of murder or something. I was taking notes on all this stuff, when the intro abruptly ended with me being thrown in jail for inexplicable reasons that probably would've ended up being explained in the Baldur's Gate 3 intro, if they'd ever made a Baldur's Gate 3.

The game itself starts with Sark from Tron throwing magic at my face while he rambles incoherent mumblings about experiments and crap. Then Clayface from Batman waddles into the room and tells the Master Control Program that somebody is attacking the castle. Or dungeon. Or wherever the hell I am.

Gul Madred stops shouting at me about how many lights there are long enough to mumble something about how the attack doesn't matter, then he teleports himself away because I guess the attack does matter, after all. I have no idea what's going on, but I'm stuck in some kind of cage inside what appears to be a mad scientist's prison and I'm being tortured to death. Life can't possibly get any lower though, so at least I've got that going for me.

Then Imoen happens. Right at the start of the game. AGAIN.



Pain. Lots of pain.

Never mind that I left her ass to die alone in the wilderness back in Baldur's Gate 1 though, because she's convinced we had a grand adventure together and are best friends 4 ever or something. She whines

at me about being tortured for a minute, then she busts me out of my cage and we get moving. There are a couple of other cages in the room, though, so I run over to investigate.
Then Minsc happens. And Boo.

Despite having literally exploded into tiny meat chunks in the last game, he seems to be surprisingly well built. He yells a lot of dialog at me, then says the same crap about his space hamster that I've been hearing for years now, thanks to every nerd I know incessantly quoting him at any given opportunity. I end up pissing him off and he goes into a berserker rage, then Hulk smashes his cage and we're suddenly friends again because Minsc is a mercurial lunatic.

In the next cage over sits Jaheria, who I haven't seen since I sent her and Khalid packing back near the start of the first game. Of course, she's operating under the same delusions as Imoen, because she's also under the impression that we went on a grand quest together to vanquish evil. Fine. Whatever. Believe whatever you need to, missy. I don't care.

Unfortunately, we can't open up her cage to let her out since Imoen can't pick the lock because she's Imoen, so we have to go find a key. We head over to a room right next to all the birdcages and start rummaging through all its containers while Clayface looks on with disinterest. We find the key, but first I try to talk to the monster.

Turns out, he's actually a golem, which is the Dungeons and Dragons version of a robot. He can't think beyond his programming, and his programming doesn't say anything about murdering us for escaping, so he doesn't really give a shit. He's also extremely unhelpful, so I stop talking to him and go rescue Jahiera. She joins the party, then tells me that Khalid was also kidnapped and is probably being tortured somewhere in the prison. I vow to search for him, and we're off to the races.



Say “Go for the eyes Boo” one more time. Say it! I dare you!

Once I get everyone outfitted with armor and equipped with weapons, we rest so everyone can heal up. The next morning, Imoen tells me how courageous she thinks I am to dare fall asleep in this awful place, and I don’t have the heart to tell her what really happened was that I just accidentally clicked the Rest button when I was trying to save the game.

I save the game.

We start exploring the prison complex and stumble into the Crystal Caves where some kind of magical entity named Aataqah appears and asks me something about pushing buttons that I wasn’t paying attention to, so I answer his question and he summons another magical entity thing to attack me, so we kill it. He gives me a little, “Atta boy!” then tells me to seek out someone called Rielev and free him from his suffering. Ominous.

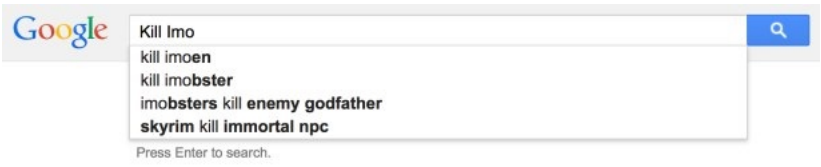
We set off to find this Rielev person, and the whole time we’re walking around killing goblins and flying things, Imoen just keeps whining about leaving this place. Which is SUPER helpful.

We eventually find Rielev, who turns out to be some kind of circus sideshow attraction in a jar. He gives me some crystals that kill him, but not before he tells me to go use them to wake up Lobster Boy and the Bearded Lady. We thank him for his time as he slips away into the great beyond, then set out to try and find these other people in jars that might be able to help us.

Along the way, we run into some goblins, and Jaheira’s stupid entangle spell entangles everyone like it always does, so we all just end up standing around and staring at each other like idiots. Eventually, it wears off and we kill the little gobbies and move on.

We find a library, and Imoen immediately stops everything to interrupt the entire party so she can whine at me about how much it reminds her of Candlekeep and how she was so very happy there, and can she please just go back home? Sure, kid. You won’t get any arguments from me.

She stays.



Google knows what's up.

We kill a few more goblins, then I start tearing apart the stacks and looting all the books before I remember that this is Baldur's Gate 2, and I probably don't need to bring a special rare book no one has ever heard of to those hipster douchebags back in Candlekeep. So I throw them on the ground, and we move on.

Well, as much as we can, anyway. There are a lot of locked doors in this place, and – big surprise – Imoen the thief is able to unlock exactly none of them.

We wander into a room with some kind of magical Bubble Boy in the corner, so naturally we try to murder him. Unfortunately, no matter how hard we pound on him, he remains unharmed due to the protective power of his bubble. I notice some kind of ornate contraption in the middle of the room that looks like Ogra's orrery from The Dark Crystal, so I set it to the Great Conjunction, which makes Bubble Boy lose his shield for some reason. We run over and kill him a lot, then jack all his shit. He was carrying something called the Sword of Chaos, which apparently belonged to my brother Sarevok. Sorry, Sarey, but finder's keepers. It's mine now and no takes backsies!

Ok, I guess technically it's Minsc's sword now, because I can't wield two-handed weapons effectively and he can. But whatever. It's cool.

We stumble into another random room and find another random golem. This one is blind because I guess even golems can get cataracts, and he works in the sewers. We lie and tell him that we're his master so he'll go and open up some door for us that I don't know where it is. He moves pretty fast for a giant clay monster, but we manage to keep up and follow him through one of the previously locked doors that Imoen was unable to perform her one damn job on. We charge in, kill some sort of shambling squid monster, then realize Imoen has wandered off and is lost again. We backtrack through the Crystal Caves to grab her firmly by the hand and lead her to where the squid monster was because wizards in the Forgotten Realms haven't invented leashes yet.

I find some kind of frost key on the squid beast's body, which I thought I could use to open some kind of locked portal door that's marked on my map, but that didn't work. Then I remember that I was supposed to be talking to the other fish people with those crystals that guy in a jar gave to me, so I gather up the party and we find a room full of mostly dead jar people. The few who are still alive wake up with the crystals, but every last one of them just whines a lot about being stuck in a jar and didn't help me at all, so I'm left wondering what the point of that whole bit was.

I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to be doing right now, so we head back to talk to the one other golem who has spoken to me, which works

out to be as useless as a wet Imoen in a thunderstorm. We decide to just attack it instead and maybe see if it's got a key tucked away somewhere in one of its many impressive bodily crevices, but the damn thing just stands there like four people aren't try to murder it with swords, because our weapons apparently have no effect on anthropomorphic clay monsters. We stop hitting it for a minute to try talking to it again. It acts like nothing at all just happened and remains useless.
I have no idea what to do now, so I save my game. It tells me that we've already been wandering these same half a dozen rooms for 12 days and 23 hours now. Time has lost all meaning.

Around 4pm on our 13th day in Hell, we finally find a door cleverly disguised as a door in a room we'd already walked through a hundred times, so we go through it and find a bedroom. We raid the nightstands looking for embarrassing battery-operated marital aids, but all we find is a necklace for Imoen because she's like a swivel-eyed monkey and is attracted to shiny things.

Just outside the bedroom, we find a small patch of lush forest and three mostly naked ladies who tell me they want me to "take their acorns".



Actually, they want us to take their magical acorns to whoever the Fairy Queen is in wherever the Windspeak Hills are. I tell them I will, then they thank me and tell us that David Warner's real name is Irenicus, as if that means anything at all to me. Oh, and it seems they're actually dryads. I know this because that's what Jaheira calls them and I just take her word for it because what the hell do I know? The mostly naked ladies then tell us that this Irenicus person captured them so they could "instill emotion" in him, which I guess is what the kids are calling sex these days. But then they say that they couldn't help him because he's barren inside, which probably explains why he's overcompensating so hard with this massive prison complex.

They also tell me that someone named Ilyich has the magical acorns of power or whatever, and to be careful because he's really mean. However, it turns out I already murdered him well before I knew what his name was, and I happened to have already picked up the acorns because I'm a loot whore. (Which is probably a good thing, because we've killed a lot

of crap in this place so far, so I'm pretty happy about not having to go on a scavenger hunt with all the corpses we've left in our wake. It's the little things.)
They also tell me that Irenicus keeps a key to what I assume is the locked portal door that's marked on my map somewhere in what I gather is some kind of disconcerting shrine to a woman he's been creepstalking, probably on 4chan. I make a note to keep an eye out for it.

When the dryads are finally done expositioning all over me, Imoen starts going on about how beautiful the mostly naked ladies are, and about how she always used to dream about them, and suddenly Imoen just became a lot more interesting. One of the dryads tells her that she is welcome among them because of her youthful exuberance, which I think is just another word for boobs.

But Imoen says no thank you, because she still just wants to go home due to the fact that she's a whiny little brat who doesn't realize when three mostly naked forest nymphs are hitting on her. Stupid Imoen.

Leaving the unexpected woodlands, we make our way into another bedroom and some kind of security alarm goes off, then all the traps that Imoen didn't detect start springing and the next thing I know, I'm poisoned and Minsc has been slimed by Nickelodeon. We finally manage to shake off the trap effects right as a couple of golems appear and start trying to kill us, so we murder them really hard, right in their silly putty. (Later, Minsc will use their lifeless bodies to lift whole comics pages from the newspaper.)



You can't do that on television!

Oh, and before I forget, Imoen is apparently a magic thief now, because she suddenly knows all these spells she didn't know before, but it doesn't

really matter because she refuses to cast any of them. I have no idea why she won't, but I suspect it's because she's just pretending to know magic to try and impress me. It's not working.
We eventually find the key that the dryads told us about by way of setting off every freaking trap in the entire room because Imoen can't do a single gods damn thing. We grab it and run away.

Passing back through the forest and the first bedroom, we find a Teleport Portal, which I guess is what we needed the magic key to activate or something, because it's all glowy and shit. There's still that locked portal door somewhere back in the prison, but screw that noise. We're getting out while the getting is good.

We all hold hands and jump into the teleporter. FOR FREEDOM!

…aaaaaaand, we just end up on another level of the prison, because of course this place probably goes on for miles deep beneath the earth's surface like how Jesse Ventura describes the Denver airport. I bet Irenicus is even a Freemason.

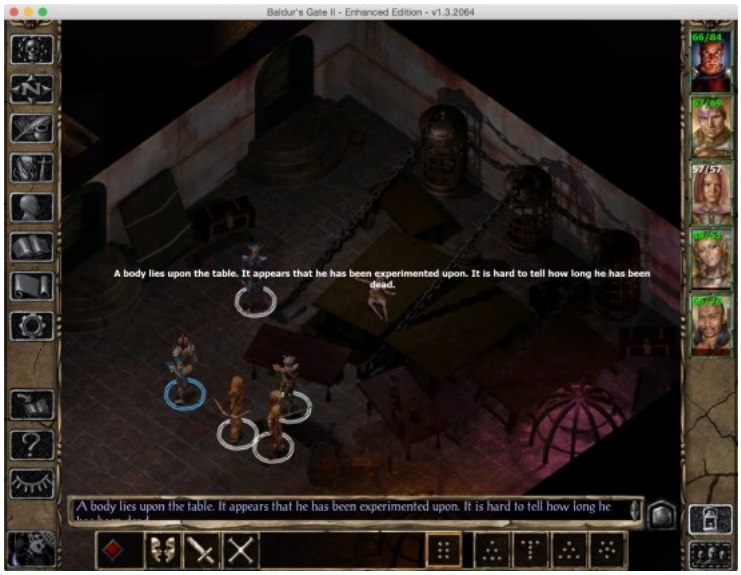
Anyway, as soon as we materialize in a puff of magical wonder smoke, some dude named Yoshimo runs up, begging for our assistance. He's trying to escape this madhouse just like us, so we welcome him to the team. Unfortunately, I guess I can have at least five characters in my party, because I didn't ~~have to~~ get to kick Imoen out. Oh well, there's always the possibility of permadeath, I suppose. Gods willing.

Yoshimo tells me that there are four portals in the next room that do something or blah other blah blah puzzle. I stop listening and just Leeroy Jenkins my way into the room to start smashing things. It's super effective!

Having solved the portal puzzle like the Gordian Knot, I'm feeling pretty good about myself and we press on. Then, we find a dead body that apparently belonged to Khalid before he didn't need it anymore on account of being dead. Jahiera goes bugfuck and starts telling everyone to stop talking to her because she's obviously in pain at seeing the mangled, lifeless corpse of her husband lying before her, and we can all understand that.

Well, all of us but Imoen, of course. She pipes up to tell Jahiera that Khalid didn't suffer, but Jahiera begs Imoen to be quiet, which just makes Imoen start whining like a child about how she's not a child. Then, she tells us that she saw Irenicus cutting on Khalid's body earlier, but I guess she just didn't think that kind of news was relevant until right now, after his damn window nearly tripped over his mutilated corpse.

Classic Imoen.



Heya! You're a dead fellow.

We leave Khalid to rot, and wander into another aquarium. This one has people fighting in it, only one of them turns out to be a clone that Irenicus made of whoever this woman is that he's stalking. The other person is just an assassin who is trying to, well, assassinate her because that's what assassins do. I try to talk to her, but she just accuses me of being The Master and tries to gouge out my spleen, so we murder her and the assassin both, just to be thorough. Then, we loot their corpses while Imoen continues to whine about some new thing I don't care about.

We keep wandering around the place and eventually find some pedestals that start shooting death rays at us, but it turns out that I can disarm them with all these magic wands I've been holding onto like some kind of diseased hoarder. This also frees up a bunch of my pants pockets, which is nice. I manage to disarm all of them except the last one, because I guess I must have missed a wand someplace.

We continue exploring, and eventually come upon a room with a harmless old man named Frennedan trapped behind a locked door. We free him, and he immediately starts following us around like someone who we're not at all worried will inevitably betray us at some point in the very near future.

Back over near the death pedestals, we find a room with some kind of empty looking shrine in it, where some more people we don't know are fighting over we don't know what, so we kill them all. This apparently terrifies poor Yoshimo who never signed up for this shit, so he takes off back into the pedestal room and starts running around in circles like a crack-addled madman, setting off traps and almost getting himself killed.

He finally calms the fuck down, and I gather my party before venturing

back through the teleporter because there’s nothing left to explore here and I still need that last damn wand.



Fear is the mind killer.

It’s day 17 in the dungeon now, and we’re back at that locked door I naively ignored earlier, when I thought we were almost done with this place. We unlock it with whatever mystical key it was that I didn’t know I was carrying, then we walk through and are whisked away to the island of Myst. Or at least it kind of looks like Myst because of the long wooden walkways and silly CGI windmills whirring about the place that apparently due nothing but keep the air moving quickly. But it’s a windmill, which should mean that it only moves because the air is already moving rapidly enough to make it move, but I guess this windmill is just moving the air itself somehow, because it got tired of waiting.

Anyway, we decide to stop trying to find logic in this realm of madness, and press on. We pass more lunatic windmills, until we eventually stumble into the Cave of Wonders or something, because – and I shit you not – we find Aladdin’s frikkin’ lamp. We give it a little rub and a genie pops out who says he has something of mine that he can’t give me until I find his lamp’s twin, because apparently lamps have siblings in this world. Of course, he has no idea where it is, so I’m going to need to search for it because why the hell not. I’ve already been wandering around this place for a damn month at this point, so what’s another few seasons?

We set back out into the prison to wander around while trying to find the stupid twin lamp for the stupid genie. In time, I remember that he said something about the dryads possibly knowing where the other lamp is, which makes total sense because they didn’t bother saying anything about it before. We make the trek back, ask them about it, and yep. They have it, only it’s not so much a lamp as it is a flask because apparently little

mister I Dream Of Genie has a bit of a drinking problem. But whatever; it's not my place to judge.
We grab the flask and head back to the Myst door. We're almost there, when I see Imoen's portrait suddenly start turning red for some reason, so I click the map button to get an overhead view because I don't know what's going on and DAMMIT, IMOEN!

She's wandered off again, probably daydreaming of talking to dryads about chocolate and boys or whatever, and she's found herself stuck in a mess of goblins. And of course she's just standing there doing nothing whilst they beat the living shit out of her because what the hell is she going to do, whine them to death?

So instead of going back to the genie and getting whatever item it is that I'll probably end up needing in order to save the universe or whatever, I gather my party and venture forth to save Imoen's sorry ass. AGAIN.



The green circle inside the green box is Imoen. The other circles are all the people I know who aren't idiots.

After dealing with more of Imoen's shit, we head back to Myst island and give the genie his booze. He's super excited to get his hooch back, so he gives me whatever my item was, then disappears in a flash of Bacardi. I check my inventory, and I now have a sword called Varsona, which probably means it's badass because it has a name. I equip it immediately.

It then occurs to me that we have a bunch of unidentified wands we've been carrying around, which I might be able to use on that last pedestal. Imoen knows the Identify spell, but she still refuses to cast it. Or any spell. Because she's just that useless.

After spending far too long trying to figure out what her damn drama is

this time, I eventually broke down and CONSULTED THE MANUAL. It turns out that she can't cast any spells while she's wearing the simple leather armor I gave her because I don't know the fuck why, but it's AD&D and who even cares. Armor just helps keep her alive anyway, so there's really no benefit to having her wear it. I have her take it off and throw it on the ground. Then, I maker her start identifying all the things. Several days later (literally, because lord knows little miss muffet over here can't be bothered to remember more than four gods damn spells a day, so we keep having to go back to sleep so she can learn them again each night), and we've got all the wands identified.

Back to the pedestals!

Well, that was pointless. None of the wands did anything to the last pedestal, but I did notice a side hallway that we haven't explored yet. We head down it, ready for a fight. And we get one.

More assassins jump out of the shadows to try and assassinate us, but we have like, a +10 saving throw against assassins by now, so we just kill them a lot and move on. We climb down some stairs into what looks like a sewer pipe, so that's great news. I just love sewer levels. SO MUCH.

We pinch our noses and move forward into the darkness, when suddenly, cutscene!

We've finally made it out of the prison, which I guess means that business with the last pedestal was either totally useless or entirely optional, which is really just another way of saying totally useless, so I don't even worry about it and just start celebrating our grand escape. But then, Irenicus has to show up and ruin everything.

He pops up out of nowhere and just starts throwing magic at people's faces. Imoen throws some right back at him, but of course her magic doesn't do anything at all because she's horrible at everything. Then, the freaking Guild of Weavers shows up and starts wailing on him with magic songs from their distaffs or something, and the next thing I know, there are explosions and particle effects everywhere. Things are starting to look grim, when something amazing happens.

Bobbin Threadbare appears and tells Invictus or whatever his name is that he's been performing unauthorized displays of magic, which I guess is a law or something, and they're going to take him to wizard jail over it because that's just how The Alliance of Magicians rolls. And while they're demanding to be taken seriously, they accuse poor little Imoen of the same crime, then teleport her off to jail, too.



THEY. TOOK. HER. AWAY.

Just like that. Poof! She's gone; teleported about by a magical Trivial Pursuit playing piece. Or maybe it was a pie chart of translocation. I don't know or even care, really, because all that matters is that Imoen is out of my life. It's probably not permanent, and I have a sneaking suspicion that she's going to turn up in an (un)surprising Bioware plot twist at some point, but none of that matters right now. All that matters is that I'm rid of her, even if it's just for a little while.

Sidetone: If you think I didn't reload the Auto Save from just before we left the prison so I could strip her useless body of every single thing she was carrying before she got zapped away again, you'd be wrong. Because I totally did that shit.

The rest of my party is still reeling from the unexpected loss of one of our own when I suddenly realize that I have no idea what happened to that nice old man who was following us around the prison before we escaped. I almost start worrying about it for a second, but then I remember that Imoen is gone and it's like mainlining heroin straight into my happy place.

Nothing can hurt me now.

Part Two
WE'RE OFF TO JOIN THE CIRCUS!

After the excitement of Imoen going away wears off, we loot all the bodies of the dead mages Irenicus left scattered on the ground, then head off to explore this city I don't know the name of in the land of I don't know where. On a whim, I decide to pull out my map to try and get my

bearings, even though I know the entire thing is going to covered in the stupid fog of war, but at least I'll know where I started.
To my surprise, the map opens up to reveal the entire city of Amn. Not only is there no fog of war, but I even have little markers all over the map, telling me where things are. I have no idea how or when I mapped out this area I've never been to before, but I decide not to tempt Fate by asking too many questions, so I pick one of the map markers and we head on over to a circus tent because who doesn't love the circus?



Oooh, I hope they have peanuts!

Of course, when I get to the tent, a guard stops us and tells me that the circus has been closed for my own safety because it's not like I'm the son of a murder god and can take care of myself or anything. I ask him what's up with that, and he tells me he has no idea because why would he? He's just a guard stationed at the entrance with an intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the city's police force, but that doesn't mean anyone actually tells him anything. I conclude that I'm talking to the Barney Fife of the Amnian PD, so I start talking very slowly, in staccato sentences.

He eventually opens up and tells me that something happened during the morning show and everyone is probably dead because of magic or something, and he's just waiting for the Cowled Wizards (the guys from Loom I mentioned earlier) to arrive and make everything all better. I've heard enough and tell Barney to step aside. I got this.

We step into the tent, which is a lot bigger on the inside. And I mean, a LOT bigger. There's a giant bridge and huge, phallic pillars and everything. I'm just standing there, taking it all in and wondering what the hell is going on, when I realize that we've probably been teleported to somewhere else that is very much not the charming circus tent filled with angry elephants and whimsical clowns I expected to find. Nothing makes

sense in this world of insanity and despair.
We cross the bridge to find another damn genie, which I guess are super common here in Amn, so I start to wonder why there aren't a lot more people walking around with sacks of gold and huge penises, but then I figure these aren't the friendly, Robin Williams kind of wish-granting genies. They're just jerks.

This one laughs and says something about us coming here to amuse someone named Kalah, then he asks me a riddle because riddles are what passes for security in fantasy worlds. He says, "A princess is as old as the prince will be when the princess is twice as old as the prince was when the princess's age was half the sum of their present age." Then he hands me a multiple choice test and a fucking Scantron, but nobody told me I'd need a Number Two pencil on this journey into darkness and what the hell's up with making me do math in a video game, anyway? Is this one of those edutainment titles people used to talk about all the time in the '90s?



Numbers, numbers. Math, math, math.

I tell the mystical bastard that the prince is 30 and the princess is 40, because I'm a freaking mathemagician, baby. Then, he grabs my Scantron and runs off to the copy room to check my work on the scanner while he gossips about the other teachers down the hall. When he comes back, he tells me that I was right, then gives me 19,500 experience points for being Rain Man and lets us pass.

We cross the bridge to find a giant mosque or something, so we go inside and meet a panicked woman named Aerie, who looks a lot like a very large bald man. She tells us that we need to run away as fast as we can because whoever this Kalah person is happens to be an illusionist in the circus, and this is all happening as a result of some kind of mental

breakdown the guy had, probably after he realized the ring leader was skimming his tips or something.
Aerie asks me to release her, but tells me I'll need a key now that I don't have Imoen around to fail at lockpicking anymore. Only it won't look like a key because why the hell would it in this frenzied realm of senseless delirium? She says some commoners are hanging around the tent that isn't a tent, but they're really monsters who are holding a sword that's not really a sword because it's actually the key and you know what? Screw it. I'm just going to go kill things until something happens, because life is so much simpler that way.

My plans are cut short, however, when I bump into a mostly naked woman. She warns me not to be of impure heart, which I think is pretty rich coming from someone who self-identifies as a Pleasure Slave, but whatever. I ask her who Kalah is, and she goes on about how he's the beginning and the end and some other wacky shit, and I realize I've probably stumbled into one of those Appalachian cults you hear about on the news sometimes. I decide to proceed with caution.



Keep it dapper, Bioware!

We turn around and go down another path, where we meet a giant spider who sighs when we approach and says, "I am a simple woman."

She tells me that she's not actually a giant death spider, or at least she wasn't until the circus went apeshit, anyway. She says her name is Hannah, and that she came to enjoy the circus with her son, although he didn't come into the tent with her because she's a horrible mother who just lets her kid wander the grounds all unsupervised with carney folk around, but I guess that's Amn for you. She says she was watching the circus while her kid was probably out back snorting cocaine off a pleasure slave's midriff when a gnome came on stage and was really bad

at magic tricks. The audience started laughing at him, which set him off and he went all Carrie on the place and turned the tent and everyone in it into his playthings.
We leave Spider-Woman to go explore deeper into this circus of horrors. We walk past the pleasure slave and enter a new room where we're immediately attacked by werewolves, because there are werewolves here. We kill them all, and they disappear into little puffs of magic smoke because they were just illusions, after all. We head upstairs and are confronted by another damn genie who teleports us to wherever Kalah's hiding. Or maybe we just walked through a door before he finished casting his teleport spell to send us somewhere else, and I've just stumbled upon a happy shortcut away from more fake werewolf slaying. I honestly couldn't say, because I'm just clicking random shit at this point.

Anyway, we meet Kalah who congratulates us on a great job doing whatever it is we did, then he tells us that his hospitality will kill us and we're attacked by more werewolf illusions. We kill them, then go wail on Kalah for awhile until the world eventually goes dark and the evil mosque or wherever the hell we just were disappears to reveal the circus tent we were in all along.

Kalah lays dying at my feet, whining that this wasn't what was promised to him. I tell him life sucks and to get over it, then he gasps and coughs up some blood before closing his eyes forever. Aerie, the large bald man from earlier, has become a blonde she-elf now, and starts shouting something about Dan Quayle.



Come with me if you want to live.

Quayle, who is apparently her uncle, laughs at Kalah's demise. Aerie is overjoyed to see him in kind of a creepy, Arkansas sort of incest way, then asks him what she would ever do without him, to which he replies,

“I dunno, bitch. Let’s find out!” Then he kicks her out of the circus because damn, carney folk are cold.
He turns to me and says she’s my problem now, and I guess she’s joining my party because her portrait is already on the side of my screen, and I guess I don’t have any say in the matter.

I briefly consider choosing the dialog option that will tell Aerie that we’re on a quest to rescue a friend of mine named Imoen, but I don’t want to start lying to her so soon in our relationship, so I just tell her to pack her bags because we’re moving out.

But wait. IS that actually my quest in this game? To rescue the bane of my existence? Seriously?!

DAMMIT, IMOEN!

Part Three
COOOO! THUNDERDOME.

After saving whatever was left of the circus, I checked my journal to see if it had any clues about what I should do next. It told me I need to be looking for the Cowled Wizards, but didn’t tell me where because why should it finally start being helpful now, all of a sudden?

I talked things over with my useless twats, and we decided to head to the nearest inn to look for clues. According to my map, the closest one was the Mithrest Inn, so we strolled on over. Once inside, we struck up a conversation with Largo LeGrande, who had just recently come into a lot of money after shaking down someone named Guybrush Threepwood back on Scabb Island, I believe. After he was done bitching about the hardships that have befallen him as a member of the nouveau rich, I asked him if he knew anything about the Cowled Wizards. He didn’t, of course, but said that the Shadow Thieves might. So I asked him if he knew where I could find the Shadow Thieves. He didn’t, of course, but he did say I should talk to someone named Bloodscalp about them. So I asked him if he knew where I could find Bloodscalp, but he didn’t, of course. So I just gave up on the whole useless conversation and went and got drunk at the bar.



Wherever you go, on sea or on land, you can't ever hide from Largo LaGrande.

We stumbled out of the inn some time later, and I checked my map again. There were a couple of houses on it with people's names who I'd never met before, so I figured they were probably pretty important. We picked the closest one, and stumbled our way over to Cernd's Home.

Of course, had we been a little more sober, we might've noticed that the map said it was Cernd's FORMER Home, so whoever he is wasn't there when we showed up. We went inside anyway though, because I guess it was an open house or something, what with the Amnian real estate market being what it is.

We looted the place for a few gold coins and books I didn't want, then left and went to Fennecia's place, the other house on my map. Of course, she, he, or it wasn't home either, so we said screw it and just headed for the district exit.

Which turned out to be a mistake, because then an enormous world map opened up and I realized just how much more of this game there probably is, which made me die a little on the inside. Also, it turns out that my map which I thought had revealed a whole city, had only enough cartography budgeted for the one small section of a much larger whole.

Oh, well. There's no way through it but to press forward. We leave Waukeen's Landing and head into the Slums, where we are immediately greeted by Tingle. Or maybe Michael Jackson. Someone who starts conversations by making an *Ooooooooo* sound, at any rate. This one says his name is Gaelan Bayle.



We've taken our first small step into a larger world.

Sidenote: Why the hell do some people get last names in these games, while most NPCs are the Madonnas and Princes and Chers of the world? Is it a good thing to have a last name, I wonder? Maybe some kind of honorific sort of thing, bestowed up certain highly qualified people? Or are last names more like scarlet letters or something, and only the really obnoxious people get them? Further investigation is required.

Actually, I stand corrected. According to the text window, what I mistook for Gaelan's "Oooooo!" was actually Gaelan's "Coo!". Because that makes a huge difference. Anyway, he says I'm the one he's been looking for, so at first I think he's just hitting on me or something. I tell him he's mistaken because I like to let my fans down easy, but then he dangles the Cowled Wizards carrot in front of me. He knows things.

He also mentions something about us being in Athkatla, which just confuses me even more than I already was. I thought we were in Amn. Maybe Amn is the kingdom and Athkatla's whatever city this is? I dunno, I'm sure it's probably explained in THE MANUAL, but I don't feel up to consulting that arcane tome just now. Or even much care, really.

I tell him he's right, then he shouts another COOOO! at me and introduces himself. Yoshimo says he's heard of whoever the hell this is, and that he's connected to the underworld, although I really don't see how. Any self-respecting gangster would've murdered him after the nineteenth cooing episode.

I ask him to tell me what he knows, so he coos again and then tells me he doesn't actually know shit. But he does say he can hook me up with someone who does, which I'm guessing is just going to be those Shadow Thieves old Largo mentioned way back when we were getting drunk five

minutes ago.
Gaelan says it’s not safe to talk here, though, so I agree to go somewhere more private with him. He coos again.

The screen goes dark, and when it comes back up again, wherever we are looks a lot like one of those vacant houses we were stealing things from a little while ago. But then, there isn’t much in this wretched place that doesn’t looks a lot like something else in another wretched part of the world, so we’re probably fine.



It kind of looks like an old lady’s living room, actually.

Gaelan starts talking about this mysterious group again, but he still hasn’t told me who they are. He also says they can probably help me rescue Imoen, if I want them to. Then, I finally get an honest dialog option and respond with, “I have little fondness for her, but I probably should get Imoen back.”

He tells me that it’ll mean his “friends” will have to cross the Cowled Wizards though, which is mighty dangerous…

And here comes the squeeze.

The little bastard wants to extort 20,000 gold pieces from me to help rescue Imoen. I’m not even familiar with the economic situation in the Kingdom of Wherever The Hell I Am, and 20,000 gold pieces still seems like way too much money to give up for just about anyone, let alone someone as useless as Imoen.

I tell him I don’t have that much money on me, and he says it’s no problem and that he can wait for me to earn it. He then directs me to his nephew, Brus, who he says can take me to someplace called the Copper

Coronet, where I should be able to find work easily enough.
Yeah, this doesn't feel like a scam at all. I'll play along for now, but I'm out whenever the first Nigerian prince shows up.

We turn to leave, when suddenly Aerie, who I met like five seconds ago, nearly breaks down in tears to me about how her wings have been clipped and now she's a filthy groundwalker or something. I tell her if she's going to whine, she can do it somewhere else. She apologizes, then tells me she'll whine to somebody else, instead. (I hope it's Minsc, because he'll probably murder her with kindness. Literally, because he's just not a stable individual.)

Having derailed that particular whine train before it left the station, we turn to leave again. And then, a cutscene happens.



Cooooo! Progress!

We're in Chapter Two now, and my worst fears have been confirmed. It seems that saving Imoen has been hardcoded into the plot, and there's no escaping it. I'm just hoping the patented Bioware plot twist has her turn evil before she shows back up though, because I'd be ok with a heartfelt reunion as long as it involved murdering her right in the Heya.

Anyway, once the little chapter crawl has finished, we turn to leave again and GODS DAMMIT, ANOTHER CUTSCENE! Will we never be allowed to leave this accursed room of everlasting torment?

This one takes us to wherever the Cowled Wizards are holding Imoen and Irenicus, although it turns out that his full name is John Irenicus, so at least now I know that having a last name is a bad thing here, after all. So I've got that much figured out, at least. The scene ends with one of the dudes saying they'll rot in someplace called Spellhold, because I guess

these guys aren't exactly into subtle naming when it comes to labeling their magical prison complexes.
Once the however many cutscenes we're up to by now is over, we turn to leave, and…finally make it out the damn door. Brus runs up to us, who appears to be maybe eight years old because I guess there's no such thing as child labor laws in the criminal underworld, and tells me I need to meet a girl named Nalia, who needs my help. Then, he leads us to the Copper Coronet and scampers away, probably to go play marbles or make a stool pigeon squeal or something. Whatever mafia kids do in their free time.

We've literally just arrived at the next place we should be, when Jaheria pipes up, asking "Where to now, fearless leader?" like some kind of condescending jerk. I ask her how the hell should I know because fuck her, that's why.

I fear I might have a new Imoen on my hands. I make a note to ditch Jaheria as soon as possible, because you can never be too careful with things like these.

Having seen to it that Jaheria checked herself before she wrecked herself, we open the door and strut into the Copper Coronet like we own the place. Or at least like we're the protagonists of this little adventure story. Whichever.

Some fratboy townie named Amalas comes at us, all angry that we look like adventurers or something, and threatens to, I dunno, punch me, I think. I accept his challenge and then murder him in some kind of bar room Thunderdome.



Two men enter, one son of a murder god leaves. YOLO!

After the fight, the Nalia person Brus mentioned earlier starts shouting to

the whole tavern about how no one is willing to hear her plea, and wailey, wailey, woe is her, etc.. She then comes up to us and asks me if I'm for hire, like I'm some kind of sword-weilding prostitute. Which I guess I kind of am, so I don't get too upset about the implication. Instead, I tell her that I'll help her out, and we exchange pleasantries by way of me clicking through a wall of dialog options for what feels like an eternity until she joins my party and we're off to go do whatever it is I just promised her we'd go do.
I start looking for the exit from this place, when fucking Aerie stops everyone to start whining about her damned clipped wings again, like anyone cares. I guess when she said she was going to talk to someone else, she didn't realize that meant she needed to talk to someone else. Or maybe she's trying to talk to the new girl in our party by putting me in the middle. Either way, I tell her the same thing I told her last time, then she whines back the same whine she whined last time, and good lord, but I'm saving the world with some needy ass people.

After shutting her down a second time, we continue trying to find the exit to this impossibly large tavern. I finally spot a door, but before we can leave, another asshole pops up out of nowhere to stop us and start talking at me.

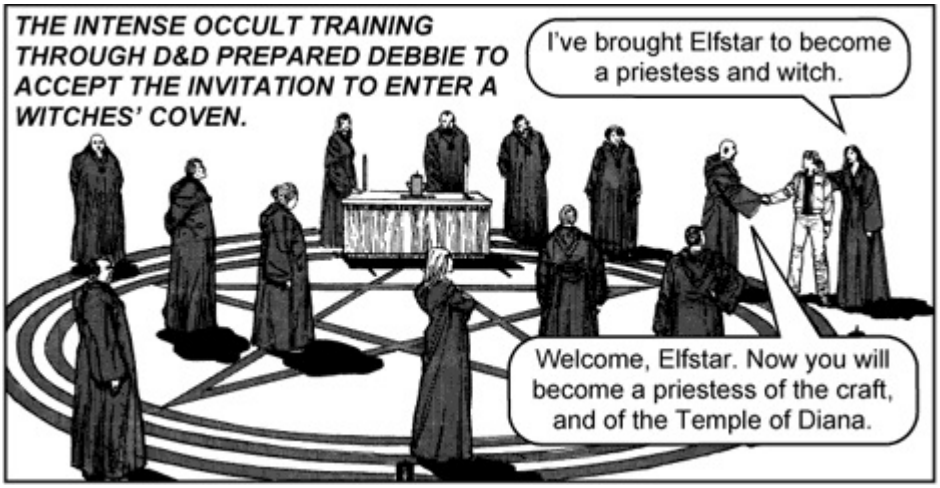
The guy's name is Anomen, and it looks like he's a potential party member. He starts chatting me up about things like courage and valor and such, then asks me if I intend to be a force for good in the world. I almost respond in the affirmative, but then I remember that I chose True Neutral for my alignment on the character creation screen because I was somehow paying attention at the time.

Instead, I tell him that there is no good or evil, only balance in the universe, or some other equally vague, pseudoscience philosophy bullshit, and it occurs to me that I probably should've named by character Deepak Yoda or something. Anyway, this response pisses him off, and he tells me to get bent and go away. At first, I'm kind of angry about his reaction, but I'm pretty sure this guy would just end up right up there with Aerie or Jaheria regarding their predilection toward stopping everything to say something annoying every five minutes. I consider his rejection a win and move on.

Which is exactly what I used to tell myself when I'd be in real bars in the real world, getting rejected by real women.

Woah. I think I just made a roleplaying connection between myself and my character in the game, which I'm pretty sure is exactly what Tom Hanks and Jack Chick tried to warn me about during the Satanic Panic of the '80s. If I'm not careful, I'm going to end up having a psychotic break and start sacrificing children to the Black Goat of the Wood with a Thousand Young or something.

I think I need to take a break.



HAW HAW HAW!

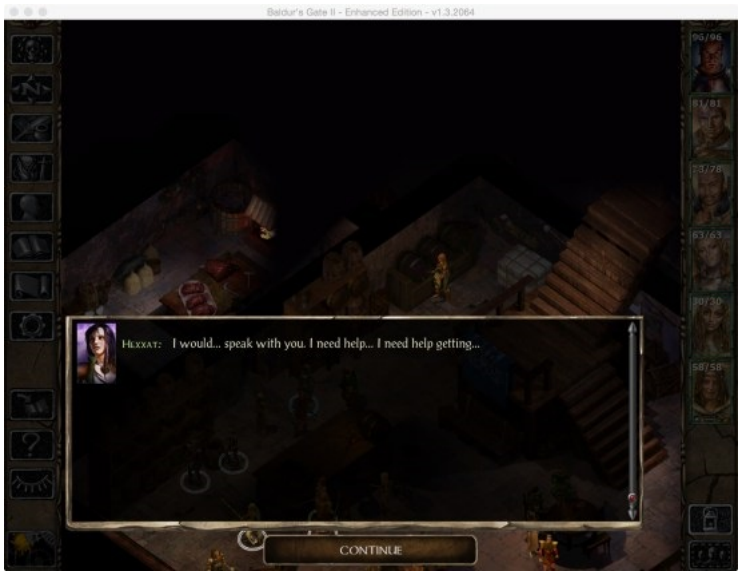
Part Four
THE D IS SILENT

I decided that we could all use a good night's sleep in a real bed for a change, so before we continue searching for a way out of this unholy tavern, I rent a room from the innkeeper and we get a little shuteye. A brief cinematic plays showing a rat scamper across the floor of our room – which is pretty true to life if you've ever stayed at a Best Western – and we wake up refreshed and ready to get back to doing whatever it was that I forgot we're supposed to be doing.

We resume our interminable search for any possible avenue of egress from this bar of endless torment, when we're stopped by yet another whining NPC. This one is named Hexxat because no one has a normal name in this foreign land, and she's speaking in ellipses. I suspect she's probably from Japan.

"…"

I hope someone out there got that joke, but if you didn't, you can go type "JRPG ellipsis" into Google while I talk to this woman about whatever her problem is. I'm pretty sure you won't miss much.



…

We're heading over toward the corner of the bar she's crying in, when we're stopped by some guy named Bernard, because of course I find an NPC with a normal name the second I say they don't exist, and he tells us that Hexxat is a weirdo. Like anyone isn't in this place.

She says she needs, "to get to… Dragomir's Tomb. In the… the district… with… the graves." I start to break the news to her about Sephiroth murdering Aerith, but then decide that now is probably not the best time to bring up tragedies from her homeland. Instead, I tell her that I can help her out, because I totally know exactly where this tomb of Dragomir isn't, but nobody else knows that, and I want to maintain my position of authority within the group.

I invite her to join the party so we can go visit this tomb of hers, to which she emphatically replies that's it's not HER tomb, but Dragomir's. Normally, I'd probably be annoyed by this aggressive use of semantics, but then she lets it slip that the tomb is in the Graveyard District, so I can pretend like I knew that all along. Because I probably would've never deduced that a tomb would be in a graveyard or anything.

I lie and tell her we'll go right now, if she wants, and she joins up immediately. But now I have to leave someone behind, because my party is full. I'm torn between Jaheria and Aerie, because I'm not sure which is worse, Passive Aggressive Annoying or Big Whiney Baby Annoying. I think about it for far too long, then go ahead and kick Jaheria out. She probably annoys me slightly less than Aerie at this point, but I can't have anyone challenging my authority in front of the other useless twats.



Cry some more.

Jaheira bitches at me after I kick her out, in her usual passive aggressive way. She's all like, "This is unexpected. I thought things would be the same between us, but I guess not…" Um, yeah sweetheart. I kicked you to the curb shortly after the start of the last game, and I'm kicking you out at the same time in this one. Life's full of little disappointments, innit?

She protests some more, but eventually relents and sulks off to wait in Athkatla, near wherever Harper Hold is. I jot it down on a bar napkin, just in case somebody in my party gets exploded and I need another meat shield somewhere down the line. Then I give her a pat on the back, tell her it's not her, it's me, and send her on her way.

But then I reload a savegame and strip Jaheria of all the cool loot and equipment she was holding so she'll be naked and penniless when I kick her out, for I can be a cruel taskmaster. But really, I have to outfit two new party members while trying to save up 20 grand here. Every little bit helps.

Once Jaheria is finally gone, I spend the next half hour fiddling with inventory and spell management, because that's apparently half the fun in this game since you spend half your time doing it. Then, we go back to the innkeeper and rent another room when maybe two or three minutes of in-game time have elapsed. I know he sees the new girl in my party and he raises an eyebrow at my sudden need to rent another room within the hour, but I don't have time for his petty judgments. I just need my mages to memorize all the new spells I just gave them. Shut up.

After we've rested again, we finally find the exit to this accursed place, and we head out to do either that one quest the new character we picked up wants done, or that other quest the other new character we picked up

wants done. I decide we'll settle this conflict with geography and just go to whichever one is closest.
We're heading toward the district exit when we get stopped by some asshat named Cohrvale, who demands we get out of his way when none of us are anywhere near him. I decide to murder him for the effrontery, if the opportunity comes up.

The opportunity comes up.



Open the sky, Bobbin. OPEN THE SKY!

Those of us with swords or other pointy things start wailing on the guy, while my mages start throwing lightning bolts at his friend because they just learned how to do that, and they're excited. However, the second they unleash the power of Zeus upon mine enemies, one of those Cowled Assclowns shows up and tells us we're not allowed to use magic in the city, or we'll get in trouble. What even are these jerks, the Hall Monitors of Amn?

I try to murder him, but the game won't let me. Which just doesn't seem fair.

Anyway, we finish killing the guys we were killing before Bobbin Threadbare popped up to write us a ticket and ask about his mother, and we do it the old fashioned way: by chopping them into tiny bits without the aid of magical lightning bolts.

We're halfway to the district exit when it dawns on me that we're hauling around a crap ton of loot we're never going to use, and we're just going to pick up more if we go do whatever quests these women want done, so we turn around and head to the nearest shop to sell some junk.

I check my map, and see something called the Silver Stockade, which sounds like a promising place to get rid of some of this loot, so we head that way. When we get there, the building is actually an old ship, which seems like sort of a whimsical thing to make a landlocked building out of, but whatever. Maybe we're in the theme park section of the city.

I try to go inside, but we're stopped by a guard. He asks me what my business is, and then I get a strange dialog option about having heard rumors I haven't heard concerning people being led into the shop by chains. I pick that one, then he tries to murder us.

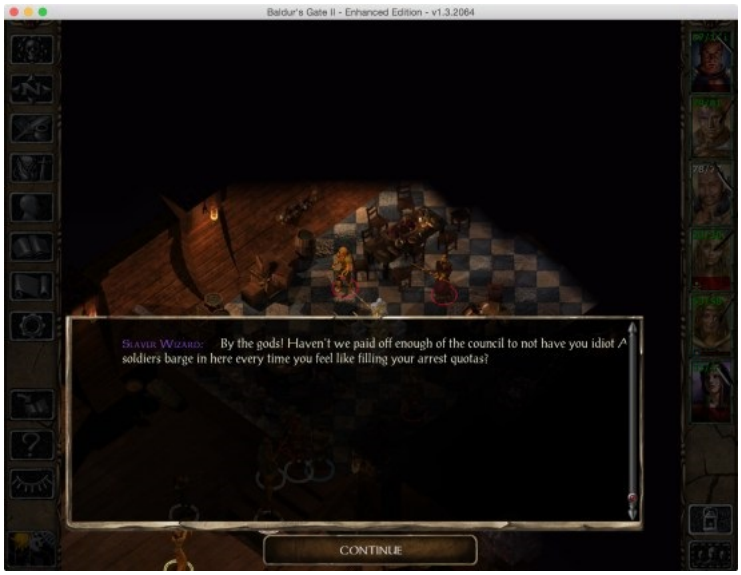
We murder him right back and go inside.

Or try to, at least, but the door is locked. I just shrug my shoulders and start to turn around because I'm so used to Imoen The Shitty Thief not being able to do anything, but then I remember that Yoshimo can pick locks. And I mean, he can *actually* pick them, which he successfully does to the lock on this door. We head inside and are immediately attacked by more guards. I just want to sell some shit, dudes. What is wrong with these people?

We kill them, then kill some more. I'm not sure what I've stumbled into, but I really wish I could use magic without those cowled bastards showing up. My melee fighters are getting a little beat up.

We loot the corpses of the fallen, and now we're even more loaded down with useless junk I need to sell. I spend a few minutes doing the inventory hip hop until I have everything in order, then we press on.

It is at this point that I realize I can't read good. We're attacked by more guards and then someone called Slaver Wizard starts shouting at us and throwing magic in our faces. I make a mental note that I'm apparently allowed to do magic indoors, but then I realize what I just read. This guy is a SLAVER wizard. And these guards we've been killing are SLAVER guards. And this place I thought was called the SILVER Stockade is actually the SLAVER Stockade, and now I am become Abraham Lincoln. I didn't realize what I was getting into when I walked in here, but now it's time do some emancipating on their asses.



Slaver, silver. What's the difference?

Me and the fellas start murdering everyone with a red circle around their feet, while the ladies start raining magical death upon the enemy spellcaster.

Or that was the plan, anyway. What actually happened was a lot of death and reloading. Nalia eventually pulls out a wand of monster summoning and conjures up a few beasties to help us out, who serve as great cannon fodder for the two (yes, there was another one hiding behind the first one) wizards to take their aggressions out upon.

It was a heated battle, but we persevered. We loot what we can without doing the inventory dance again, then move a bit further into the slaver's den of inequity. And then we find more guards and a snake man, and bravely run away.

We make our way back to the Copper Coronet so we can rest and heal up before going back to work on the underground railroad. I rented the Merchant room for us this time, which comes with approximately 15% less rat. Then, I tuck the useless twats into bed because everyone I'm traveling with is a big baby, then lay down to get some shut up myself.

Then Imoen happened.

I was having a perfectly good dream about anyone other than Imoen, when she suddenly popped into my head for a cinematic dream sequence. Except I guess I was doing that lucid dreaming thing Queensrÿche was singing about in the '90s, because instead of just watching this one, I got to control it.

Of course, all I could do was click Continue between Imoen's droning

monologue and select the one dialog option available to me when Irenicus showed up, but I'm still getting a handle on this. I'm not quite a Dream Warrior yet, but I'll watch Nightmare On Elm Street 3 again this weekend, just to brush up.



SHUT UP, IMOEN!

We awake the next morning, and head to a shop in Waukegan's Promenade to sell some crap before heading back to deliver a little Django-inspired justice to those slavers at the stockade boat thing.

We rush back inside and kill the snake men, then we come across some holding cells. Yoshimo picks the locks and we free some kids, because it's not bad enough that these bastards are slave traders, but they're trading kids. I decide to murder them extra hard, right in their Harriet Tubmans.

We storm the next room, where there's another mage and some douchebag named Haegan calling himself Captain of a landlocked boat with kiddie slaves on it. We murder everyone else in the room first, then beat him up for a little while before I have Nalia polymorph his kiddie-peddling ass into a squirrel. Then, Minsc steps on him until all that's left is a mushy red stain and some rodent fur on the floor.

We use his key to unlock another door, when we're attacked by a couple of trolls that refuse to die, for some reason. Beat on them long enough, and they'll eventually make a *swooshy* sound and go down, but I guess they have Wolverine's mutant healing factor or something, because they just get back up again a minute later.



Who needs Child Protective Services when you've got a heavily armed party of righteous madmen at your disposal?

We knock the trolls down for the time being, then I run to the back of the room to talk to another child slave. She thanks me for freeing everyone, then I give her 100 gold pieces to split with the other kids so they don't starve on the streets, because just because I'm an asshole in these games doesn't mean I'll tolerate anyone being shitty to kids.

I mean, the line has to be drawn somewhere. Right?

Anyway, after we're done eradicating the Amnian slave trade in this part of town, we head back to the Copper Coronet to rest and heal up to get ready to finally go do whatever it was I'd planned to do when we woke up this morning. Oh, yeah. We were heading to the Graveyard District to take care of whatever Hexxat's problem is.

I rent another room and crawl into bed. As I begin drifting off sleep, it dawns on me, and I break out in a cold sweat:

I've just done…a sidequest. ON PURPOSE.



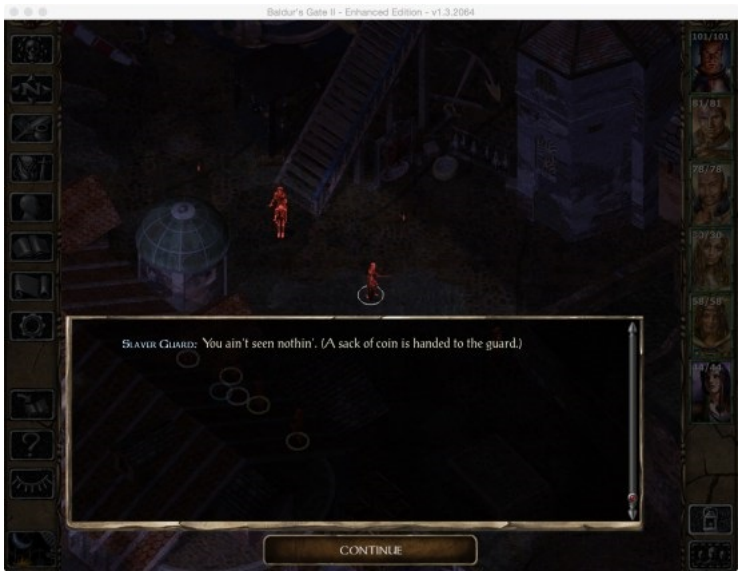
I think I’m starting to enjoy this game.

Part Five
TROLLING NALIA

We wake up the next morning to Hexxet’s bitching that we haven’t done her quest yet, so I reluctantly agree to do it first thing. Then, on the way out the door, some pretentious nob named Lord Jeridan offers me 10,000 gold pieces to go kill some trolls in wherever the Windspear Hills are, and I forget all about Dracogen’s tomb or whatever. Dengler will just have to wait.

We start to head out to go take care of this Lord Wossname’s problem, but we end up walking past a slave who keeps chanting “I’m so tired” like some kind of damn mantra, so I guess word’s got out that I’m the Great Emancipator or something, so I’ll have to deal with this first.

The slave cries out to a city guard for help, but the slaver just pays him to look the other way, because I guess things are just the same all over, aren’t they? Minsc sees what’s going down and loses his shit, since it’s been five minutes since the last time he had a violent mood swing, so we rush in to free the slave by way of exploding the slavers.



Are there no honest cops in this city?

They go down pretty easily, and the slave thanks us for our time. We loot the gold off the slaver corpses but leave the rest of their junk and head on toward the district exit, because I'm about to bank 10 grand here and don't have time for this penny-ante shit.

We've almost made it out of the Slums when we're stopped yet again by another person needing our help, and I can't help but wonder what's next in the parade of constant interruption.

This guy's name is Habib Khalid Achmed Allafif, so I'm already suspicious. In a world where anyone with just one last name is a jerk, then someone with as many as this guy has is bound to be an asshole.

He screams something about how he'd sooner throw a scimitar at someone's head than suffer the indignity of prison, and I start to realize that D&D is kinda racist. I walk up to Habib to ask him what's going on and to see if he needs any help, and he responds by throwing a rock at Aerie's head and running away. Which, I'm not gonna lie, was pretty funny, so I'm not even mad.

There's some other shit going down here, though. Somebody named Hareishan is murdering Shadow Thieves like they were going out of style, which seems odd. After she's done killing them, she tells me that I wasn't supposed to see any of this yet because I haven't chosen a side. Then, it's something about obey the will of the mistress and when I'm ready they'll find me and, honestly, I'm not even paying attention anymore.

I click the dialog option that I hope will let me kill her, but she teleports away. Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, I loot the bodies of all

the thieves she killed and we finally make it to the district exit.



Yoshimo has a katana. Habib gets a scimitar. If there were any actual black people in this game, I wonder what sort of weapon they'd get?

We're halfway to the rich guy's house when we get waylaid by enemies, so I guess that's still a thing in this game because random encounters are SO MUCH FUN. Fortunately, it was nothing we couldn't handle, so we have them murdered and looted and we're back on the road faster than Chitika Fastpaws, whatever the hell that means. But it's something Aerie says every 5 damn seconds, so it's stuck in my head and you will share my pain.

We finally make it to Windspear Wherever, and we're not even five damn steps into the place when Nalia isn't suddenly chiming in again about how I promised to go save her farm or some crap. I pacify her for the time being by lying and telling her we'll go there right now, but unless she can come up with 10,001 gold pieces to top Lord Fancypants' offer, she's just going to have shut up, take a damn ticket and wait her turn like everybody else.

I notice a group of people gathered around a shimmery blue thingamabob, so I figure they're the ones to talk to about whatever it was I told Little Lord Fauntleroy we'd do here. I go up to one of them to get the 411 or whatever it is the kids say these days, and she tells me I need to speak to the most holy Reverend Brother Odren, hallelujah and praise his name. I go up to another person who looks a little most holy-like, but he tells me I need to speak to their wizened leader, Brother Odren, so I go up to another person who tells me the same fucking thing because every little pixel bastard in this game looks like every other little pixel bastard in this game, and can I please just get some floating nametags or something over here to help a player out, gods dammit anyway.

I just keep clicking on all the little dudes until one of them is finally Brother O-Ren Ishii or whatever the hell his name was because I can't remember any of this bullshit anymore.

Anyway, he's very happy to see me, and then he praises Helm's name and then the whole damn group goes into a religious circlejerk with the praising and the glory be's and hallelujahs, and I feel like I just walked into a Southern Baptist church, amen.

Finally, this Odren character gets to the point and tells me that he's glad I've come because Watcher's Keep is a long journey from – hey, wait just a damn minute. We've traveled to somewhere called Watcher's Keep? I thought we were going to Windspear Creek or wherever it was Lord Sassafras told us about. How did we get here?



"God, guns, and Jesus. AMEN!" -Baldur's Gate, Texas Edition

I curse the ineptitude of my own navigational acumen, then decide to just click through whatever this Odren guy is about to tell me, because I might as well just go do Nalia's stupid quest now so she'll shut up about it since ain't nobody paying me to deal with any holy hellfire bullshit at no Watcher's Keep, I can tell you that right the Helm's Damn now.

He tells me he's the leader of something called the Knights of the Vigil, who were given a solemn charge by whoever the fuck this Helm god is, like that's supposed to impress me or something. He says that Watcher's Keep was once a great prison for terrible foes of the gods, so I'm guessing word of all the emancipating I've been doing lately has gotten around, and they want me to bust the old prison up and let loose the enemies of the gods. Which is fine by me, because most gods are assholes anyway.

Except that's not what Odren wants, because that might actually be interesting. No, instead he says that The Great Evil stuggles within and is trying to escape, so he wants me to go murder it or something righteous like that. In Helm's name and such.

Screw that noise.

I tell him I don't have time for his bullshit right now, then he gets all middle management passive aggressive on me and is like, "Well, that's good because you don't have enough experience to do this yet, anyway. So there!"

Yeah, whatever dude. If I come back, it'll be because somebody's paying me, preferably to murder you and all your little cultist concubines and then free Lord Voldemort or whoever the hell it is you've got locked up in there. But for now, piss off and see ya.

I check my journal to find out where it is that I told Nalia we'd go, then we head to the area exit and I click de'Arnise Hold on my map, even though my stupid journal said it was de'Arnise Keep, because this is only the Enhanced Edition of a game that came out in the year 2000 and was just re-released a couple of years ago, so naturally nobody could be bothered to do any proofreading over the last 15 damn years.

Anyway, we get to where we're going and Nalia immediately starts whining that the keep has fallen and will be hard to save now. I tell her to fess up and come clean about what, exactly, it is that she expects me to do here, and she tells me it's all about the trolls. And, according to the crap Lord Dribblepants was telling me earlier, trolls can only be killed with fire. Which might've been useful to know sooner, since I have a couple of mages who could've spent last night memorizing a gods damn fire spell or two.

I put a checkmark next to Nalia's name on The Next To Be Kicked Out list I've started keeping.



SHUT UP, IMO– I mean, HEXXAT!

She says some moron named Daleson might know how many trolls and snakemen – yeah, she left that part out, too – there are, and how strong the opposition is, so we should go talk to him so we can plan a complex tactical assault and minimize our risk, which sounds like it'd be a terrific plan if I gave a shit.

I tell her we're just going to rush in and start smashing things, because that's what I do. She insists that her way is the better idea, but I stopped listening about ten minutes ago. We're going in, and she can just cry about it.

Except that before we even take one damn step, here comes Hexxat again, bitching that we still haven't done whatever HER bullshit quest is yet, and I swear to Helm that I can't take much more of this.

I ask her if she's sure she wants to leave, and being that she's kind of a simple person, she just responds by telling me she needs an item from the Tomb Of Bavmorda or whatever, so I just recycle the dialog options until I get a chance to lie to her again and say we're headed there right now. She buys it, because simple person.

With that obnoxious bit of recurrent drama dealt with, I gather my party and we get ready to venture forth to murder us some trolls.

Only we don't get very far, on account of how every useless twat in my party – which is everyone – starts bitching about how tired they are, so fuck it. We'll just sleep on the damn ground and you mages can spend the night memorizing some fire spells, then I swear by all that is unholy, we're waking up in the morning and killing all these mother fucking trolls in this mother fucking Keep, so help me Helm.

But of course, that doesn’t happen because as soon as I close my eyes, I get another freaking dream sequence. WHY WON’T YOU JUST LET ME PLAY THE GAME, GAME?!



Every night is like an infomercial in my brain.

This one has me sitting in some kind of church pew while Irenicus is preaching nonsense about the futility of life and power or something, but the only thing I care about is how I’m getting better at this lucid dreaming business, because now I have TWO dialog options to choose from. Geoff Tate can suck my silent lucidity.

I tell him to get bent, but then he tries to convince me that I will eventually bow to his will and accept the “gifts” offered to me, or others will suffer. He then teleports Imoen into the scene and starts torturing her with magic waterboarding and fire spells, and I don’t think it’s having the effect he thinks it’s having.

After dreaming of Imoen’s misfortune and suffering, I awake the next morning relaxed and refreshed from the first good night’s sleep I’ve had since I woke up in that cage 214 days and 19 hours ago, according to my latest savegame. Killing these trolls should be a cakewalk now. You know, endorphins and all.

We try to storm the castle with a frontal assault, but the game designers have put the drawbridge up so that I’ll be forced to follow Nalia’s annoying plan of subterfuge and interminable talking, because they paid somebody to write that shit and they’re not just going to let me skip it. So, fine then. I guess we’ll go find this stupid Daleson person.

We wander all around the area, and I can’t find wherever Daleson is hiding. I do find a little fort, though, with somebody named Captain Arat

standing inside. I go up to ask him if we can please go kill things now, then he calls me and my friends vagabonds and I want to murder him. But I can't because that would be Wrong or whatever, so instead I ask him how to get into the castle.
He tells me that the secret entrance Nalia mentioned but didn't bother telling me where it was because she's a manipulative, withholding snob, is hidden in some bushes north of the fort. He also says that he and his guards will help us out, if we lower the drawbridge as quickly as we can once we're inside. Nalia then helpfully suggests that we should lower the drawbridge as quickly as we can once we're inside because she's determined to show me how useless she is.



Thanks for the tip, Useless Twat #7.

We find the secret entrance without any trouble, because it apparently makes a *dingly ding* sound and glows pink when you get near it, which is pretty damn ostentatious for a secret door, but the whole thing just reeks of Nalia's absurdity anyway, so I'm not really surprised.

We go inside, and Nalia immediately starts in with the bullshit about finding Daelson again, then reminds me that opening the drawbridge as quickly as we can would really probably be just a swell idea.

I put another checkmark next to her name, then move out.

We open a door to find a servant begging a troll to not punish her anymore, just before it punishes her again with an exploding fist punch. She explodes. We rush in and wail on the troll until he goes down, then Nalia finishes it off with a flame arrow, because despite EVERYTHING ELSE about her, she's actually a pretty good mage.

After defeating the troll, we notice another secret door that starts glowing

pink and aggressively chiming at us, so we check it out and find Daleson. And then The Great Talking Times happen, so I just start clicking my mouse on the Continue button until carpal tunnel sets in and he eventually shuts up.
After he's gone, yet another secret door lights up and we go though it, only for several more to light up along the way like this whole damn castle is made of those glowy tiles Vanna White spins around whenever someone guesses the right letter on Wheel of Fortune.



R, S, T, L, N and an E.

We go through all the secret doors and fight a bunch of snakemen and trolls, but I won't bore you with the details. We manage to get outside and lower the drawbride, so Captain Whoever was able to come in and not really do anything. After a while, we needed to rest so Nalia could memorize all her fire spells again, and I had another damn dream sequence, but Imoen barely got tortured in it at all, so it's hardly worth mentioning.

Oh, and Hexxat has chimed in twice more about how she's leaving because of that thing I haven't done, but I just keep telling her the same shit lie and she keeps buying it, because I'm surprised she can even remember her own name, never mind something I've only told her 500 times now.

We slowly work our way through the castle, cleaning out the trolls and snakemen where we find them. Nalia says we should go to her aunt's bedroom because there's a secret passage in there, which surprises no one in the group. She says it leads to the cellars, which are really just a polite way for rich entitled people to say dungeons without sounding cruel. I suspect the leader of the bad guys is down there, because Nalia suspects the leader of the bad guys is down there. And we both know she's not

bright enough to have come up with that on her own unless a game designer wrote it into her head, so she's probably right.
Of course, she doesn't bother to tell me where the hell her aunt's bedroom is, because she's only lived in this stupid castle her entire miserable life and hasn't told me one gods damn useful piece of information yet, so why start now and break her perfect record of not being the least bit helpful?

Well, I guess she's pretty good at throwing fire magic at the trolls, which is kind of helpful. But still.

I pick a random direction and decide that the bedroom might be that way because how the fuck should I know, so I point and everyone follows me. And then Hexxat chimes in for THE THIRD TIME IN FIVE MINUTES about her stupid quest. And I lie to her about it AGAIN.

I add a new name to The List and put a checkmark next to it.

We've been searching this castle for an hour now, and I can find neither this mythical bedroom nor any other entrance to these so-called cellars. Oh, and Hexxat bitches half a dozen more times throughout our search, and I lie a half a dozen more times. I'm stating to think I should just let her go and be done with it, but I'm kind of hoping whatever her quest is will unlock her feeble mind once it's done, and she'll become a powerful character. But right now, she's basically worthless in a fight, and the disinterested moan she makes every single time she gets hit – which is all the time – makes me think this is how MTV's Daria would sound if she ever played D&D.



THAC0? Whatever.

I'm about to give up and call it a night when I do the unthinkable and consult the Oracle At Googlephi, because sometimes you just want to finish a damn quest and go to sleep. It tells me that some bad guys I've

already killed but didn’t loot have the key I need that unlocks all the damn un-pickable doors in this accursed place, so now I get to go play Where’s Waldo with a bunch of corpses. Yay.
I spend the next ten minutes picking through the remains of the few things I’ve killed that actually left remains, and another fifteen minutes looking for the ones I haven’t found because they aren’t there. I go back to the Oracle, and she tells me that the guys I’m looking for were in the southernmost room on the second floor of the Keep, so I head there and loot all of the nothing on the floor. Thanks, Google!

Resorting to desperation, I just start feverishly clicking anything I can, until I finally find a tiny bookshelf above a desk that I can open. And there’s the key. On a bookshelf, not a body. It turns out that the bad guys I fought in this room were only guarding the key, not holding it, which is fine. I mean, everyone loves pixel hunting, right?



Found it!

We grab the key, then head to the first unlockable door that looks like it might lead to an rich noblewoman’s bedroom, find the secret door inside, go through it, then listen to Nalia *crywhine* about how this is all wrong for a minute before we walk down a passageway and through yet another secret door until we finally make it into a room where some dude named Glaicus starts waving a sword at us.

He says something about serving his new master, then Nalia tries to tell me he’s been charmed and we shouldn’t kill him because he’s probably a really nice guy when you get to know him or something, but I’m on the clock here, so we just murder him and keep going.

But of course, what I thought was the aunt’s bedroom with the secret door was a different bedroom with a secret door because this place is just lousy

with secret doors. However, while I was searching for the cellar entrance in the wrong room, I noticed another secret door go pink and *dingly dingy* in another room, so we head over there.
We open the door and find Nalia's aunt and a guard in the room, which is apparently her bedroom after all, which is a little surprising because it's kind of a dump.

The Lady Delcia Caan comes out from her hidey hole to insult us for a little bit, then she wanders off.

We're on our way down to the cellar dungeons, when I spy a room to our left. It's filled with golems, and a row of lootable statues or sarcophaguses or something, and all three of them have a magical item inside, so I loot them all.

And then the golems wake up and murder me.

I reload and grab the one non-magical item from the room, since that doesn't provoke the golems. Also, I'll need it to forge what sounds like a really good weapon later, so that works, too. After I have the item in hand, we take the express staircase to the cellar.

We walk through a few doors, then get bum rushed by some kid of engorged beetles with a severe case of gigantism. We die a few times, but I eventually manage to save and reload our way to victory, because I'm a Time Lord.

We start working our way through the largest cellar ever built by human hand, and come across the place where the Umber Hulks – which is what the stupid beetles are actually called – tunneled into the place. A little section of the floor glows blue when I hover over it, indicating that there's a container there I can loot. So I loot it.

I pick up a couple of odd looking items that I don't know what they are because the game doesn't let you right-click things to look at them before you pick them up, so I end up stuffing the decaying carcasses of a couple of dogs into my pockets without even realizing it. I bet they're probably useful for some weird reason known only to our game designer overlords, but I don't feel like having dog bones rattling around in my pants for the next ever, so I drop them and we get back to exploring.



Mmmmm, dog bones!

We search every room of this supposed “cellar” and find lots of prison cells with iron bars on them, further indicating that this is, in fact, a dungeon and Nalia is either lying or is a delusional little shit, or both. Probably both. I start to confront her on it, but then decide that would probably seem too much like giving a shit, so we just get back down to business.

We open up another door to an impossibly huge room for any cellar or dungeon, and come across the troll leader, TorGal. I get several dialog options, which probably means I can talk my way out of this fight if I want to, so I ignore all that and just start beating on the guy. He’s a lot stronger than he looks though, and he has two friends with him, so he murders me and everyone I’ve ever not loved.

I do the save and reload dance a few times, then get the bright idea to open the door, piss him off, then run away so he’ll follow us into the next room. And, since trolls are apparently too stupid to use doors (which begs the question of how they even got inside The Castle of 10,000 Secret Doors in the first place), I close the door behind him and then me and the useless twats take turns murdering him in the kidneys.

Once he finally goes down, Nalia goes all ragecrazy or something and vows revenge on the dude we just got revenge on, but whatever. She never makes much sense anyway, so I don’t see why I should expect anything different to happen.

We can probably leave this place now and complete the quest, but there are still two more trolls in that room we ran away from, so we rush inside and kill them now that we don’t have to contend with TorGal at the same time. They go down pretty easily, then I notice a body lying on the floor

in front of a statue that turns out to be Nalia's dead father, who she apparently doesn't give a shit about because she doesn't say a single damn word when we find him, even though at any other point in the game she'll stop everything to talk about the needy every five minutes. I just keep clicking the corpse for a while, trying to goad her into at least saying, "Bye, daddy" or something, but I'm pretty sure she's a heartless sociopath.



She is dead inside.

We're about to leave, when I notice I can loot the statue Nalia's dad kicked the bucket next to, so I check it out and find over 2 grand in gold, plus more in jewels crammed inside the thing, which I stuff into my pockets because somebody's paying me for this damn quest, and it sure as hell isn't going to be Nalia.

We leave the statue room and make our way out of the castle. Once outside, Nalia finally shows some sign of emotion and pretends to be upset that her daddy just died. I tell her I want to be paid for this nonsense, and she says she'll see what she can do, but isn't making any promises. Then, she reveals what's probably the real reason we've been dragged along on this stupid vengeance quest of hers, and it has nothing to do with killing trolls and everything to do with poor little Nalia not wanting to get married. Apparently, she's been betrothed to a jerk or something.

She has an idea how to get out of it, which isn't something I'd normally care about, but then she offers to give me her castle and I start paying attention. She says I don't even have to marry her or anything; she just doesn't want to give the Keep up to the Toenails or whatever family she said she's marrying into. I accept because free castle, then I get a brief scene where I'm introduced to my majordomo and other servants, which is pretty swet. I've always wanted my very own majordomo.

Also, I get to collect taxes. My dreams of becoming an oppressive tyrant and squeezing the lifeblood from my pathetic vassals are finally coming true. I can feel it. It's all happening!

Majordomo dude says the taxes should generate about 500 gold pieces a week for me to come stuff into my pockets, so I'm starting to think about just hanging around the Copper Coronet for the next several months, getting drunk and hitting on wenches until I've saved up 20,000 gold by not doing anything. But that probably wouldn't end up being as much fun as hitting things with sticks, so I dismiss the idea.

Before we leave, I head back through the endless series of secret doors like some kind of medieval Maxwell Smart, and reconstruct something called the Flail of Ages at a hidden forge. It's a pretty badass little weapon that deals acid, cold, fire and crushing damage all at the same time. Unfortunately, I don't think any of my useless twats know how to use a flail, so I'll just keep it in my pocket for now, until I can kick one of them out for someone better.

With the Keep secure and its ownership transferred to Yours Truly, I feel that our work here is finally finished. We should probably get around to taking care of Hexxat's drama now that we have a minute, because I'm probably going to cut out her tongue if she pipes up about it one more time, which she's likely to do at any moment since it's been approximately 30 seconds since her last outburst, so we leave the area and head to the Graveyard District back in Athkatla.



My first castle, by Fischer Price.

Part Six
THE MONSTER MASH

Early the next morning, we set out for the Graveyard District, which we're able to make it to without being waylaid by a single enemy, which was nice. However, as soon as we get here, a messenger pops up out of nowhere, whistling a jaunty tune and asking Aerie if she was Dan Quayle's apprentice in the circus. She says yes, and then in a shocking turn of events that shocks no one, it seems old Uncle Quayle is in a bit of a pickle and would like us to return to the circus and help him out as fast as we can, because heaven forbid I go one single day without some new asshat demanding I do something immediately and without delay.



When will it all be over?

Honestly, even though I'm actually kind of enjoying Baldur's Gate 2 (or at least not hating it as much as Baldur's Gate 1), all of these incessant demands are starting to make playing the game feel a lot like work. And I don't even mean that figuratively. I mean in the quite literal sense of how every little problem anyone has is always of the utmost urgency, and all your immediate supervisors can tell you is to give this project 100% priority while also giving these other 18 projects 100% priority because they don't teach middle managers how math works in whatever correspondence course it is that generates these useless drains on society. But yeah, everyone in the game constantly harping on me to do this one thing right now while nine other people are also harping on me to do these other things right now feels a lot like work, and it needs to stop.

But I digress. I click through the messenger's dialog and Aerie's subsequent crywhining at me to drop everything we're doing to go help Uncle Quail's Egg right this instant, and then just try to pretend it never happened. We've finally made it to this stinking graveyard so we can find this Tomb of the Gravitron thing Hexxat's been bitching about the entire game, and we're damn well going to do it. Everybody clear on that? Good. Now shut up, and let's go.

The useless twats seem to have gotten the message, because they all pipe down and allow me to finally click somewhere on the screen to get us moving again. And gods dammit, but here's goes Hexxat with her bitching again. EVEN THOUGH WE ARE EXACTLY WHERE SHE WANTS TO GO, TO DO WHAT SHE WANTS DONE.



“We need to go to where we are right now, or I’ll leave you and go to where we are right now!”

But I don’t really think I can get too upset with her. The poor lunatic clearly jumped off the Sane Train about a dozen stops back, so she’s not exactly all here. She probably doesn’t even realize we’re in the graveyard, so I just click through the same dialog options again, and reassure her that’ll we’ll head to where we already are as soon as she stops talking. She just nods and stares off into the distance like normal, so I guess everything’s fine.

AND OH MY GOD, ANOTHER INTERRUPTION. We’ve taken literally NO STEPS into this graveyard, and I’ve already had a messenger interrupt me, then had to stop and listen to Aerie’s whining, which was followed up by Hexxat’s crazy ass being crazy again, and now I’ve got some kid named Delon – who apparently spends his nights hanging out in cemeteries, which can’t be at all healthy – running up to me, begging for help that he needs, of course, RIGHT THIS VERY INSTANT.

Saints preserve us.

The kid says he comes from someplace called Imnesvale in somewhere called the Umar Hills, where people have been disappearing and coming back crazy. Hmmm. Sounds a lot like Hexxat’s people, if you ask me. I go ahead and tell the kid we’ll help him (if I feel like getting around to it, at some point), mainly so that Minsc won’t lose his damn mind about it and try to kill me again like he did in the last game.

Delon wanders off back amongst the gravestones, and we FINALLY get to start looking for this stupid tomb. However, this being a graveyard, there are a lot of tombs, so I decide to walk around the whole place first, to see if any important ones highlight on my map before I just start

busting down doors and defiling the sacred resting places of the dead.



Look at the past three screenshots and notice how much we haven't moved.

So I'm doing that, and – now get ready for this one, because it's going to be a HUGE surprise – I get another random asshat named Nevin running up to me needing my help with a problem that requires IMMEDIATE ATTENTION.

Helm, give me strength.

I ask him what his problem is when when all I really want to do is punch him in the throat, and he says that his Uncle Lester has risen from his grave, which I guess is as uncommon an occurrence in this mad world as it is in the real one, so I can sort of see his cause for alarm. I decide to hear him out, and maybe pencil his quest in, if I can find the time.

Not that the game gives me any choice in the matter, of course. Because as soon as we stop talking, here comes old Uncle Lester rising up out of the damn ground in front of us, like some sort of pixelated Lazarus come from Hell. He starts yelling at Nevin about what a cheap bastard he is, which I've really no reason to doubt, and then starts trying to murder him. I briefly consider just watching how all this plays out, but I haven't killed anything since I got here and I'm feeling a little antsy.

My first impulse is just to have Aerie cast her Turn Undead spell on him, in the hope that he'll slink away back into his grave, but of course everyone is still loaded down with fire and acid spells from all the troll fighting we've been doing, so there's nothing for it but to beat the grumpy old bastard into submission.

Unfortunately, we're not able to bring the old guy down before he's

managed to kill poor Nevin, not that any of us are likely to lose any sleep over that great loss or anything. Still, I feel like his life shouldn't have been lost in vain, so I loot his corpse to preserve his memory or whatever. It turns out Uncle Lester was totally right about the guy, though. All he had on him was one lousy gold piece. Meanwhile, sketchy Uncle Zomboid has shambled off to try and find his favorite prostitute again, which is bound to come as a bit of a shock to the poor girl, but that's not my problem.



I think this was supposed to be funny.

We get back to the business at hand, and resume our exploration of the cemetery. We don't manage to find anything called the Tomb of Whoever or anything, but we do come across a couple of entrances to the Lower Tombs, so it's probably down there. We hop in one of them and descend.

Instead of tombs, we find ourselves in some sort of enormous spiderweb, because I guess groundskeeping at this cemetery just doesn't give a damn. We run around and map the place out while killing a few spiders here and there, but then we find what seems to be the heart of the problem: a giant spiderweb cave thing. I really don't think this is where we need to be for Hexxat's quest, but it's a giant spiderweb cave thing. We have to take a peek inside, right? We just gotta!

As soon as we walk in, some clown named Pai'Na shouts something about death to the interlopers, then sicks a bunch of spiders on us, like no one saw that coming. Fortunately, the spiders are of the tiny variety, so we squish them pretty easily. Whoever this Pai'Na character was goes down without much of a fight, too. Once all that's done, we loot the room and find some kind of magical rock Yoshimo puts on his head to make himself strong. Yeah, I know. It's D&D logic. Just roll with it.

After we're done playing exterminators for whatever criminally negligent

company manages this cemetery, we take the nearest exit from the spiderweb cave thing into the southern dungeons, where we're immediately transported to ancient freaking Egypt. I shit you not.



Anck-Su-Namun! Imhotep!

Of course, as soon as one of us steps on Cleopatra's face, a bunch of skeletons and wraiths pop out of the walls and try to kill us in the name of their people or whatever. We're in the middle of fighting for our lives, when I realize that Turn Undead isn't a spell Aerie hasn't memorized, but a skill I forgot all about the button for. I switch over to her and press it, and she starts turning these undead as hard as she can.

Which doesn't do a damn thing and we all die.

I reload the savegame from just before we entered the Temple of Ra or wherever we are, and this time I remember to tell all my thieves (of which there are no less than three in my party now, which just seems kind of ridiculous) to start Detecting Traps, which I should've done in the first place. Once we're back inside and everyone is doing what they're supposed to, someone notices that both of Cleopatra's eyes are trapped, so I have Yoshimo run over and disable them.

Which doesn't do a damn thing and we're all attacked anyway, because the crypts are apparently triggered to open regardless of the traps we can see. It's the traps we can't see that are the real danger, like invisible trigger zones added in by game designers to activate scripted events. THE HORROR!

We manage to kill all the baddies, but not without taking a beating. I'm pretty sure this isn't the place I need to be for Hexxat's quest either, and as much as I'm digging this Egyptian motif and pretending to be Indiana Jones, I decide we should pull out for now and come back later. I'm tired

of her droning.
We leave the southern dungeons and lower tombs, because I'm starting to think this is just getting way too complicated for what should've been a starter quest, had I gotten around to bothering with it sooner. I decide to check my map of the graveyard to make sure I didn't miss the area I missed because I should never be trusted with a map. I find a tiny bit of fog of war that we didn't dispel earlier, so we take a stroll down that way and, wouldn't you know it, there's the damn tomb right there. Because of course it is.



Great! Now maybe she'll shut up.

I ask Hexxat if she knows how to open the tomb, and she babbles something about having done it before. Then, the door flies open and something inside lets out some sort of devil yell and a couple of undead ghost thieves come flying out. We kill them, then Hexxat just stands there like nothing weird just happened, so I just shrug my shoulders and we go inside.

Hexxat mumbles something about having to go inside the tomb we're already inside of, but then she runs over and just starts staring at a wall really hard until it goes pink and I see it's a secret door. We open it up and go inside, then get a fancy pre-rendered cutscene so you just know shit's about to get real.

We run into a bunch more undead ghost thieves who all chant, "YOU MUST ENTER THE TOMB" while we're killing them to death, which is kind of weird because I thought we were already inside a tomb. But I guess that's the whole joke, since my journal suddenly updates itself, telling me that there's a tomb within a tomb and that whoever designs these things must mad, drunk, or possibly both – but also urbane, witty, handsome and charming because gods dammit, who let the game

designers break the fourth wall?
Sigh.

Hexxat says I must enter the tomb alone, which isn't at all ominous, but whatever. She then shouts something about how the Sleeper must awaken, and I guess this is Dune now and maybe my name is a killing word, but I just don't care anymore, so I hop into Dragomir's smelly sarcophagus and damn the torpedoes.

On the other side, I run into a ghosty ghost named Burich who wants very much to kill me, but I somehow manage to talk my way out of a fight and he gives me his special rod that I need to use to penetrate an innocent wall hole elsewhere in the dungeon. I take it, but he still wants to murder me for some reason, so I hop back in the sarcophagus and come out the other side clean as a whistle.

I dust myself off and head back near the entrance to the tomb, where I whip out my rod and jam it deep inside the wall vagina to open up another pathway further into the tomb. Of course, this also seals us in because I wasn't feeling trapped enough by these stupid companion quests already. They had to go and make the metaphor real.

Anyway, we push on further into the tomb until we finally find old Dragomir. I start talking to him, and he asks me why I'm here. I get a dialog option to say, "The sleeper must awaken," so I figure what the hell. Let's go with that, House Harkonnen style. He then figures out that I've come for Hexxat, whom he then curses and asks how she continues to draw people in.

I wish I knew, ugly demon dude. I wish I knew.



Spoiler Alert: He's a vampire.

I tell him that Hexxat is already here with me, so maybe he's as confused as she is because I guess all the crazy in this place is contagious. He just shouts something about how now is the hour of my doom or whatever, and we get down to the fisticuffs. Dragomir is a strong opponent, and it takes a few tries before we're able to bring him down, but we eventually kill him to death.

Hexxat pipes up and says that we're very close now, whatever that means. Oh, and apparently we're dealing with vampires here, because I just looted Dragomir's corpse and he was wearing a cloak only wearable by vampires. So, using my amazing powers of deduction…vampires.

We push deeper into the tomb, until we eventually come across some glowy barrier thingie that only Hexxat can pass through. When she does, we get a cutscene and suddenly Hexxat is talking to Hexxat, only Hexxat is actually some poor girl named Clara, and the real Hexxat is some kind of Haitian/New Orleans vampire queen because she's the first black character I've seen in this game, so of course she is. D&D is racist as fuck.

Anyway, she kills the useless twat formerly known as Hexxat, then tells me she'll meet me in the Copper Coronet in a couple of hours. Remembering that we're sealed in here, I decide to follow her to find the way out. When she gets back to the room where I killed Dragomir, she demands I give her his cloak, but first I tell her that I want some answers, which wasn't at all true so I don't know why I clicked it.

She then goes into Full On Exposition Mode and starts telling me all about how Clara was actually a farm girl who came to the city to be an actress, but she ended up becoming a prostitute instead and I'm already bored. I just start hammering the End Dialog button like a coked up lab rat until she finally shuts up.



Kale mi noo, fir yer free readin'!

She joins my party and hands me her gris-gris bag that somehow has Dragomir's entire casket in it, which I then somehow stuff inside my back pocket. Apparently, this and the cloak will let her leave the tomb and walk around during the day and…oh, whatever. I don't even question anything anymore, for logic is lost to me now.

I decide we've all earned a good night's rest, so we leave the tomb and head back to the Copper Coronet. Or that was the plan, anyway, until another damn messenger appears with another damn URGENT QUEST for us the second we emerge from the tomb. This one's for Nalia, and it says we must go to the Graveyard District where we already are AT ONCE. Nalia insists on this, because she's a stupid person who understands even less of geography than I do.

I figure we'll swing by whatever it is she needs to do since we're already here, then we'll go back to the Coronet. And Minsc can just shut the hell up about that kid's quest in Imnesvale, I'm not even kidding.

Apparently, Nalia's urgent quest was to attend her father's funeral, which is suddenly a super important thing even though she didn't really seem to care very much when he died. Oh, well. No big deal. We swing by, pay our respects, Lord Toenail or whoever gets pissed that Nalia doesn't want to marry him, the drunk dwarven uncle gets drunk and wanders off…you know, typical family shit. We finish up and leave, then finally make our way out of the damn cemetery.

But before we get anywhere, I suddenly notice that four of my characters – including myself – have fewer hit points now than they did before we started this little graveyard smash, so I wonder what's up with that. Finding no help at all in the game itself, I end up having to resort to the horror of horrors and CONSULT THE MANUAL. According to the accursed book, we're all experiencing some kind of status effect that drains our energy, and we'll need to be healed at a temple.



Et tu, Minsc?

I remember spying a temple way back in Wakizashi Promenade or whatever it was called, so we head there. We're stopped along the way by someone whose name I don't remember, who told me I need to GO BACK TO THE DAMN GRAVEYARD to meet her mistress, so screw that. I've just spent days inside that madhouse, and I've got the status effects to prove it. I ain't too eager to go back anytime soon, thankyouverymuch.

After she leave, Brus suddenly comes running up, telling me that I need to go see Gaelan again before I make any "rash decisions," whatever that means. I have no idea what's going on though, so I just ignore it all and go to the temple.

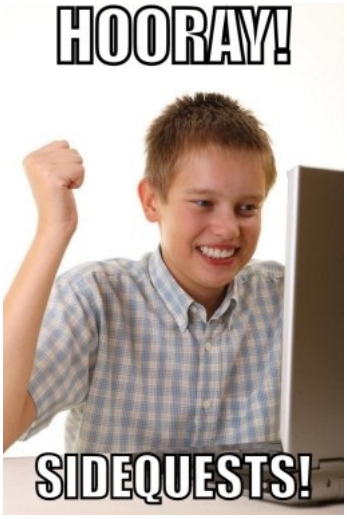
I buy a Greater Restoration prayer for all four of us afflicted with whatever unholy malady plagues us, which sets me back 750 gold pieces each. We then head over to rent a room at the nearby inn and that's when it hits me.

The only reason Brus and whoever that other person was are suddenly coming up to me now is because I must've triggered a scripted event by having met my goal of saving up 20,000 gold pieces. Of course, that was *before* I spent several grand on freaking restoration spells at what I guess was a privatized corporate church because damn, the profit margin on healing spells has got to be pretty freaking great.

I guess I'll have to just go see about Lord Whatever His Name Was' quest tomorrow, since it pays that 10,000 gold I'll need so I don't end up accidentally breaking the game by trying to talk to Gaelan again or this new person without having the gold I had when I set some flag in whatever database it is inside the game that is pushing me along the plot.

But for now, we're just going to go to sleep and not worry about having to do another damn optionally mandatory side quest until tomorrow. I've had a day of nothing but trolls, ghosts, spiders, mummies, funerals, vampires and endless twat drama.

I need a bubble bath and some me time.



Dammit.

Part Seven
GRRR. ARGH.

I awake the next morning at the Mithrest Inn to the relaxing sound of nobody giving me shit for a change, which is nice. I check my coin purse like I do every morning because I don't trust any of these bastards I'm sleeping with, and sigh when I remember that we're still a few thousand gold coins short of our goal. I roll over and try to get back to sleep, but there's nothing for it. We're going to have to go sidequesting. AGAIN.

I wake everyone else up by way of kicking them in the ribs until they stop snoring, then we splash some water on our faces and we're out the door. Time to go see Lord Whoever He Was. Yay.

Once everyone's awake, I notice that Aerie has leveled up, so I pat her on the back and tell her she's a good girl, then I give her a skill point in the proper use of flails, because I want to get some use out of this Flail of Ages thing I forged back in Nalia's – I mean, my – castle. So I do that, then switch over to the inventory screen to have her equip it. Which I absolutely cannot do, because I guess her character class can't use flails for some bullshit D&D reason no one understands, so I just wasted a skill point and I don't even care. I could reload a savegame and reassign the point, I guess, but Aerie is a cleric/mage, and the only points I can assign are in weapon use. But the only weapon she uses is her incessantly

flapping mouth and maybe a few finger wiggles to cast her spells, so giving her a actual weapon is kind of pointless. Like my life.



I don’t know what I expected.

We leave the inn and are making our way toward the district exit when it dawns on me that I haven’t visited a shop to sell off any loot recently, so I should probably do that to free up some pocket space before we go off on another damn adventure. Of course, it doesn’t dawn on me that we might actually turn enough of a profit to avoid having to go off on another damn adventure, but that’s what happens.

I briefly consider selling the Flail of Ages because it’s worth a pretty penny, but I hold on to it in the hope that I’ll eventually come across a useless twat who can actually flail it around without killing himself or seriously injuring the rest of us. Instead, I just start clicking through everyone’s inventory and selling everything we don’t need, which includes a bunch of gems and crap. I sell a few “lol gems” and I don’t even know what to make of that, because I’m not sure LOL was even in the public vernacular back in 2000, so I’m sure it’s not actually a joke. But even if it was, it wouldn’t be a very funny one, so I’m not too worried about it.

We manage to unload just enough crap to put us over the 20,000 mark, which means Lord Byron can just go walk in beauty with the night for all I care. His mandatory sidequest just became optional again, so I’m opting out of it and heading back to the main campaign because I’m never going to finish this damn game if I don’t stop dicking around with party drama and start making some actual progress in the storyline.



I'm rich and you're not.

It looks like I'm at a fork in the road, and I'm not sure which way to go. That whole bit with the mysterious mistress in the graveyard sounds like it has a lot more potential to be interesting than whatever crap aligning myself with Gaelan is going to lead to, plus she might not charge me 20,000 gold for the pleasure of being her errand boy. Still, it's not like I've actually spent any money at all in this game apart from the insane tithing I just had to do at the Temple of Holy Exploitation last night, so I'm not too concerned with having a lot of gold on hand, and I really don't feel like going back to the stupid graveyard.

I decide to stick with the devil I know, so we head back to the Slums to pay Gaelan a visit. As soon as we walk inside, he starts that cooing business again, then tells me not to worry about the 20,000 gold I was just worrying about, because he decided that 15,000 would be enough but didn't bother to tell me until just now. I consider murdering him for almost making me go do more sidequests for no reason, but decide against it. The game probably wouldn't let me, anyway.

Gaelan tells me that I need to go see the Shadowmaster, Aran Linvail, in some orange building down by the docks, then gives us 45,000 experience points that mean nothing to me because they're apparently the RPG equivalent of pesos and it takes 8,000,000 of them to buy a taco or something. I thank him for all the nothing he's done, and we head over to see whoever this Shadowmaster is.

As soon as we step out the door, I get a surprise cutscene! It's another one of those little chapter crawl thingies, which means we're finally making progress again and I'm one step closer to ~~saving the world~~, I mean ~~saving Imoen~~, I mean finally finishing this damn game.



The chapter crawl. It's kind of like Star Wars, but without any of the fun.

After the chapter crawl, I get an actual cutscene where Irenicus breaks out of his prison on Loom island or wherever, explodes a few Cowled Wizards, then grabs Imoen and leaves. I really hope he's going somewhere to turn her against me or something, because an evil Imoen is an Imoen the game will probably let me kill. Of course, it'll probably give me a choice to save her for the Good Bioware Ending, but I don't really care about that. I just want vengeance for my suffering.

We get to the Docks, and Yoshimo tells me something I don't care about involving either a price on his head or kidney failure, but I tell him whatever it is will just have to wait because I'm done with stupid companion sidequests for now. If someone want to come murder Yoshimo while he's with me, we'll just murder them right back until they stop trying.

We make it to the Shadow Thieves HQ, when some crazy trashcan preacher demands I repent and come to know the one true god, which just happens to be whichever one it is this nutcase believes in. I tell him no thank you, then he tries to kill us all for our sins. I guess people take religion a lot more seriously in this city, because this is not something Kirk Cameron would ever do, even if you made fun of his banana.

After we get done teaching crazy cleric dude the error of his ways, we head into the building and start looking for this Aran Linvail fellow. We find a secret door Gaelan told us about, which takes us to a massive lower level where we spend a lot of time not finding where we need to go. We eventually stumble upon some kind of training session wherein a new recruit learns how to use a bow by way of murdering three other new recruits with arrows, then some woman whose name I can't remember tells us we need to go look for a secret door all the way back at the start

of this area, because of course it’s another damn secret door. Can’t have a building in this damn game that isn’t chock full of freaking secret doors. We go through the motions and finally make it to Aran, who then whines that he doesn’t work with vampires and that Hexxat will have to go. I tell him to get stuffed, because I just went through a lot of trouble to get this vampire and I’m not about to just give her up. He says it’s cool, no big deal. I just need to give him 2,500 more gold pieces to ease his bigotry, and everything works out.



Don’t be racist against vampires, dude.

With all that out of the way, he tells me he’s going to give me some magical items and that I’ll be able to go rescue Imoen just as soon as I do some shit for him, because of course I have to do some shit for him. I’ve already spent this whole damn game doing shit for him, and it was all just so that I could afford to pay him for the privilege of doing more shit for him. Typical.

He wants me to go guard his shipments with someone named Mook, which is a stupid name and I already hate this person, but whatever. Let’s just go play watchmen and get this over with.

We step outside, then lie down and go to sleep because I’m supposed to do this quest at night, and we have time to kill. When we wake up, Lord Toenail appears and arrests Nalia for not marrying him. I try to murder him, but the game won’t let me because all the choice and freedom people say this game has is bullshit. He takes her away, and now I’m down a party member and short a mage, leaving me with precious little but fairly useless thieves and Minsc.

After they leave, one of Toenail’s guardsmen comes up and tells me what a *sumbitch* his boss is, and that if I go find a guy named Barg, I should be

able to get enough dirt on the bastard to make him give Nalia back. So, hooray! Another voluntarily compulsory sidequest. SO EXCITED.
I want my mage back before we go any deeper into this Shadow Thieves foolishness, so I go try to find whoever this Barg guy is. My journal says he should be “at the docks in the Docks District” which is super helpful, but I guess it means where the actual shipyard docks are, so we head there. Except it’s not Brag we find, but Mook and I’m just like, screw it. I guess we’ll do this Shadow Thieves crap now and get it over with.

Mook tells me she’s seen a suspicious character casing the place and that we should sit tight and click through dialog options until something happens. Eventually, a guy magically teleports in and murders Mook, then tries to kill us. We defend ourselves, and I have Aerie cast a Silence spell on him, just in case he tries to get up to any magical funny business. Things are going well, too, until those Cowled Assclowns show up out of nowhere.



Begone, son of Cygna!

Apparently, it’s still not okay to use magic in the city (unless you’re the Scripted Event Bad Guy who just used magic in the city), and they’ve already given us a warning, so now they go bugfuck and start slinging murder spells at us and fine. Screw it. I’ll just reload a savegame and kill the guy without magic. Like some kind of caveman.

After we’re done beating the guy to death, we resume our search for this Barg dude. What this involves is a lot of wandering around and either clicking on people and risking getting another sidequest of +10 urgency, or hovering my mouse pointer over them and waiting the twenty minutes it takes for the tiny tooltip with the person’s name on it to appear. I opt for the latter.

And who do I find while I'm doing this? Jaheira, of course! I'm down a party member right now, so I welcome her back into the fold and she's super happy to be part of the team again. I smile and then don't tell her that I'll be dropping her again like a bad habit as soon as we get Nalia back.

We eventually find Barg standing outside the Sea Bounty's Tavern and stumbling around like a drunken fool. We talk to him, and he lets it slip that he does a bit of pirating for Lord Toenail now and again, and then tell me that he also goes in for a little slavery, as well. Some guy named Dirth will have more info inside the bar, so we go inside to check it out.

As soon as we walk in the door, some guy named Baron Plover starts talking to Jaheria because of course the second I pick her ass back up, I'm being interrupted by sidequest drama bullshit again. But it's not all that bad. Apparently, Jaheria ruined the good Baron's life by accusing him of slavery – *and can we just take a minute to appreciate just how much illegal slave trading is going on here?* – so he's pissed and wants revenge. Some mages teleport in and don't get in trouble with the Cowled Wizards because they're wearing amulets of +10 Plot Scripting, and they curse Jaheria. Of course, it's no ordinary curse that can be cured by paying the outlandish healing rates at a temple, but one that involves doing a whole bunch of crap I ain't gonna do.



She shall die as she has lived: by passive aggression.

Sadly, the curse will eventually kill her, but I'll have kicked her ass back to the curb long before that happens. I just need her to be a meat shield until I get Nalia back anyway, so I really don't care. She asks me if I'll help her track down the cure posthaste and toot-sweet, and I lie and tell her we will. I don't know why she still believes anything I say, though. Not that bright, I guess.

We find Officer Dirth hanging out in a corner of the bar, then walk up to him and ask him if he's an evil slave trader in league with Lord Toenail. He responds by trying to kill us, so we respond by killing him until he's dead. Then I loot his corpse and find a register of recently traded slaves bearing the seal of Lord Toenail himself. I decide that's probably enough evidence to secure Nalia's release, so we head off to the Government District to present it to whoever the guy was that other guy told me I should take the evidence to.

I check my journal. It says we'll need to take the document to Corgeig in the government building. But then it also says that I apparently don't think this slave register will be enough evidence to do anything, so I might as well break into Toenail's home and look for some more crap, since it's right next to where I'm going anyway.

We break in by opening the Toenail estate's unlocked door, then walk inside where nobody is, and search the one container I can loot. I find a ledger which might indicate foul deeds or something, so I snatch it and we walk right out because Lord Toenail is kind of a shitty criminal mastermind. We then take the evidence next door, to the government building.

Just before we go inside, some dude named Madeen tells me those Cowled Bastards need my help with something I don't even care about, but it might be important later so I make a note and then shove him aside.

We go into the building, which is absolutely filled with pixel people who all look the same to me because I'm racist against graphics. I just pick one at random who I hope is the Corgi guy I'm supposed to give this evidence to, but nope. Instead, it's some assclown wizard named Tolgerias, who I guess is the person Madeen told me I needed to talk to, because the universe just hates me, so I keep accidentally locking myself into all these stupid sidequests because of, I dunno, karma or something.

I start talking to the guy and I'm getting all these dialog options where I can demand he tell me where they're holding Imoen, when it dawns on me that they're not holding Imoen. Not anymore, anyway, since Irenicus busted out and took her whiny ass with him. Once I figure this out, I just start clicking shit until he shuts up.

I eventually find Corgi and present my evidence, which turns out to be sufficient to call an official inquiry into Lord Toenail's activities and yadda, yadda, yadda, Nalia is free to go. She joins back up, and I kick Jaheria back out onto the streets. She'll probably just go back to pitifully standing next to that building I found her pitifully standing next to earlier until she slowly withers and dies from whatever evil curse Baron von Braun put on her. Tough break, kid.

With Nalia back in the party, we leave the Government District and head back to the Shadow Thieves to tell Aran Whoever what happened to

Mook The Recently Murdered, except that Yoshimo refuses to move for some reason, so I get to the district exit and send the disembodied narrator voice into a looping fit of shouting at me to gather my party before venturing forth over and over until I just reload the auto save from when we left the building and try again. Hooray, bugs!



“You must gather your party before venturing forth.”

We eventually make it back to Aran, who tells us all this nonsense is over some inter-guild drama and I don’t care. I have to go see some potential defectors at someplace called the Five Flagons in the Bridge District, so we go to the Five Flagons in the Bridge District because I’m smart like that.

When we get to the Bridge District, some asshole cop wanders up and warns us about, I dunno, I guess Jack The Ripper or somebody because there’s a serial killer on the loose and unless any of this is at all related to the main plot, I don’t care. I click through his dialog and head straight to the Five Flagons.

We go upstairs and meet the defectors. I try lying so they’ll think we’re here to be recruited to the rival guild too, but they see through my clever ruse and attack me. One of them shouts the name of the contact before he dies though, so at least now I know the password. We kill the two guys and loot their bodies, then Gracen – that’s the contact – comes wandering in. I get a whole list of dialog options with various names to address him with, so I pick the right one.

And he attacks me anyway.

We kill him, then find a note on his body that talks about the Graveyard District and mentions that crazy Pai’Nai guy we killed back in the spiderweb cave thing. Oh, goodie! I hope this means I can just go straight there and get whatever it is I need from the room, because I already killed that bastard and all of his little spider friends. With any luck, I won’t have to do it again.

And with a little more luck, I won't have horribly broken the game by killing him early.

We're on our way out of the Bridge District, when we're stopped yet again by another scripted sequence. I'm immediately annoyed, but then – holy crap! A wild Neera appears from Baldur's Gate 1! She saves some kid a witch was trying to abduct or something, then teleports away before I get to say hi. Dammit, too. I could really use her in my party, since I'm overloaded with freaking thieves at the moment.



My favorite Imoen replacement.

We're on our way to the cemetery when we're waylaid by a wild Neera again. I'm hoping this means I can recruit her now, but she says she has to get back to wherever the Wild Forest is, but I should totally meet her there when I can. I think we'll take finish up with this Shadow Thieves business first, then pay her a visit. Hexxat is starting to become kind of a problem with everyone else in my party, and I'm pretty sure it's because I'm traveling the countryside with a bunch of white supremacists. But I can't save the world with just one lousy vampire by my side, so I'm going to have to suck it up and deal with them.

Also, Hexxat is proving just as useless as she was back when she was Clara pretending to be Hexxat or whatever the hell was going on back then, except now she suffers various vampire penalties to her occult math equations that run this game that I don't understand, so I think it'll be easier for everyone if we just go our separate ways.

Plus, I kind of miss Neera.

We make it to the graveyard, then descend into the lower tombs and head for the spiderweb cave thing. We go inside…

Aaaaaaaand, I think I broke the game.

The room is empty, and the one lootable area has already been looted, on account of how I looted it earlier, before some event trigger set a flag on a file in some database somewhere that populated it with whatever it was that's supposed to be here now, assuming Pai'Nai and his spider minions were still alive.

Dammit.

Hoping against hope that I haven't done something horribly wrong (because I really don't feel like loading a savegame and redoing a full day's worth of crap), I head back to Aran to at least try and tell him about the defectors and maybe the name of the contact, along with how they meet in the graveyard in the cave where I killed this guy that I didn't know who he was at the time before I murder him and ruined everything.

We get back to Aran, and I tell him about the defectors and Royce Gracie or whoever the rival guild contact was. I let him know that they meet in the graveyard district, but none of that seems to matter at all because the leader of the rival guild, a guy named Bodhi, tried to assassinate him last night.

Rendering all my previous work moot, whether by design or as a surprising workaround for when some jerk breaks the game, Aran concludes that Bodhi is a vampire, and that the rival gang must also be vampires. And he knows exactly where they hang out, which is back in the lower tombs of the cemetery, to the north of the spiderweb cave thing. He tells me he'll send a mage to meet us who can open their Special Vampire Doors or whatever, then shoves a fistful of wooden stakes in my hand and I guess we're off to play Buffy now.



Work it, girl.

We prowl the vampire halls, killing vampires. I'm not staking them though, because the game never told me how to use the stakes, and it's not letting me use the stakes, so I'm not using the stakes. Any time we dust a vamp, he just goes all wisp of smokey and flies away, so I don't consider it much of a problem.

We're chasing some vampire from WKRP named Les Nessman across the area, until we finally corner him after a pretty intense ambush. Of course, we can't actually attack him because he retreats to some spike and blood room or something, so we have to go back and find wherever that is and then kill him. Hooray, more walking!

We find the room, and it's covered in a bunch of little spikes that all of my useless twats can't help but step on because they're useless twats. We eventually make our way across the room amidst their ouchies and boo-boo cries, then confront Lester and give him final death. Except I don't really think that's what we're doing, because the game still won't let me use the damn stakes.

We go back to the main area and find some side tunnels, dust some more vamps and kill a few ghouls, etc… Eventually, we come upon some kind of mummy wrap things that I don't know what they are, but when I click them it tells me that a vampire I killed retreated here, so I guess this means I can use the stakes now. I click it again and yep, vampire dusted. I do the same for the other ones in the room, then Bodhi appears and reveals herself to not be a dude. She then starts talking a whole bunch of unskippable shit at me until we finally get down to the punching and the biting.

And then she kills us.

Then she kills us again.

And again.

She's a tough little cookie, but much reloading and cursing later, we finally manage to not kill her because she's apparently scripted to teleport away at the last second so we can run into her again later, probably in some sort of Surprise Bioware Plot Twist or something. We lost poor Yoshimo in the battle, though. May he rest in peace for the next few minutes, or as long as it takes us to get to the nearest temple and resurrect him. So maybe it's more like a nap, then. May he nap in peace.



Six people, several dogs and other summoned minions fighting ONE vampire. The Scooby Gang, we are not.

Only, I don't get a chance to do any of that because I get murdered by spiders on the way out of the lower tombs, and I forgot to save the game after we didn't kill Bodhi, so we have to go not kill her all over again.

And then she kills us.

Then she kills us again.

And again.

Each and every time, I have to run and stake all of the vampires again, then click through her giant walls of expository text before we even get to throw the first punch or sling the first spell. EVERY. TIME. I mean, this game is only 15 years old, but I guess no one at Bioware of Beamdog or wherever has ever figured out how to auto-save at the start of a boss fight like every other game developer on the planet has managed to do.

Oh well, we fight her again and eventually win again, and Yoshimo eventually dies again.

May he nap in peace.

We find a shortcut out of the tombs this time, so there's no danger of spiders getting me, but I still save anyway so as to avoid being stupid again. Then we hop up to the service, catch a cab to Wookie's Promenade, and run up to the temple where I'm forced to optionally donate the required 1200 gold pieces to resurrect poor old Yoshimo. Once he's better, we run over to the Adventure Mart – which is a lot like Walmart, but with less sweaty people and more open check-out lanes – and sell our excess loot, then it's back up the Mithrest Inn, where I rent the most expensive Royal suite the guy has because dammit, we've earned it.



You get a higher quality of rat in the Millionaire's Club.

Part Eight

AIN’T NO CURE FOR THE IMOEN BLUES

We wake up on the morning of our 347th day in this place, which means I’ve spent nearly a year doing sidequests for needy companions who take and take and take, but do they ever give? Of course, it might not be nearly a year yet, because I don’t know a year actually lasts or even how time works in D&D terms. There’s probably an equation for it, though. Probably something along the lines of rolling a *3d20 + {[4d6 * (7d3 + 2d8) – (3d20 / 1d12)] – * r²}*. Seems legit.

Anyway, we wake up and I make an executive decision to go try and grab Neera before we turn in the Shadow Thieves quest, because as eager as this game tends to be when it comes to wresting control from the player and funneling us into some pre-scripted event, I don’t want to get caught having to do anything else with Hexxat. She’s even more useless than Imoen ever was, which is not something I say lightly. Or ever thought I’d say about anyone. Ever. In the history of whatever planet it is that we’re on.

Of course, I don’t let that on to Hexxat, for obvious reasons. You know, just in case I have to do some kind of quest *before* I get Neera instead of *after* – although, who am I kidding, I’m sure there’ll be both – I want her along for the ride in the event that I need her to, I dunno, stand around and get punched or something. She’s pretty good at that.



MOAR SIDEQUEST!

I tell the group that we’re going to swing by and just say hi to an old friend of mine, and they go along with it because they’re stupid and I’m their god now. However, the second we leave the inn, here comes someone named Cabrina who demands we do another urgent quest right away because that hasn’t happened in, like, five damn seconds. This

particular annoyance is from some mysterious figure known only as L, who wants Hexxat to go do something Hexxat's not gonna do, because Hexxat's going to be gone as soon as we get to wherever the Wild Forest is. I hope.
I click through all of Cabrina's crap, then we head to the district exit and I double-check my map to make sure I'm actually going where I think I'm going, lest I end up in the middle of another meeting of the Forgotten Realms chapter of the Branch Davidians or something.

We make it to the Wild Forest without any problems, and Neera just happens to be arriving at the exact same moment we are. Wow! What a random, crazy happenstance! Also, hey…isn't the Wild Forest where those mostly naked dryads way back at the start of the game wanted me to take their magic acorns or something? I'm pretty sure it was, so I'm not even going to bother checking my journal because I'm just that bad ass.

Neera joins up immediately, although she wants me to do her quest right this instant, which I'd normally refuse, but I kind of want to see what happens with these funky nuts I've had rattling around in my pants for the past 347 days. I think we'll give it a whirl.



My funky nuts. I keep them inside a sack in my pants.

After giving Hexxat the brush off, we start walking into the forest and come across a little fat dude standing next to a broken down cart, probably a Faerûn Pinto. I try to help him out, but he just keeps telling me to turn around, then starts yammering something about a fortnight over and over again until he explodes. No, really. He exploded. I think he might've been a robot. No, really.

We meet a talking snake next, which freaks Neera out because I guess she has crippling ophidiophobia or something, but it doesn't even offer us an

apple or anything. It does say a lot of stuff about death, though. The death this and the death that, but then it shuts up and doesn't do anything, so we walk right past it and murder a bunch of kobolds. Then, we cross a broken bridge that isn't really broken, but is just an illusion spell Neera plucked a bunch of eyelashes to cast. Yeah, she actually said that.
We continue working our way deeper into the forest, killing a few panthers and some more kobolds along the way, and eventually make it to the Hidden Refuge where we're given a metric crap-ton of new sidequests to not do. Seriously, they want me to fetch materials for one of their craftsmen, then go fight some kind of bad guys, then do a whole bunch of other crap I'm not about to do because screw this, we're leaving. And I'm taking my magic nuts with me!

We go back to the city and make our way to the Shadow Thieves building to turn in our quest for Aran, so we can hopefully move the plot along a little bit and make some damn progress already.

Aran doesn't seem bothered by the fact that I didn't kill Bodhi, since it's enough that I staked plenty of vampires along the way, so her guild should be effectively shut down for the time being. He then gives us 50,000 meaningless experience points, and I start wondering how many of these damn things I need before I get to level up again. But then I stop caring about any of it, and Aran goes on to tell me that he's booked us passage on a ship headed for Spellhold, which Irenicus has already taken Imoen away from, but I guess my character doesn't know that yet, so we have to go through the motions of trying to bust her out of a prison she isn't in, anyway.

Except that my character should totally know that, because I keep getting these dream sequences every few nights showing me that she's not there anymore. You'd think I'd been given a dialog option to say something about them to Aran, but again, Bioware spent good money to pay someone to write this crap, so they're damn well going to make sure I play through it, whether I like it or not.

Speaking of dream sequences, I get another just before we board the ship for Spellhold. Irenicus has Imoen locked up in a jar or something, where's he's torturing her and killing a whole bunch of other people he's also locked up in jars. Then he says, "She's almost ready for you" to someone off screen, and I'm starting to think maybe Imoen is going to be sacrificed to some dark eldritch god or something, which I'm totally okay with. But I'm also hoping she just becomes a vessel for some dark eldritch god to possess, so I can exorcize the demon by way of murdering little Imoen right in her queer fellow.



Heya! You gon die.

We board the whatever this ship's name is, and I get a new chapter crawl when we depart. We've made it to Chapter Four now, and I just can't resist casting the Google Bones to see how many chapters are left, and it's good news. There are seven total chapters, not counting the Throne of Bhaal expansion pack I'm not counting because I'm not going to play it.

We've officially made it past the halfway point, kids! And, if my previous experience with most RPGs is any indication, the rest of the chapters will start picking up speed and getting shorter from here on out, unless the ending is a long and tedious, drawn out affair. But just because Baldur's Gate 1 did that doesn't mean that Bioware didn't learn from their mistakes and streamline the sequel's ending, right?

I grow cynical of my optimism.

Oh, and I was totally right about how turning in the Shadow Thieves quest would lock me into a pre-scripted sequence, so I'm glad I went ahead and picked up Neera before we did that, otherwise Hexxat would've been dead in ten seconds after the ship's captain betrayed us as soon as we stepped onshore at Spellhold.

Of course, to be fair, we **all** pretty much die within ten seconds of the captain betraying us, because damn, it's an unreasonably difficult battle. We eventually manage to make it through without losing anyone, which is especially important now that I'm stuck doing this quest without being able to travel anywhere else until we're done here. If anyone dies, it'll be a while before we're able to get back to a temple to perform any miracle resurrections.

Speaking of temples, I just noticed that Minsc has been afflicted with

whatever damn malady it is that causes that stupid status drain effect most of us came down with earlier, but since I can't travel back to a temple, he's just shit out of luck for now. Oh well, we've made it this far. Might as well press on.
We make our way from the docks and into the little village around Spellhold, if that's even where we are. We turn a corner and watch some nonsense play out that I don't pay any attention to other than simply giving it as much focus as is required to click the Continue and End Dialog buttons. Then, we take a few more steps and are attacked by slavers who want to, surprise, enslave us. We respond by killing them real hard.



I'm a lot like Moses, but with more fireballs.

After escaping the indignities and general inhumanity of the slave trade, we press on in the direction I hope Spellhold is in, because I'm already tired of this place. I've only been here five minutes, and I've already been betrayed by a sea captain, assaulted by his magical something or other minions, then molested by slave traders. I think it's safe to say I'll be giving this island zero stars in my Yelp! review.

Then again, I'm actually starting to think this isn't actually Spellhold, because it's filled with pirates who just wander around yelling *Argh!* all the time and attacking us for no good reason at all. I don't have any idea where we really are, so I'm just going to call it Buccaneer's Den, because maybe if I pretend this game is an Ultima hard enough, it'll become a little more bearable.

After a little more exploring, I do manage to find a temple in this village of debauchery, but I guess the Temple of Umberlee, Bitch Queen of the Deeps (no, I'm not making this up) doesn't do Greater Restoration blessings, so Minsc is still out of luck. And so am I, apparently, because I

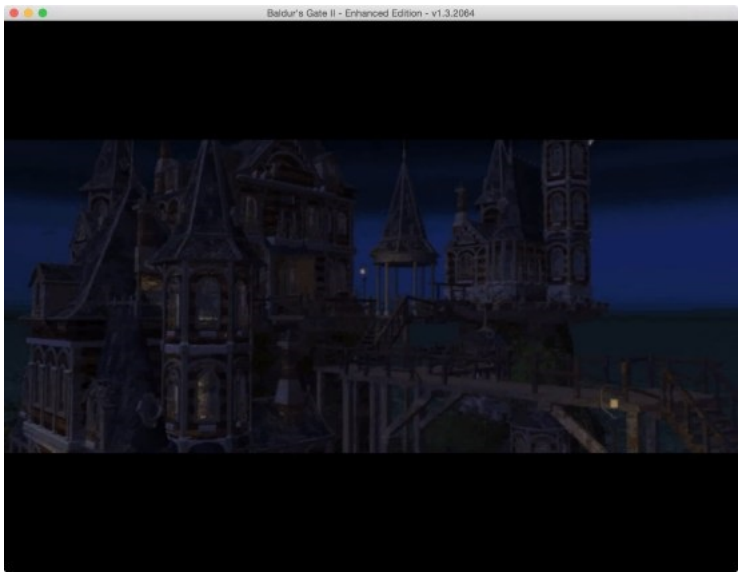
just noticed I have the same energy drain thing going on with me. So yay. We continue wandering around aimlessly for a while, then finally find the hard to find path leading from wherever we are to Spellhold, so we take the exit and hit the road. Of course, when we get to there, I get a warning message that the bridge is enchanted or something, and that it wouldn't be wise to try crossing without the Magical McGuffins I didn't know I needed, so we turn around and head back to Brynnlaw, which is what the pirate village is actually called, according my journal I checked just now.

I'm still calling it Buccaneer's Den, though. And somewhere in the distance to the east, Lord British is sitting in Britannia Manor, waiting for me to come say hello. I miss that old bastard.

Anyway, we're supposed to find someone named Sanik inside some building somewhere in the town my journal doesn't think I need to know the name of, so it looks like a lot of random breaking and entering is on tonight's agenda.

Except not, because the first place I go to is the Pirate Lord's house. I have to bribe a guard to let me in since I don't have a name to drop, but he only wants 300 gold, so I throw it on the ground and let him scrounge for it while I walk on inside like I own the place.

I tell the pirate lord that I need to bust someone out of Spellhold, then he tells me he can't allow that, then Yoshimo tells him that he can, then the pirate lord tells me that he'll sneak us in as madmen, because apparently Yoshimo has some past relationship with the guy that I don't care enough to ask about. The next thing I know, we're being whisked away to the magical prison by way of a fly-by cutscene.



Seems inviting.

We're dropped off in some sort of common area, where we're left to fend for ourselves amidst the crazy folk, which is not entirely unlike the rest of this lunatic game. Whoever brought us here told us that Imoen is in a cell down the hall, so we go looking for her, and slap my butt and lick my biscuits if it isn't Imoen I see when we open the door. Only it can't really be Imoen, on account of how I know she's not actually here, so I already feel let down by this plot twist.

Of course, this entire meaningless section of the game is just going through the motions anyway, so I'll play along. Maybe it'll make it end faster.

We wander around for a little while, talking to people who don't make any sense at all, so nothing's really feeling any different than any other part of the game so far, but I eventually run out of people to click on, and Yoshimo can't pick any of the locks on the doors in this place because they're protected by Magical Wards of +10 Game Design and won't open until the moment comes when they're scripted to open.

Without anything much else to do, I just lie down and take a nap. I like to think it's what Randall McMurphy would do if he were in my situation. Tomorrow, I'll look for Chief and we'll bust out of this joint before Nurse Ratched comes along with her lobotomy needle. But for now, rest…

When I wake up, the magical pie chart of teleportation appears, and bust my buffers, if it isn't ol' Jon Irenicus standing before me. He tells me that he's taken over the joint since last we saw him, thanks to some help from Bodhi or something or other. I still think it's a trick, but maybe he's telling the truth. Maybe that was Imoen in that cell after all, and I missed my chance to murder her because the universe is a cruel mistress.

I think this is what demoralization feels like.



We can only hope, sweet Imoen. We can only hope.

After Irenicus gets done taunting me, he reveals that the only character that hasn't gotten on my nerves throughout the entire game – and who I actually kind of like – was working for him the whole time. OMG! BIOWARE PLOT TWIST #1! Or maybe it's #2, if we count Irenicus' sudden takeover of the asylum I clearly saw him bust out of in my dream visions.

Which, now that I think about it, probably weren't dream visions so much as they were Irenicus broadcasting what he wanted me to think directly into my cerebral cortex. Holy shit! BIOWARE PLOT TWIST #3!

He knocks us all out with magical sandman dust or something, and I wake up back inside one of his torture porn laboratories, locked inside a fucking jar. Isn't that just dandy.

Oh, and he tells me that Imoen is apparently a child of Bhaal as well, which I guess makes her my sister or something, but I don't really care. I'm not counting this as a plot twist either, because George Lucas already pulled this joke on me when I was a kid, and I swore to myself…*never again*. Never again.

As soon as he gets done monologuing me to death, he does some evil finger waggling along with uttering the same incomprehensible chanting that accompanies every other spell anyone ever casts in this crazy little world, and all the people in jars around the room start dying, just like what happened when he did this to Imoen. Once they're all dead, I get zippy-zapped and wake up in some sort of dreamscape reality where it looks I'm back in Candlekeep.

So I'm having to relive Baldur's Gate 1 then, Jon? Damn, Irenicus. I knew you were an evil bastard, but that's just cold. You're kind of a dick. And a monster. You're a monster dick.



Look on the bright side. At least we never made out in front of a wookie.

On the plus side, I've totally mastered the whole Dream Warrior thing, because I have full control in this little nightmare Irenicus has conjured up for me. It starts off with Imoen whining, because no hell dimension would be complete without Imoen's incessant whining. Next, I run into a demon guarding a door, who won't let me pass until I give up a character stat. I choose to abandon all reason because logic is useless in this place anyway, so I give it my Wisdom. It's not like I'm not using it or anything.

Deeper into what I thought was Candlekeep but isn't, Imoen comes back up to me and tells me to lead the "Bhaal Creature" back to her, so we can fight it together. Which makes sense, because she's always been SO HELPFUL in a fight. But seeing as how the outcome of this particular fight has probably been predetermined by the game developers, there's not much I can do about it.

I roam around the castle for far too long, because there's nothing at all to do in here, so I go back outside and start wandering around. I eventually find Big Daddy Bhaal and lead him back inside, where I run up to Imoen for protection. Like some kind of hopeless eunuch.

At which point, she does *absofuckinglutely* nothing. Not a single gods damn thing. She just stands there while I get my ass beat. And, since I couldn't save the game once Bhaal spotted me because I was in combat and the game failed to do an auto-save either when I entered, left, or re-entered the castle like it's done for every other area transition in the entire damn game, I'm screwed. Back to the beginning of the dream. Hooray!

I repeat everything I did earlier, only I save it before I run up to Bhaal this time. Then, I run inside and talk to Imoen again, then she continues to not lift a finger while I'm being murdered. I guess I'll have to fight the guy

on my own, which is kind of hard when I'm still suffering from energy drain and he nearly kills me with each hit, but I eventually manage to dispatch him.
I wake up back in the real world, and Irenicus says he's done with me and hands us over to Bodhi to dispose of. Only she doesn't kill us just yet, since she wants us to run through – and I'm not even joking here – a freaking maze. I'm not sure what electric Kool Aid acid trip game developers were on back in the '90s, but whatever it was made them absolutely adore Full Motion Video and fucking mazes. Stupid '90s.

Once Bodhi cackles over our fate and goes away, Imoen is ready to join back up with me. I politely decline, then she starts crywhining about how I'm ABANDONING her after EVERYTHING WE'VE BEEN THROUGH together. No, sweet Imoen. I'm not abandoning you *despite* everything we've done together. I'm abandoning you *because* of everything we've done together. Or, more specifically, everything you've not done while we were together. Like being at all useful.



Muahahahahahahahahaha!

After she gets done bitching, she says she'll try her best to make it out of here on her own and meet us back at the Copper Coronet, which I just know is going to happen because this freaking girl is a damn immortal menace and cannot be stopped, so I'm sure we'll see each other again.

Because dammit.

Part Nine
MAZES AND MONSTERS

I'd like to start this entry off by describing something cool and interesting

that happened during Bodhi's maze run. I'd like to say that it was a surprisingly refreshing take on an outmoded method of game design intended to artificially lengthen playtime by infuriating the player with tasks that aren't remotely fun, but that Bioware somehow managed to pull it off this time because they filled the maze with a plethora of novel and engaging mechanics that stimulated my intellect while rewarding my sense of exploration and discovery. I'd like to say all of these things, but I won't. Instead, let me just summarize my experience and then we'll try to pretend this never happened.
There was a maze. We went through it.



…

I could say more, but I really don't want to. I just don't see how I could make the incalculable nature of my boredom and frustration while trudging through the thing even remotely interesting. There were riddles and statues and traps and crap and shit and suck. Oh, and I somehow got turned into The Slayer, but not in the cool way like Buffy did. I'm not suddenly blonde and athletic or anything, but I do turn into a hideous ragemonster whenever we go to sleep now, which kind of sucks.

But it's also a little funny, because then there's this whole bit where I lose

control of my character, who then tries to murder my companions, but I still have control over them. So it all becomes this whole Benny Hill / Yakkity Sax comedy routine of me making them run around in circles while my Slayer beast flails his arms and shambles around after them like some sort of enraged Quasimodo. I think I even giggled once.
But it's over now, and we've made our way back up into the prison or asylum, or Kellogg's Sanitarium. Whatever this place is. And, in keeping with the Randle McMurphy theme I had going on earlier, I decide to open all the cells and release the inmates. It's revolution time, Irenicus. Feel the swift hand of crazy justice!



Which one of you nuts has got any guts?

After a fair bit of dialog clicking to rally the troops, we storm Irenicus' laboratory armed with our guts and insanity. He babbles a bit about how it's all futile, then we unload on him with everything we've got. He goes down surprisingly easily, but somehow I die, anyway.

We reload and sit through all the dialog again with the rallying of the troops and then more with Irenicus, because Bioware still doesn't think things like pre-boss auto-saves or skippable dialog are important. So we wail on him again, and he teleports away again. Hooray, we won!

But then here comes Yoshimo, ready to murder me because Irenicus cursed him or something. I try to reason with the guy, but he's having none of it, so I stab him right in his shiny wakizashi and he goes down. But then more assassins start coming out of the woodwork, and we must've ended up murdering a least half of dozen of the little bastards before we were through. Unfortunately, none of them have any decent loot except for Yoshimo. I rip his heart out of his chest and stuff it in my pocket, right next to my magical nuts.

Suck on that, jerk.



All I need now is a pint of pig's blood and a full moon, and I can get up to some serious mystical shit.

We make our way out of the asylum, and are stopped by someone else who apparently betrayed me, but honestly, I can't keep up anymore. This one is a pirate, I guess. Maybe he was on the ship with us? Who knows. Or cares. We pump him for information, and he tells us that Irenicus is going to some elven city in the Forest of Tethir called Suldanessellar, which is a ridiculous name for a city, but I guess elves don't know how to spell for shit.

So I guess we're headed to wherever the hell that is.

Captain Barbossa here says we can either leave with him on his ship, or by entering a magical portal Irenicus left behind that will probably take us to somewhere called the Underdark, which freaks Aerie right the fuck out and doesn't sound too pleasant to me, either. Probably just more monsters and mazes, and I'm not even having it.

He's probably just going to betray us again, but I don't care. I just want to leave this place I've spent the past eight hours of my life, because that's what it takes to get this crap done for you people. So you could at least scroll up and click that Like button, you know. It's not like I'm making you run through an endless maze of crippling despair or anything.

Captain Threepwood escorts out of the asylum via a fade to black transition, and suddenly we're back on the surface. He tells us to do whatever we need to in town, then we can climb aboard his starship and head for the skies. Come sail away, come sail away, come sail away with meeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

Ok, enough Styx. We have business to take care of back in Buccaneer's Den. I pull out my map and find the exit, then point everyone in the right direction and we're off. Of course, we can't just walk there because floaty undead ghost things start attacking us, and Minsc keeps getting murdered in one hit. None of us are anywhere close to full health, of course, and everyone's fatigued because I haven't felt like re-enacting the Chasing The Wenches scene from Pirates of the Caribbean with The Slayer and his Merry Band of Useless Twats, but I really don't see any other choice.

We lie down to rest.

And I get another dream sequence, where an Imoen who isn't Imoen starts telling me something about unleashing my inner asshole and embracing the Dark Side or whatever, so I watch as I become The Slayer again and murder all my friends. Then, the scene ends and I find out I've learned to control my *Slayerishness* now, so I strum a few air guitar chords from War Ensemble and pat myself on the back.



"The final swing is not a drill; it's how many people I can kill!" Party on, Wayne. Party on, Garth.

We wake up the next morning all healed up and refreshed, so we make quick work of the ghosties on the way back to town. Once we arrive, I decide to hit up the Bitch Queen again, and see if she's reconsidered her stance on Restoration spells. She hasn't, of course, but I start clicking around and find out that she does sell some Restoration scrolls, even if she's too unholy to restore people herself. I buy a couple and use them on myself and Minsc.

And good lord, were we ever energy drained. I start to see why that damn maze was a lot harder and took a lot longer than it probably should have. I was running on 17 hit points the whole time, while Minsc was doing a

little better with 21. After I use the scrolls, we both gain a level and I go back to having 119 hit points, with Minsc getting 96. I guess the first one now will later be last, eh Minscy?
Hrmmm. I've had three musical references in this entry. I wonder if my subconscious is trying to tell me something…

We leave the temple and head over to The Vulgar Monkey to rent a room a get some shut eye. The next morning, we head back downstairs to talk to Captain Jack Sparrow and set sail. Only we can't, because his ship's been scuttled by the game designers, so we're going to have to end up doing more shit before we can leave this place, even though the whole point of taking the ship rather than the portal was to avoid going to wherever the Underdark is and having to do more shit before we can leave this place.

I can't find joy in the little things anymore…

Captain I'm Running Out Of Names wants us to steal the Pirate Lord's ship under cover of darkness, which isn't too bad. We can do that. Except we can't, because first we have to open the "sea gates" which are so common around every port that has never had such a thing because they don't actually exist, but whatever. We can do that too, I guess.

To open the gates, we have to get the horn that signals the gateman so he'll open the gate so we can steal the ship so we can leave the port and get to wherever it is we're going. Also, I know an old lady who swallowed a fly. I don't know why she swallowed the fly. I guess she'll die.

Four references now. Everything is slipping away…



It's like Mousetrap, but with sidequests.

I agree to his stupid plan, then he tells me I need to sneak into the Pirate Lord's lady friend's house at night to steal the horn, which is probably not going to look good on my resume. But whatever. If I'm lucky, she won't even know I'm there. If she's lucky, she won't have to get murdered tonight.

I briefly consider quaffing an invisibility potion or something, but then I figure the game will probably force-detect me anyway, because I'm sure that's what has been scripted to happen by the Powers That Be. So we just rush in, instead. Cayia, the Pirate Lord's significant other, is busy lying on the bed and getting some strange from some random pirate when we bust open the door and don't startle them at all.

They finish the conversation like we're not even there, and only then do they notice the six heavily armed madmen standing in front of them. Cayia cries out for the guards who just materialize right out of nowhere, so we kill them all without hesitation because all this sidequesting has ruined us and we're all psychopaths now. Once everyone is dead, I loot the room and grab the horn, which is actually a conch shell. I resist the urge to make a Lord of the Flies joke, and we head back outside.



Ok, I lied.

We head on over to the Pirate Lord's ship and I almost try to reason with the pirate guard stationed there, but then we just kill him really hard because that's easier and we've all gone insane. Once he's dead, we go over to Captain My Captain and we all board the ship.

We're about to shove off when the Pirate Lord appears and yells some crap at us that I don't care about, then murders his wife for adultery because pirate lords don't play. He then pulls a whole mess of pirate henchmen right out of his swashbuckling ass, because they just appear on the deck and start trying to kill us. We slaughter them without remorse though, since we're all just murderers and madmen now.

Once we're done swabbing the blood and entrails off the poop deck,

Captain Planet gives me a sword as thanks, then we head out to see…and are promptly boarded by bunch of whatever the hell the Githyanki are, who demand we surrender the "relic of holies" they say we have, and I don't really know what's going on anymore. I just want to give them whatever the hell it is they want, then go somewhere and lie down. And of course, the relic of holies turns out to be the damn sword Captain Jerkoff handed me before we left, so now I have an entire race of lizard people pissed at me.

I just unleash on them, because what's the point of anything anymore? I'll go full genocide, if that's what it takes. I have Neera load up on her magical fireballs of doom, then direct my other spellcasters to unleash hell while I start carving through the beasts like Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner and I don't even give a shit. Eventually, the ship breaks apart and Captain Hook hops on a lifeboat to save himself while we're dragged down to the deep where angry blue fish people start yelling random syllables at me.

That's five now. I give up. Surrender to the Darkness. Respite. Succor. Sanctuary…

Part Ten
I HAVE NO INNSMOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM

When we last saw each other, I was being held in an underwater cavern populated by fish people because I've apparently reached the Let's Just Throw Any Old Shit Idea Some Unpaid Intern Came Up With After Pulling An All-Nighter Writing His H.P. Lovecraft Thesis portion of the plot. Honestly, I have no idea what's even going on right now, and I don't care. There's something to do with ancient, prophetic doom written into the history of these Smurfishens (yeah, that's what I'm calling them) that somehow involves me and my companions.

Also, there's something else going on having to do with traitors or tyranny or tyrannical traitors or something, but I really couldn't tell you. I started mindlessly clicking the Continue dialog button after about five straight minutes of actually paying attention before my eyes glazed over and my index finger just started acting on autonomic impulse. At some point, I was thrown into an arena where I had to fight a giant, two-headed caveman or something because that makes sense.

To recap: I avoided going to the Underdark because I didn't want to get caught up with having to do more useless shit to progress the plot, so I got on a boat that was boarded by lizard people who wanted a sword I didn't even know existed until the ship's captain made me his drug mule, then when the fighting broke out, I guess we were hitting our swords together so hard that we broke the ship and it started sinking, so then

these blue fish dudes showed up and dragged me and my friends down to an underwater grotto where I became part of their religious iconography and fought a giant two-headed caveman.
Seriously, Bioware. Drugs are bad, m'kay?



That time I killed Captain Caveman.

We kill the giant conjoined caveman twins with fire and steel, then we're whisked back to some kind of Smurfishen board room, where a big fish with the impossible name of King Ixilthetocal says a whole bunch of authoritative shit at another mucky muck fishy dude, then some other fish guys say some other crap. I could probably reload a savegame so that I could go back and pay attention in order to give you an accurate sense of what's actually going on here, but I'm already having serious doubts regarding the fractured state of my mental health and I fear what terrors might result from putting too much strain on it.

I guess I agree to go do something for King Unpronounceable, because everyone finally shuts up and the game reluctantly surrenders control of my characters. I should probably check my journal to see a concise description of what it is I should be doing, but I opt for an even less wordy approach and just start wandering around until something attacks me. I figure that will be the bad guy.

We head outside the city and one of the Smurfishens warns me that it's dangerous to go alone, but we go anyway because he's a fish and what the hell does he know?

We set off some traps because the only thief I had that was actually any good at thieving was Yoshimo, but all that's left of him now is this pocketful of his still-beating heart, so he isn't much help with detecting traps. And neither is Nalia. But they're pretty crappy traps and don't hurt

much, and now that I can rest again without Hulking out, it’s no big deal to get zapped and then go nighty-night until I’m all better.
Which is what we do, until we reach an area where some Imps are talking like Gollum and start asking us if we wantses to plays their gameses, precious. I tell them to shut up, but of course they don’t and I have to end up playing their stupid game because some programmer back in 1999 wanted me to. The jerk.



La la, lalalala, la la la. la laaaaaa!

The game involves talking to several people that I have no idea who they are, who each give me an item to give to one of the other people I still don’t know who they are. Not that it’d matter if I did know what was going on, because the whole place is lousy with traps anyway, so just walking to and from one guy to the next means I have to make a saving throw vs death every couple of seconds. Which is SUPER fun.

After lot of time and reloading later, I solve their stupid puzzle and get a cloak and some boots for my trouble, but they’re magical and do +something or other, so I put them on and go my merry way.

Just beyond the imps little playground, we meet a Beholder guarding a chest. And yes, I know what a Beholder is. It’s a giant monster with a gaping mouth and one big eye, with bunch of little tentacle eyes around it. I told you I’ve read all about D&D. I just never got to play it because I had a deprived childhood.

Anyway, the Beholder is supposed to be comic relief, and I guess it’s a little funny. But when you’re just trying to finish a quest and you get dragged to the bottom of the ocean where goofy talking fish people are splat-splat-splatting around the place on their fin-feet, well…humor becomes a pretty relative thing.

I manage to talk the Beholder into letting me loot the chest without killing us, then he wanders off to go do whatever it is evil dungeon creatures do when they're off the evil dungeon clock.

Inside the chest was something called Sekolah's Tooth, which is apparently something I need to have in order to get into the rebel prince's base. So I guess it's a civil war thing the Smurfishens have going on, and I gotta go kill Robert E. Lee or something, which I don't really have a problem with. Damn rebs!



It's a tooth. What else do you want me to say about it?

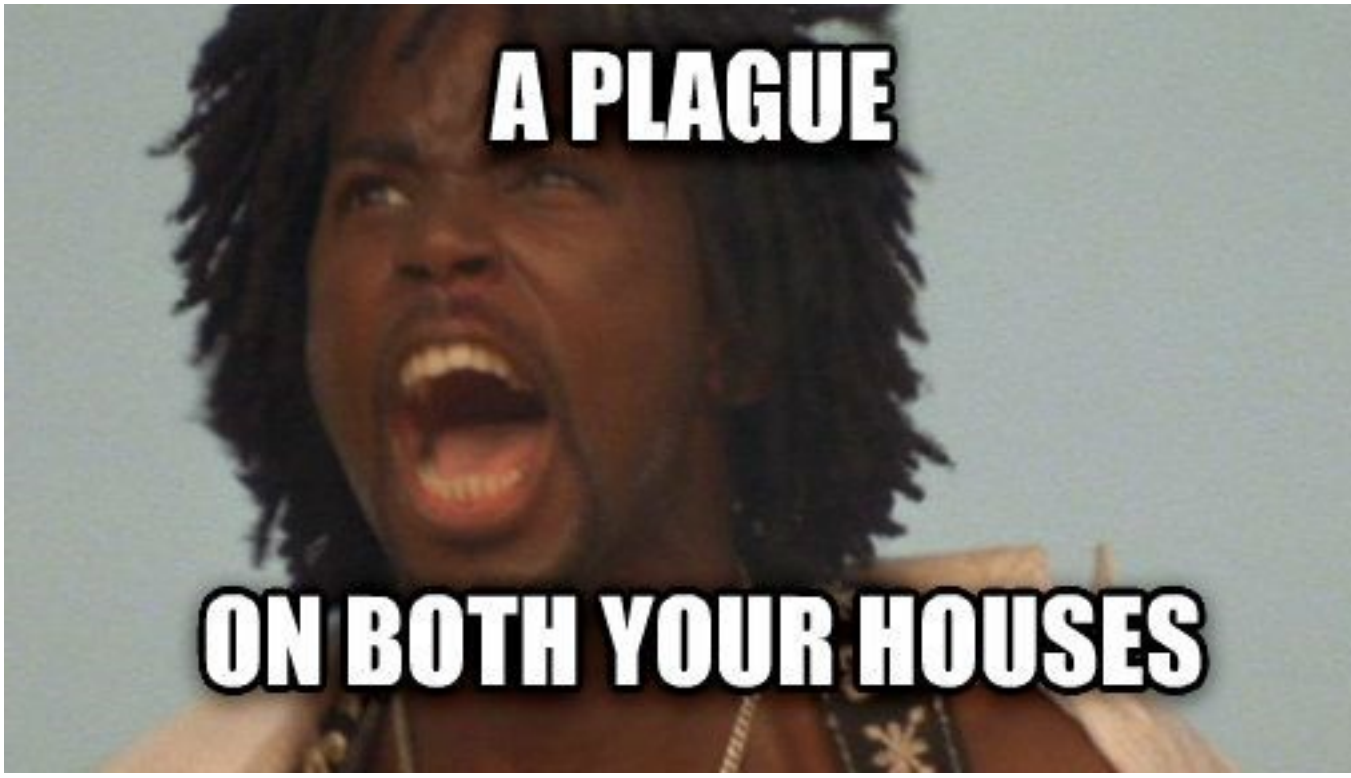
We head back to the city and start wandering around again, when we start coming across little combat zones of civil war madness. It's fish man against fish man. Smurfishen against Smurfishen. Brother against brother for the profit of another; game point. NOBODY WINS!

So yeah, we just murder everyone on both sides because they're all wearing neither blue nor grey, so it's just a bunch of floppy blue *fishflesh* flapping in the breeze when the spears come out. Better to just kill them all, so each side knows I'm not messing around.

We keep at this for a while, always heading in the direction of more fighting. More carnage. More senseless bloodshed of innocent aquatic life, all in the name of…wait. What exactly is this civil war about again? Are the Rebs running slaves or something, or it is just more like Prince Big Britches wants the throne, so we have a War of the Roses type of thing going on?

Not that any of it really matters much to me, mind you. My plan is to just keep rushing in and killing every single one of the scaly bastards because as far as I'm concerned, they're both to blame for putting me in the

middle of their stupid little war, so all are punished.



Preach it, Mercutio.

We finally find Prince Whoever hiding in some room that looks exactly like every other room in this underwater nightmare, then we kill him and take all his shit. It turns out, slimy blue fish people don't really react well to fire, so Neera's little Minute Meteors spell is making her a Smurfishen killing badass today. Let's all hear it for Neera, group.

Hooray, Neera!

After I get done looting his body, I rip the prince's heart out because that's apparently I thing I do now, and we take everything back to King Crazyletters in the fishy throne room. He snatches the prince's heart from me and then eats because he's fucking crazeballs, then he tells us he knows a way to get us back to the surface.

FINALLY! Progress!

He leads us away via another fade to black, then when the screen comes back up, we're all standing over a big ass hole leading down to…the mother fucking Underdark. SON OF A—-

You mean to tell me that I took that damn ship for the sole purpose of avoiding having to do whatever tedious bullshit I would've had to do in the Underdark, but now that I've done a whole bunch more tedious shit for Captain Jackass and the conga line of fish head gumbo people, I still

have to go to the gods damn Underdark anyway? So everything I just spent the past couple of hours doing was pointless?!
THANKS, BIOWARE. You're a bunch of dick holes.



For the first time in my life, I truly feel the urge to murder someone.

We grab a magical rope and hop down the damn hole because I guess we're going to the freaking Underdark now. We get a little cutscene where Irenicus and Bodhi are talking to a new character the writers just now pulled out of their cavernous asses that they're calling the Matron Mother or some other horseshit, and I can't even pay attention because I'm so pissed off about this whole Underdark business that I almost want to spend the rest of my life inventing a time machine just so I can go back and murder whichever designer at Bioware thought any of this useless crap was a good idea.

But hey, at least I made it to Chapter 5. So that's something. I guess.

Part Eleven
PLEASE SEND HELP

As soon as the little flyby intro revealing the terrors of the Underdark finishes and we take our first steps into the inky blackness, Aerie loses her shit. I tell her to be strong, but I'm pretty sure Minsc ended up having to slap her. Tough love and all that.

We head into the black, and come across a shimmering pink portal that spits out Air Elementals like an overactive gumball machine. We waste a lot of time killing them, but they just keep on coming like some kind of Sisyphusian horror, so this is probably a puzzle or something and dammit. I just want to kill my way out of here, with no puzzling. No talking. No

sidequesting. Just pure, unadulterated carnage from asshole to eyeball. And then we're out.
That's my plan, anyway. But I have a feeling it will all go horribly wrong.

I reload a savegame and make a note to ignore the devil portal. This time, we go south at the crossroads, but this path leads us to some dwarves who don't attack me, which means they probably want to talk, which means dialog and sidequests and I don't have time for any of that nonsense.



They're like Pringles. Once you pop, you can't stop. EVER.

I turn around before they come at me with their aggressively Scottish accents, and we just keep wandering through the Underdark, trying to find a way out. There's nothing too eventful about it, other than a whole bunch of fighting whatever Drows are and a crap ton of those little dancing mushroom dudes from Fantasia.

Eventually, we make it to the northeast corner of the map, where we spot some more dwarves, but we're not able to turn around before they spy us. Then it's all, "Ach! I need a swing of some strong dwarven ale!" and some mercifully brief dialog about going to see their King I've no intention of seeing, so we turn around and go away.

I'm just dragging my mouse around at this point, when it suddenly turns into a wheel at the edge of the screen, which indicates a transition point. Hooray, progress!

We head that way and are dumped out…in another cave. It's unclear whether we're on the same level, of if we've ascended or descended, so this could still be the Underdark, or possibly the Overdark or maybe even the Belowdark, or whatever the Underdark under the Underdark would be called. But who cares, really?

ONWARD!

This place is kinda funky, with little swirly things on the ground and the vague sense that there's lava moving around nearby, so I'm not sure we're actually in the Underdark anymore. Or maybe we're in some subsection of it. I honestly have no idea. We walk around for a good bit before we run into and trouble, and when we do, it's with some of David Icke's reptilians or something and they're called Kua-Toans, which sounds a lot like Croatoan to me, which if you remember your high school History classes, was the word left carved into a tree of the lost Roanoke Colony. So probably what happened was Icke's transdimensional overlords used their vibrational matrix powers during a celestial event back on Earth during the late 1500s and transported all the colonists to this plane of existence, where they've been steadily interbreeding a new royal bloodline for the UK inside the Hollow Earth ever since. OMG, and the Hollow Earth is Faerûn.

IT ALL MAKES SENSE NOW!

Or maybe you just saw the Croatoan episode of Supernatural.

Or you just don't give a shit.

Whatever. It's cool.



How did conspiracy theorist ever theorize anything before The Matrix came out?

We keeping push on through this dungeon, killing the reptilian overlords whenever we find them, until joy of joys – I see an EXIT marked on my map. We run toward it like two lovers through an open field. Then, we run into some more Drow who try to kill us, so we kill them and leave the Underdark!

Except we don’t, because the giant ass door won’t open and its lock can’t be picked BECAUSE OF STORY REASONS, so crap. I don’t have a clue what to do now. We wander around a little while longer, but since I’m clearly not supposed to be here without having first done some stupid bullshit sidequest beforehand, we turn around and head back into the main part of the Underdark to start doing the unthinkable: talking to NPCs.

Ugh.

I guess we’ll start with those dwarves who saw us earlier. It sounded like they might even have a city of sorts in here, so maybe we can find a shop and sell the ridiculous amount of loot we’ve been hauling around for ages.

But of course, they don’t. It’s just a pathetic little collection of mining tunnels – and surprise, they mined too deep into the ground and awoke and ancient evil. I reckon it’s probably the ghost of J. R. R. Tolkien or something because damn, they’re totally ripping off Durin’s Bane, the Balrog of Moria. (Yeah, I know the Balrog’s name. I’m a nerd. Deal with it.)

Some dwarf named Goldander Blackenrock wants me to go kill this ancient copyrighted beastie, then bring the tunnel down on its head after I’m done, probably because the poor little guy’s had to go through life with a name like Goldander Blackenrock, which is bound to do things to a person. I wonder if all dwarves really have such stereotypically stupid names, or if this is just D&D being racist again. Oh well, best not to worry too much about it. We’ve got business to attend to.

So we’re off to kill the Balrog, I guess. The wonderful Balrog of Oz!

But before we can do that, Goldfinger tells us that we need to head to the northwest passage of out his little shitbox of a city and find a creature named Alan Alda or something. Probably in a green tent. Big red cross on it. Dude running around in dresses and a guy with a teddy bear. Can’t miss it.

We start to climb down the hole leading to the 4077, and wouldn’t you know it? Some kind of winged fire demon thing materializes called a Balor, which is totally not a Balrog in the same sense that Ice, Ice Baby totally isn’t Under Pressure, *amirite*? I guess I misheard Goldeneye when he was dishing out this quest, because I thought I had to go see the Adonis person or whoever *before* I killed the Balrog. But I was wrong. Again.



No. See, their's goes "Ding ding ding ding DINGA ding ding" and ours goes "Ding ding ding ding TINKA ding ding." SO IT'S DIFFERENT!

He's a total badass too, and no matter how many times I reload or what spells my mages cast against him, I lose at least one party member each time we fight him, which is kind of a big deal when there are no temples around and this supposedly open-ended game full of freedom has had me locked into forced linear progression for hours upon hours now, so it's not like I can hop back to a previously visited area and hit up a temple or anything.

So I end up Hulking out and go *ragecrazy* on his ass via my Slayer powers. I have to agree to let the evil have a bit of my soul to do it, but I'm not really using it anyway, so I figure why not. I just want out of the damn Underdark, so whatever the price is, I'll pay it. Once the Balorog is dead, I use the scroll Goldschläger gave me to collapse the tunnel. We then run back to him and he gives us some shit and tells us to go find Abaddon or whoever using this Light Gem doohickey he just gave me.

Finding Alabaster is no easy task, since I have no idea where I am, much less where he/she/it is, so there's a lot of wandering around the Underdark and murdering Croatians, like they haven't had to endure enough already. Eventually, we make it to some stairs that I don't know where they go, but fuck it. We're taking them.

We either descend or ascend again, because the game never makes it clear. But wherever we are looks a lot fancier than the hewn walls of the Underdark. Masonry is afoot here, so I suspect the reptilian shapshifting overlords will be near. Best to keep a watchful eye.

Fortunately, we're in luck for a change. The stairs lead us straight to Adalon, who is a female, by the way. And also a dragon, because why the

hell not. She, of course, has some shit she needs me to do before she'll show me a safe way out of the Underdark, which I'm almost certain will end up being the exit I already found and made safe by murdering everyone around it before the game wouldn't let me go through the door, but fine. We'll go do your thing, dragon lady.



Dragon Age: The Early Years

She casts some kind of illusion spell on us that lets us pass as Drow and then some major boring shit happens over the next TOO MANY HOURS involving fetch quests within fetch quests within fetch quests. It's kind of like Inception, but with a whole lot of tedious walking instead of all the cool zero-gravity hall fighting. I could go into detail and tell you all about the Drow and their internal politics, but the truth is nobody would care. I know I sure as hell don't. And I'm definitely not talking about the time I got raped by an evil she-elf or anything, so don't even ask about it. I won't know what you're talking about, because it never happened.

Are we clear?

All that counts is that I met the Matron Mother, then murdered her through treachery and deceit. So basically, it was normal Tuesday. She calls – or called, rather – herself Ardulace, was undeniably evil and really, seriously hated it whenever anyone used wire hangers on her clothes. I switched out some real dragon eggs with some fake ones I got from a traitor, then gave other fake ones to the person who gave me the first fake ones, and then everybody died. Or, at least the Matron Mother and the duplicitous tart who was set to be her successor died, but that's all that really matters. If you're having trouble following along with any of this, don't worry. You didn't miss anything, because the writers only introduced this Matron Mother character to frame the whole Underdark nonsense they force feed down your gullet because Bioware doesn't even have a cutting room, let alone a cutting room floor. They make it, you

have to play end. End of story.
And that's about the only thing of note that actually happened during hours of repetitive, disconnected gameplay, but in the end, we finally got all the shit done that Adalon Smaug wanted us to do, by way of doing a whole bunch more shit for other people, who each had other people we had to do even more shit for before we could do the shit for the people who sent us to the other people in the first place, and now all I want to do is cry.

Anyway, silver dragon chick makes good on her word after I give her egg babies back, then takes us to exactly the place I thought she'd take us, which is the place I was earlier with the door that wouldn't unlock until the game told it to. Which is now.



Please let it be over. Pleasepleasepleasepleasepleaseplease…

As we head out through the doorway, I cross my fingers, close my eyes and pray to Helm and Bhaal and the Bitch Queen of the Deeps to please – for the sake of all the people I haven't murdered yet because this game hasn't quite yet pushed me over the tipping point, but it's getting dangerously close – please let this be over now.

I keep my eyes closed tight, then hold my breath as I click my mouse button to take us through the doorway.

And then…more tedious Underdark bullshit. But at least this bit is short and just involves a lot of killing things for a few minutes as we make our way up to the surface, which is actually kind of relaxing in a weird sort of psychopathic way. But then again, I've always found senseless murder to be an excellent palate cleanser, so that might just be me.

Part Twelve

MY BODHI LIES OVER THE OCEAN

We pop out of the Underdark to a chilly welcome from the elves, because they're elves, and being shitty to people who aren't elves is kind of their thing. (Have I mentioned how racist D&D is?)

They don't trust me at all, so we're dragged before their leader whose name I'm not even going to bother trying to type because I've about had it with fighting both my spellcheck and autocorrect, and I just can't take it anymore. These names are absolute nonsense, anyway. It's as if a bunch of random consonants and a few vowels were simply tossed into one great big Scrabble Bag of Holding, then shaken up and whatever order they were drawn out in became someone's name in this accursed game.

For real, though. I'm pretty sure that's how the Bioware do.



Chapter 6 out of 7. We're almost there, Porkins. Stay on target.

Anyway, once the leader decides I might be a threat, he has one of his lackeys – let's just call him Mister Unpronounceable for now – interrogate me while onlooking sages play the role of lie detectors. They want to know if I'm in league with the Drow or Irenicus and Bodhi, so they ask me a thousand and one questions until I just want to start punching everyone I've ever met.

Once I prove I'm not a threat by way of repeatedly telling them I'm not a threat, Mr. U tells me that Irenicus has gone all David Copperfield on Sunnydale (or whatever the hell the name of their stupid elven city is), and has made it disappear by cloaking it in magics. You know, like with the Statue of Liberty.

He goes on to say that I'll need to RECLAIM A POWERFUL

MAGICAL ARTIFACT that was STOLEN by PLOT CHECKLIST BOX NUMBER 37 before the elves will be able to retake the city. Or at least find it, at any rate. I guess they don't have maps or something, probably because they'd need paper to write them on, which obviously comes from trees. And everyone knows elves are pretty gay for trees, so I guess I kind of see their problem. At any rate, they'll need me to go reclaim something called the Rhynn Lanthorn (which even my autocorrect knows is a stupid way to say lantern) from the MYSTERIOUS STRANGER who stole it. Once they have the great and powerful Lanthorn, the elves will supposedly be able to use it to walk right into Sunnydale, since I guess it'll light it up in the presence of the ancient city or who the hell knows. Or cares. All I'm getting from this LENGTHY dialog exchange with these pointy eared bastards is that *everything* hinges on getting this lantern. All of my questing up to this point has led me here, from my very first moments waking up to being tortured in Irenicus' funhouse, to Imoen's eventual capture and my slow progression into madness – it's all come down to this. And only this.

>GET LAMP.

You know what? Fuck you, Bioware. Now you're just trolling. What's next, a white house and a small mailbox? Am I likely to be eaten by a grue? Maybe have Ford Prefect show up with a towel? Or how about sending me on a quest to find the fabled Wishbringer stone? Have you no sense of decency?! For shame, Bioware. For shame.



"We have talked long." Baby, you ain't kidding.

Once I finally wrest control of my characters from this dread machine of unyielding dialog robots, we head straight back to Athkatla. Mister Unpronounceable suggested we gather some allies before storming Bodhi's lair in the Graveyard District (because she totally has the Lamp Thingie, since the game has apparently run out of patience and has begun

just flat out telling me shit), so I figure I'll go talk to the only allies I've actually made during this little adventure that didn't turn out to be traitors, vampires, or are just plain dead. To the Docks, my friends! We must make haste for the Shadow Thieves!
Except making haste is impossible in the unrelenting tide of constant interruption that is this game, so as soon as we hit the road, we're waylaid by Fan Service. Specifically, Drizzt Do'Urden and his merry band of people I don't give a fuck about because, for as much of a nerd as I am, I've never stooped to reading D&D novels.

Because some lines you just don't cross.

Still, I know enough about the universe to know he's a fan favorite, even if I don't recognize any of his buddies who are having a bit of WITTY BANTER when they waylay us.

Once they notice us, Drizzt tells me that I look familiar, but my only dialog options are variations on a them about how I killed him in the last game, even though I have no memory of having done that. Then again, I did click through as assload of dialog and never paid much attention to who or what I was swinging my sword at most of the time, so I guess it's possible. I try to pick the least offensive response, so I just play dumb and tell him we've never met.

He says that's weird, then shrugs and scampers off into the bushes with his little friends. Probably to go LARPing down by the river or something.

With that unnecessary bit of nonsense out of the way, we continue on to Athkatla and the Shadow Thieves. We're making our way through the docks, when the game suddenly starts flashing messages about Jaheria taking damage. Seeing as how this is something that normally happens when I'm twiddling my thumbs while waiting for everyone to SLOWLY saunter over to wherever it is I've clicked, my first instinct is to hit Pause, then jump over to my party to see who's attacking them. But Jaheria isn't even in my party, which confuses me for a second. But then I realize she's probably still hanging out by the tavern in this area, waiting for me to come save her. The damage messages are coming from the fact that, while she's standing there waiting on a train that ain't ever gonna come, her insides are slowly rotten away due to whatever it was that guy cursed her with a little while back.

I laugh way too long at this. Then we move on.



I passively aggressively ignore her suffering.

After enjoying the schadenfreude of Jaheria's predicament, we continue on toward the Shadow Thieves HQ and are stopped by some of those githankey lizard people or whatever they were called, who are still pissed about that sword the Captain gave me back in the last chapter, just before our ship sank and the Smurfishens happened. It's their holy wossname, and they want it back. I'm not even using the damn thing, so I'm like sure thing, crazy inter-dimensional religious wackadoos. Take it.

They thank me, then attack us anyway. We murder them all pretty easily, but after the fight, I notice that Neera has run out of her magical wizard balls, so I have her re-cast the spell she uses to replenish them. Which is when I remembered about the Cowled Wizards and their stupid magic ban.

They show up, cast Silence on everyone, then start flinging spells and exploding everyone I know. When most everyone is dead, I go to reload and then realize that I haven't saved my progress since right after Mister Unpronounceable finally got done talking way back in the wherever we were. And neither has the game, because I guess it's just given up on auto-saving entirely now.

I reload and we're all the way back in the elven wonderland, so we have to walk all the way back to Athkatla again. And, lucky us, we're waylaid by Drizzle T and his uptown posse a second time. This time, I just lie my ass off (or maybe I'm telling the truth, because I honestly don't remember) and tell him that I helped him kill some gnolls or something back in Baldur's Gate.

Which he's totally cool with, so maybe I did actually help him. Or maybe memory is as shitty as mine, and now we're both just standing here, awkwardly pretending to remember things that never happened. Either

way, I’m somehow able to sweet talk him into helping out with my fight against Bodhi, so I’ve got that going for me.



Hey, you’re that guy from that place where we did that thing that one time, right?

After Drizzy scampers back off into the bushes again, we make our way back to the docks again. Then we laugh at Jaheria again. Then we’re attacked by the GetHappys again. Then we kill them again, only this time I don’t have Neera do anything with her balls, so the Cowled Wizards never show up and history is righted, once more.

It suddenly occurs to me that, with each save and reload, I’m just leaping from life to life, as if I’m striving to put right what once went wrong. And hoping each time that my next leap will be the leap home…



OH BOY

We finally make it to Aran, who whines at me for a little while before reluctantly agreeing to help me fight Bodhi. I feel like that was a bit too easy though, so he’s probably just going to betray me like everyone else

I've ever loved. This game is starting to feel a lot like real life, only somehow even more monotonous.
He tells me he'll send his best assassins to the cemetery when I'm ready to begin my assault, which I take to mean as the game's way of telling me to finish up any sidequests or other business I need to take care of now, because it's about to take control away from me again. However, since I don't care about my unfinished business or the people who are depending on me to save them, it doesn't really affect me. All I care about is getting to Imoen, so I can (hopefully) finally murder her and bring this whole nightmare circus full circle. If I get to take Irenicus down along the way, so much the better; but I'm really just looking for some closure, at this point.

The only thing I need to do now is swing by a temple and pick up a Greater Restoration blessing for Nalia, who has become the latest victim of whatever virus it is we picked up along the Oregon Trail that keeps infecting everyone in my party with Energy Drain. I bet it's Mono.

After she's all better, we swing by the ol' Mithrest Inn and rent a room for old time's sake. We say hi to the rats who've probably been missing us, then everyone dogpiles into the big featherbed for a long group cuddle. And don't give me that look, either. Our song is not your song. Deal with it.

Once that's done, we head to the graveyard to fight Bodhi…who taunts us for a minute, then promptly runs away as fast as she can. We spend the next few minutes slaughtering the minions she leaves behind, then we just leave and come back the next morning, because what are they going to do then? They're vampires. ¡*El sol no es bueno para los vampiros!*

Aaaaaaand now I'm suddenly thinking about that part in From Dusk Till Dawn where Selma Hayek is dancing half naked on the stage…



Don't judge me.

And now I'm trying not to think about that part where she turns into a half-snake/half-vampire murder python, so I head into the Lower Tombs

to distract myself by killing Bodhi.
Once down there, we start fighting our way though hordes of the undead, which just keep coming out of the woodwork, like so many roaches under a blanket of moldy old cardboard. We put them down with a little help from Aran's assassins and Drizzy's merry band of marauders. Now it's time to take down Bodhi.

We storm her sanctum sanctorum and just start slinging all the spells we have at her, none of which are doing any good, since she's immune to magic because of course she is. After dying several times in a row, I try a new strategy of breaching her doorway, then letting everyone who isn't in my party rush in. While this is happening, I position my fighters to protect my spell casters as Neera casts a Break spell on Bodhi to hopefully remove that pesky magic resistance, then my other two mages release both a Cloud Kill and Massive Fart into the room (both are wide area-of-effect spells).

And then I close the door and listen to the screams of the dying.

Including Drizzt and his buddies.

Because I'm cold like that.



Sorry, Drizzy. War is hell.

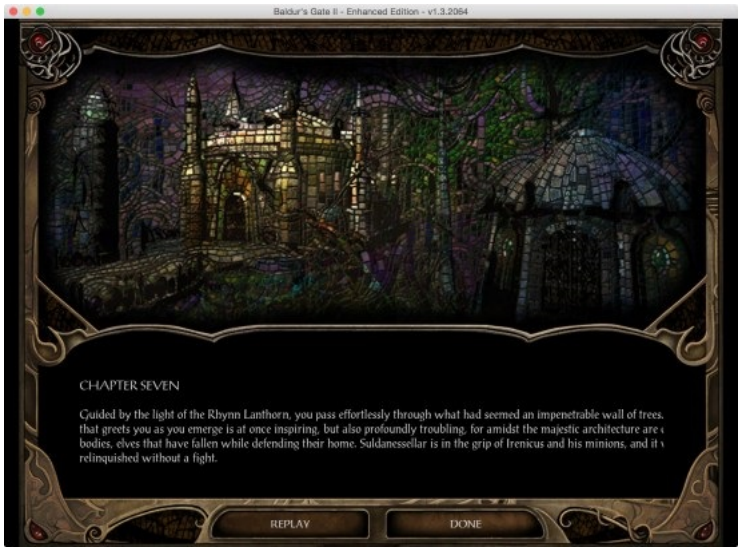
Once everything goes quiet, I position everyone around the corner in the little hallway leading to Bodhi's lair, then I run up, kick open the door, and sprint back around the corner where Nalia is waiting to jump out and cast a Web entanglement spell. Bodhi and her minions then get trapped as they rush toward me, and they're easy pickings from there. After all the bodies stop twitching, we run back in, stake Bodhi in her coffin, then snatch the Lanthorn.

Holy shit! I think I might've actually started figuring out how to play this game.

Part Thirteen
LET THIS BE OUR FINAL BATTLEFIELD…or not

We take the lamp back to Mister Unpronounceable, then he whisks away to the magical elven city of Crazyvowels. When I given control back, I'm in a dark forest with the fog of war covering everything again, so I bet this is another freaking maze. I'll probably need to use the magical flashlight to guide me through false walls or something, which is going to be SUPER fun, I just know it.

I kind of want to know where I am though, and since the only thing my map screen shows is Area Map, I decide to turn around and go back to wherever we came from, so I can get to the travel screen right quick and see exactly what area my Area Map is for. Except that doesn't happen, because suddenly cutscene!



We've made it to the final chapter. It's all happening!

I watch a flyby of the city, then I get THE FINAL CHAPTER CRAWL, and I think I just somehow skipped a very large and annoying part of the game. Maybe not. I don't care enough to go look it up to see, because I'm not actually missing whatever it is I'm missing because I don't care.

We pop up on some platform in Crazyvowels, where Mister Unpronounceable is telling me yadda, yadda, yadda, go kill Irenicus. Before we run off to start the murder spree, he says that I first need to go see someone with an elvish name I'm not going to bother remembering. I just turn around and wave at him, since I'm already halfway gone.

Crazyvowels is basically just a fancier version of the Ewok Village Playset from my Return of the Jedi toy collection, with lots of little suspended pathways between tree houses. Irenicus and his goons are attacking the place, so at least I get to kill things while walking very slowly and admiring the scenery, which is always nice. Also, I'm apparently a badass at Fake Balrog slaying now, because I'm killing them left and right without breaking a sweat.

I am become death, destroyer of Tolkien ripoffs.

I suspect Irenicus is in the palace, so we make a beeline for the doors…which are locked, of course, and Nalia can't use any of her Thieving Skills anymore, probably for nebulous D&D I'll never understand. That means I can't pick the lock (not that I think the game would let me anyway, seeing as how it wants me to go meet whoever it was Mr. U mentioned), so I'm going to have to find another way in. I sigh and accept the likely outcome of this resulting in another irritating series of fetch quests for some annoying ass NPC, but whatever. We're so close. I can't give up now!



Oops. Sorry. I grabbed this out of the Science Fiction part of the Fantasy and Science Fiction section. But the sentiment still applies.

I pull out my map and give it a glance. I can't remember the random vowel vomit that passes for the name of whoever it was Unpronounceable told me about, but I do see someone's house marked on my map, so that's probably him. Or her. It's impossible to tell with elves.

When we get close to the house, another Balrog attacks and goes down pretty easily, but then some spellcasting bastard named Rammalammadingdong or something freaking STOPS TIME and murders us. I try again and again, but if I do manage to get close enough to hit him, he just slaps me with a Death spell and I explode. If I somehow manage to not explode, he summons some kind of demon thing that eats me. We try to kill him for at least half an hour before I give up, Hulk out and go Slayer-crazy on his ass.

He’s as dead in two seconds as my reputation is with my party. I am now DESPISED by everyone I know, because I guess I’ve been giving into the Dark Side and using my Slayer powers too much. Also, I’m kind of a dick. It’s probably a combination of factors, really.

After bastard dude is dead, we head inside where Priestess I Don’t Care is fighting more tiger people. Oh yeah, I just remembered that I forgot to tell you that there are apparently tiger people now. They’re sneaky little bitches, but their tails are kind of cute, so fighting them fills me with conflicting emotions I can’t resolve in a healthy way, so I just punch them until they die.

Once we save the Priestess, she starts talking to me and I accidentally click the TELL ME MORE dialog option, which is basically the same thing my wife does whenever some parking lot perfume salesman spies her, then she ends up talking to him for ten minutes while being spritzed by the finest carcinogens China has to offer because she’s too nice to tell him to piss off.

Anyway, Priestess lady tells me all about how Irenicus was a good guy once but he FELL FROM GRACE for some endless multitude of reasons I clicked through, and Bodhi is his sister or something. I honestly don’t know, because all I hear is the *clickity-click* of Continue dialog button at this point.



Please just shut up.

When she finally gets done talking, she tells me all we need to do to defeat Irenicus is FIND THREE MAGICAL ITEMS, because god knows you can’t just go do things in a freaking RPG. You always need to find three things, usually involving multiple steps to acquire each one. This time, I have to fetchquest my way to victory by way of finding a Talisman, Moonblade, and the Goblet of Fire. Well, technically it’s the

Golden Goblet of Life, but even one of the worst Harry Potter movies was a better couple of hours than any time I've spent with this game, so I'm going with Fire. And I'm pretending Dumbledore is somewhere back in Candlekeep, which has become Hogwart's Castle in my mind and yes, I know I'm 40 years old but shut up you can't tell me how to live my life go away.
I'm going to spare you the details of the stupid fetch quests, because they are exactly as much fun to write about as doing them wasn't. You're welcome.

Now that we've FETCHED ALL THE THINGS, we head to the Temple of Cellophane or something to summon the Leaflord, Lord of all the Leaves. I assume he's going to help me stop Irenicus by way of devising a cunning horticultural campaign involving aggressive landscaping or some equally absurd nonsense. We kill a few tiger dudes standing guard at the temple doors, then rush in and come face to face with…some dude I've never seen before.

He says I continue to surprise him though, so maybe we met before and I just didn't care. Or maybe this is just another BIOWARE LAST MINUTE CHARACTER DROP IN, as was so prevalent in the last game. Either way, he just wants to kill me, which is worrisome because he's got a couple of giant golems and a tiger guy fighting alongside him, which all prove too much for us to handle all at once.

Fortunately, everyone in his little clique are deeply stupid, so we just rush in and kill the tiger guy, then rush out and sleep to heal up. Then, we go back in and do the same thing to one of the golems, then the other one. By the time it's down to just the one badass mage, he isn't such a badass anymore and Minsc explodes him with that cool flail we forged back in Nalia's castle that he can finally use now.

After everyone is good and murdered, I put all the stupid doohickeys on the altar and ta-da! Leaflord!



Mmmmm. Mossy!

Old Leafypants spends a few minutes YELLING AT ME IN ALL CAPS, then busts open the doors of the palace, where Irenicus is holed up, waiting for me to come murder him really, really hard. And Imoen too, if I'm lucky enough to get the chance to not be able to save her or something.

We storm the castle with our dukes up, ready for a fight…and then nothing much happens. We just wander in and look around at the pretty architecture for a minute, then I start clicking things. I gently molest a tree for a few minutes, then it spreads its limbs and offers me its nuts. (See? I told you elves were pretty gay for trees. And you probably thought I was just being insensitive.) I guess I also picked up some kind of stone musical instruments along the way or something, because I click a couple of statues a few times and then give them the things I didn't know I had, and a staircase opens up.

Yay, me!

I start to shove everyone down the stairs, but then my character has a sudden crisis of conscience or something because he starts talking to each party member about how they've come far enough, and none of them have to follow me to Irenicus if they don't want to. It's probably meant to be a moving tribute to the loyalty of my companions, but when I already know they despise me, it falls kind of flat. But they all stand by my side anyway, and we descend.

The spirit of the Tree of Life appears and tells us that Irenicus has put some parasites on the tree that are killing it and gods dammit, this IS a clever horticultural plan of aggressive landscaping. I WAS ONLY JOKING, GAME!



Tree parasites. I'm exterminating tree parasites now.

We spend the next few minutes playing gardeners and killing the parasite thingies, of which no part of the process is even remotely interesting, so I'm not going to talk about it. After the last parasite falls, we're transported to another cutscene, followed by reams of unskippable dialog before yet another boss fight we cannot win without trying a hundred times and watching the cutscene a hundred more times and clicking through the unskippable dialog a hundred more times.

This fight is with Irenicus, and it's damn near impossible. The instant we see him, he stops time and starts casting Instant Death spells on my mages, leaving just me and Minsc to swat at him with our melee weapons, all of which proves useless. The only way I was able to beat him was by going Slayer again, which caused whoever was left alive in my party to abandon me, which is not something I would normally care about if this final battle was actually the final battle, but of course it's not.

After killing Irenicus, I'm dragged down to Hell to face him again, but unless I reload and manage to keep my people alive, I'm facing him alone. And it looks like this whole Hell section is going to be another tiresome bunch of Doing Pointless Shit Quests just to get to him again.

I thought this would be the final entry, because I thought I would finally finish the game today. I was even kind of happy that this whole nightmare would end with the thirteenth entry, because that's a terrible number and nobody like it. I truly, honestly thought it would be over today.



Somebody hold me.

Part Fourteen
HERE ENDETH THE LESSON

You know what? Screw this noise. If my friends can't accept me for who

I am, then they were never really my friends in the first place. Nancy Reagan and about two dozen Afterschool Specials taught me that back in the ’80s, and it’s not something I plan to start ignoring now. If the gang only liked me when I wasn’t being the Slayer, then they only liked me when I wasn’t being myself. And I can’t wear the mask any more.
So I descend into the depths of Hell, alone and loud and proud. I’m here. I’m evil. HEAR ME ROAR!

It feels good to finally let go, so I put my game face on and Slayer up. Except then I decide not to do that, because being in Slayer mode hurts me over time, so I guess even the game wants me to hide who I am. From it, from society. From myself.

sniff

Fine. I transform back into my human form, then start exploring what I hope aren’t nine circles to this Hell, because I just don’t think I could take that much more game.

I walk into a room and come face to face with the demon of Pride, which is actually kind of fitting if you know me at all. He tells me that I need to go kill some creature to reclaim the Tears of the Thingie and claim my birthright, and you know what? I’m all for it. I’ll be Bhaal, if that’s what it takes to end this. Damn my soul AND the torpedos. I’m going in!

I scream a battlecry that I’m sure probably sounded a lot better in my head than it did coming out of my mouth, then Slayer up and charge in to face down whatever beast lies in wait, for it shall surely fall beneath the might of my SLAYER RAGE!

Except that it doesn’t. What it *does* do is barely get injured while I explode into tiny Slayer chunks. So much for going it alone, I guess.



Dammit.

I reload back at the Irenicus battle. I trigger the cutscene, then spend the next ten minutes running far enough away from the battle to allow the game to let me save again, then we run all the way back and quick save just before we get close enough to trigger combat mode again. Now I don't have to endure the cutscene and unskippable dialog anymore. Ain't I smart?

Not that it matters. I'm just no match for the jerk, and this isn't even his final form. I try every trick I can think of, but I can't think of all that many on account of how I have no idea what I'm doing. I try loading up my mages with buffs and debuffs, which does nothing when Irenicus stops time and Insta-Kills them to death before they get so much as a finger waggle off.

I try summoning some creatures, but he kills them just as easily as he murder my mages, if not more so. I try brute force and just wail on him,

but that only lasts about half a second longer than every other battle, which probably has more to do with a lucky roll of the dice than anything else.
I repeat this process more times than I can count, and it's just not fun anymore. I know it's probably my fault for not doing even MOAR SIDEQUESTS and gaining more levels before getting to the final area, but come on. I've put hours upon hours of my life into this game – much of which was surprisingly fun and a huge improvement over the first game – but a whole lot of it has just been extremely tedious, unimaginative filler. And now I face an impossible boss battle just because I didn't feel like throwing even more hours into the sidequesting time sink.

I'm about to just give up and call it quits. I made it this far, and I've written thousands of words about my journey. It should be enough.

It should be.

But it isn't.

I decide that, if the game's not going to play fair, then neither am I. If it's going to let Jon Irenicus tap into transdimensional forces to pull instant death kills out of his ass like tacos on a low fiber diet, then I'm going to play dirty, too. And with darker magics than even Irenicus could dream up. But the best part is that he won't ever see it coming.

Before going back into battle with him for the umpteenth time, I summon the antediluvian god of Baldur.ini. I then chant the unholy mantra to invoke its power: 'Program Options', 'Debug Mode', '1'. And then, I reload my game…

I walk slowly up to Irenicus, oozing confidence and testosterone. He starts to waggle his fingers, and I just say, "Hush now. Daddy's home."

Then, I cast Control-Spacebar and CLUAConsole:EnableCheatKeys().

A look of horror flashes over Johnny Boy's face, and I almost think he knows what's about to happen. He doesn't, of course. How could he? He's just a collection of mathematical algorithms and pixels. *He's* not a god.

But I am.

I put my cursor over his body, then press Control-Y…



SPOILER ALERT: He dies.

Yes, I cheated. So what? Just pretend that I went back and did whatever stupid crap you think I should've done, then make believe I came here and beat him fair and square if it makes you feel any better. Just don't actually expect me to do that, because I'm done. Flat done.

I watch the cutscene, then descend into Hell with my dignity still intact and ready for a little payback. It's clobberin' time!

We arrive in Hell, and I run straight to the Pride demon. He says his thing, then I rush into face the dragon again.

CONTROL-Y!

He goes down, and I take the first Tear of Bhaal.

I run back out to the central area, then down into another room, where I come across the Fear demon. It offers me a cloak that will never let fear or panic touch me again, but it's made from the skin of nymphs – which reminds me of those mostly naked dryads back at the start of the game – so I decline the offer. I want nothing to do with anything so evil simply because it might be a great help in my upcoming ordeals. I don't have to compromise my integrity anymore, just to stay alive. I have REAL power now, so I can afford to be good again.

We push the demon aside and run forward into a room of high level Beholders. Normally, I'd probably be in for a difficult battle, but that was then. This is now.

CONTROL-Y! CONTROL-Y! CONTROL-Y!

They lie dead, motionless and rotting in pools of their own viscera at my

feet. I snag another Tear, then we walk over and loot the chest they were guarding, and I grab some potions I don't need because Death can't touch me anymore.



CONTROL-Y AND YOU DIE!

I find the Selfishness demon next. He presents me with a choice: Go through the Evil Door, and someone in my party will be sacrificed, or go through the Good Door, and everyone will live, but I'll lose some of my abilities. The choice is a simple one, now that I have become immune to the petty necessities of pragmatic reality. I choose the Good Door because I don't need abilities anymore.

I lose some hit points and a little dexterity, both of which are meaningless to me now. Statistics are something that happens to other people. Let the proletariat fret over min/maxing their die rolls. Their petty worries are of no concern to the aristocracy.

I get another Tear, the loot the room because old habits die hard.

Next up is Greed. He gives me an evil sword that will make killing this Tear's guarding much easier, but I don't use it, for I no longer heed the siren's call of Evil's allure. Instead, I give the sword to the genie enslaved to guard the Tear, thus sacrificing my power to release him from his eternal servitude.

I have transcended morality.

I get another Tear, then head to the last room. Waiting inside is Sarevok, the Big Bad from the last game. He tries to goad me into a fight, clearly representing Wrath, if only in deed rather than name. I refuse to be lured into his trap and do not succumb to my inner rage. This infuriates him, so he attacks me anyway.

I dispense the wisdom of the Way of Control-Y, and help him find inner peace at last.



Requiescat in pace, Sarevok.

With all the Tears now in my possession, we return to the main room and unseal the gate. My alignment changes from True Neutral to Neutral Evil, and I am judged.

Irenicus emerges from the black abyss that lies beyond the dark portal and summons forth a small army of minions to aid him, but it is all for naught. I dispatch each of them in turn, almost without thinking. Certainly without remorse or concern. Their fate was decided the moment they were conjured into existence. I am a function of the universe now, and the universe is but a manifestation of my will.

To oppose me is to oppose existence itself. All who try shall suffer.

Irenicus now lies dead at my feet while all of Faerûn celebrates the victory of my benevolent grace, for I have delivered them from evil and shown them the one true way to victory lies not through magical items or skill with a sword, but through Me.

I am the beginning.

I am the end.

I am…getting in trouble with my wife, because it’s my night to do laundry and I’ve been playing this damn game way too much.



No, I won’t be playing Throne of Bhaal. So don’t bother asking.

THE END

Life Bytes: FPS Retrospective



After no one read [feature](#) , I thought I’d continue my lack of success by adding another

bonus feature to the Life Bytes series thousands of people also aren't reading. This time, I'm bringing you a historical retrospective on the First Person Shooter genre. Why? Because sometimes, you just want to shoot things, preferably in a consequence-free environment, unshackled from the chains of mundane concerns like petty morality or the long arm of the law. Also, the FPS genre has been the most popular in gaming for the past all the years, so I thought people might enjoy looking back on its early days. I say *look* back, because some of these games are best remembered than replayed. Trust me on this.
BONUS FEATURE: FPS Retrospective

- 1991
- 1992
- 1993
- 1994
- 1995
- 1996
- 1997

The Complete Life Bytes Series

- Growing Up Geek: Introduction
- BONUS FEATURE: Baldur's Gate
- BONUS FEATURE: Baldur's Gate 2
- BONUS FEATURE: FPS Retrospective
- BONUS FEATURE: Star Wars Games

Of course, I can't cover every single game in the most overcrowded genre ever conceived, but I'll do my best to hit the highlights from all the different eras, starting with the emergence of the shooter in the early '90s, and continuing on to the present day. Or at least until I get tired of it.

However, while this is intended to be a chronological retrospective of the *entire* first person shooter genre, I'm only going to be discussing games that 1) Were highly influential and/or innovative or underrated, and 2) Have either been made freely available by the publisher, or are available for purchase from a digital distribution platform, such as gog.com or Steam. (You're on you own with EA's Origin, though. Sorry.)

There might be the occasional exception to this rule for games that have neither been made freely available nor purchasable through a digital platform. I'll try to minimize these, but due to the nature of covering older games, there will probably be a few. Whenever one does come up, I'll try and find somewhere you can buy a physical copy. (And no, I'm not using any affiliate links, so any stores I send you to – digital or otherwise – are just regular links I don't make any money from.)

That said, I'll **only** be providing links to purchase the GOG versions of titles that are available on **both** GOG and Steam. No, this is not because I work for GOG (although they should totally hire me), but because I believe in DRM-free gaming. Plus, I really dig the GOG community. Sue me.

I'll be continually adding games to this post until I reach the end of the feature, just like I did with Baldur's Gate . You won't get any notifications when the page has been updated though, so check back often for new entries.

Also, please be sure and share the link, because your Likes and Shares validate my immense, yet surprisingly fragile ego. And if I've missed one of your favorite games that you'd like to see included, let me know in the comments, and I might try to squeeze it in.

Catacomb 3D
1991



Yes, there were technically some 3D, first-person games before Catacomb 3D, but I started here because this game really does mark the birth of the FPS genre. Even though I didn't hear of it until years later, well after I'd played other FPS games, it was id software's first foray into the genre. And id **is** the father of the genre. Or maybe it was the mother, considering the whole birthing aspect…but you never really hear "The mother of the FPS genre," do you? Or the mother of any genre, in any media, now that I think about it. Somehow, things are always "the father" of this or "the granddaddy" of that, but the closest moms get is "The mother of all" moniker in front of what are usually terribly offensive, misogynistic things. Most anything from George Broussard and 3D Realms comes to mind…

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Other FPS titles don't exist yet, because the father of the genre just gave birth (somehow) to the first one: Catacomb 3D. It's kind of amazing that FPSs grew into what they are today from these humble beginnings, because after spending about ten minutes with this migraine-inducing mess of pixels only a mother could love, I'm surprised that anyone ever thought making a second go of it was a good idea.

Maybe if I'd played it when it came out back in 1991, I would have gotten it. But playing it for the first time in 2015, all it gave me was a headache. Literally. I had to stop playing because the badly faked first-person perspective was just so *off* that, whenever I turned my character left or right near a wall, I felt a tiny dagger slip into the squishy bits of my optic nerve and twist.

As for the gameplay, there's not really much to say because there isn't very much to it. You're plopped down into what appears to be a dungeon, although it could really just be anywhere with stone walls covered in glowing, radioactive lichen, but it's probably a dungeon. Within moments, 

you're attacked by gorilla monkeys with spears or something, and you pew-pew them with magic missiles or fireballs until they're dead. At least, I think they were magic missiles or fireballs, but I'm not really sure. I spent most of my time with the game rapid-firing death pixels, and it wasn't until I was nearly finished torturing myself that I noticed I could hold down the fire key to build up a graphic on the right of the screen that slowly turned into an enormous mushroom cloud. Presumably, this amounts to charging the magic missile fireball into a thermonuclear detonation, which would at least explain the aforementioned radioactive lichen clinging to the walls of the place, I guess.

The rest of the catacombs are filled with glowy doors of different colors with giant keyholes in them. You run around, collect the keys, open the glowy doors, collect treasure chests and pew-pew evil whatevers in the name of I don't know what. Adventure, I suppose.

Oh, and you make this obnoxious fart noise whenever you bump into a wall, which happens constantly. So if you're into fart jokes, it's got that going for it.

I didn't get very far in the game, and I'm not going back. I don't have nostalgia goggles for this title since I never played it before, so I have no protection against the onslaught of awful. I guess it was fun for its time, but that time is over. And unless you're a fan of self-induced migraines, the game should probably remain a footnote on a Wikipedia page covering the history of the genre.

Retro Rating:

- *It was probably fun at the time.*

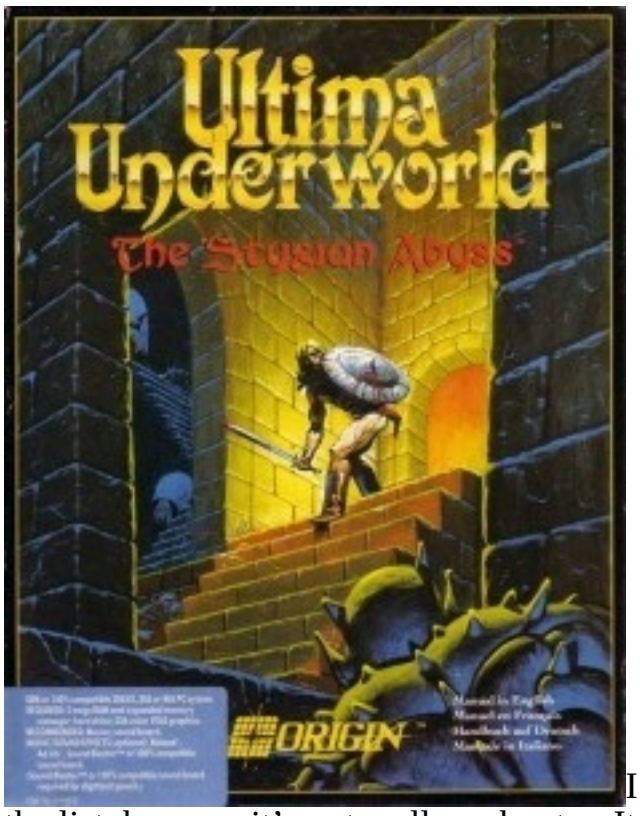
Modern Rating:

- *Take off and nuke it from orbit. It's the only way to be sure.*

Where to get it:

- GOG ($5.99 as of March 2015)

Ultima Underworld
1992



I almost didn't put this game on the list, because it's not really a shooter. It is first-person, however, and it has real-time combat, so it kind of counts. But mainly, it's here because the things done in Ultima Underworld would greatly influence future games across many genres, including the First Person Shooter.

The first time I saw this game was over at a friend's house. He was That Friend of mine; you know, the guy with the rich parents who bought him the latest and greatest everything. He was playing UU on a 486 with a VGA monitor, Sound Blaster, and who knows what else. Probably quantum-based RAM with a super double Turbo function or something. Point is, he had a top of the line rig.

He gave me a whirlwind tour around the Stygian Abyss, killing a goblin here and a giant spider there. He showed me how it was VIRTUAL REALITY, and you could look up and down, everything had textures, and you could hit things with swords. I was hooked immediately, even if

he did drone on at length about how you even got experience points just from walking. FROM WALKING! (Imagine a kid with a bowl cut and a not inconsequential dandruff issue leaning back in his expensive office chair and swiveling around while madly throwing his hands in the air and screaming these words. Got it? Congratulations. You've just met my friend. Ritalin hadn't been invented yet.)
He let me borrow his copy, and I eagerly ran home to install it. The problem was, I was installing it on a crappy 386 with minimal RAM. The game chugged.



But I played it, nonetheless. From the moment Richard Garriott's faux-British accent boomed really bad VO from my tiny speakers, I was hooked. I loved the game, even if it hated my computer. It was immersive before we even knew what immersion was in gaming, and you really can't understand it *now* if you didn't play it back *then*, when there was nothing else like it.

The good news is that it still holds up today. I played through most of it a few weeks ago, and had more fun that I remember having had back when it was new (probably because I'm not playing on the PC equivalent of an abacus anymore). The controls took a bit of getting used to at first, because you move by way of holding down the mouse button, but I slipped back into the groove fairly quickly.

Ultima Underworld would go on to influence just about every other game in existence, including the System Shock series, the Thief games, the Elder Scrolls, Deus Ex, Bioshock, etc… But back in 1992, it was just freaking awesome, even if I didn't really understand why it was so much more of a resource hog than the next game on my list. And yes, Ultima Underwold came out **before** Wolfenstein 3D. Google it, if you don't believe me. Go ahead. I'll wait.

Retro Rating:

- *You get experience just from walking. FROM WALKING!*

Modern Rating:

- *Did you like Bioshock? Great! Now shut up and go play the first*

one.

Where to get it:

- GOG.com ($5.99 as of March 2015)

Wolfenstein 3D
1992



While id software did make several sequels to Catacomb 3D, I'm not playing any of them on account of how they're all sequels to Catacomb 3D. Instead, I'm moving directly on to their next shooter, which is the first FPS I ever played, and what most people consider to be the legitimate beginning of the genre.

I remember downloading the shareware version of Wolf3D from a local Bulletin Board System back in '92. It was near the end of my junior year in high school, and the sysop of the Around The Clock BBS broke into chat after I dialed in, to tell me about this amazing new game I just had to try. Having played Castle Wolfenstein on my Apple][and remembering it as a really fun game, I headed over to the Files section and started my download of Wolfenstein 3D Shareware. Then, I went and ate dinner. And watched some TV. And then went to school the next day, because these were the days of 1200 baud modems, noisy phone lines and non-resumable file transfers. That shit took time.

Anyway, once I finally got my hands on it and installed the thing, I was hooked. I burned through the shareware levels, and decided that I actually wanted to buy a copy. I'd never actually bought any shareware game before, seeing as how the demos were usually enough to warn me off of most of the crap that was out there, but Wolf3D was actually good. And I wanted more.



Unfortunately, my parents didn't feel the same way about putting a check in the mail, or giving their credit card info to some unknown game studio they didn't care about, so I had to either wait until retail copies started showing up, or for the sysop of the BBS to buy it…and then make it available in the *secret* file section. (Hey, don't judge me. It was the early '90s, and I was a stupid high school student. Besides, we didn't know piracy was wrong yet, because the MPA didn't start releasing those hilarious *You Wouldn't Download A Car* PSAs until 2004.)

Sadly, the rest of the game didn't live up to those initial Shareware levels (which was often the case, back in those days, when the best of the game was shoved to the front to convince people to buy it), but it was still a good time.

Playing it today, though? Eh, it's still a good time, if you only play for a few minutes and make sure to have your nostalgia amplifier cranked up to 11.

I still remembered where some things were on the first few maps, which surprised me. The level design isn't quite as maze-like as Catacomb 3D was (and as later FPS games would become), so there's a lot less wall bumping and farting. (Although the farting has been replaced by a muted "oomp" sound in Wolf3D. Sorry, fart joke fans.) There are, however, a few notable things to consider that you might not know about if you're a younger gamer, or may have forgotten if you're an old bastard like me.

First, these games weren't about story or even level progression. This was back when points still mattered, so the game is as much about treasure hunting as it is about killing Nazis. In addition to fully exploring every room in each map, you'll spend much of your time running along the walls while frantically mashing the spacebar like a coked up lab rat, because that's how you find secret rooms in older FPS titles. And there are LOTS of secret rooms to find, in almost every game.



You also don't really aim in Wolf3D – or any of the early FPSs – so much as you point your gun in the general direction of an enemy and press shoot. Auto-aiming was the name of the game back when people were still figuring out how to navigate in a fluid, first-person environment, and the sluggish nature of keyboard controls meant that twitch gaming didn't apply to the first person shooter in its infancy. That would come later, after God invented mouselook.

John Carmack had resolved the headache-inducing perspective issues from Catacomb 3D by the time Wolfenstein came around, so you'll likely be able to play it for as long as you feel like shooting pixel Nazis. Admittedly, that's not likely to be very long, but it can still be a fun diversion, and is definitely worth checking out, for the sake of history.

The genre still had a lot to learn before it could really come into its own, though. Like, I thought I was going to kill several Nazi bastards with one clean shot, but it turns out that barrel manufactures hadn't yet started lining their products with deadly explosives back in 1992.

Retro Rating:

- *This game single-handedly launched a genre. It was amazing in 1992.*

Modern Rating:

- *You should try it at least once in your leben.*

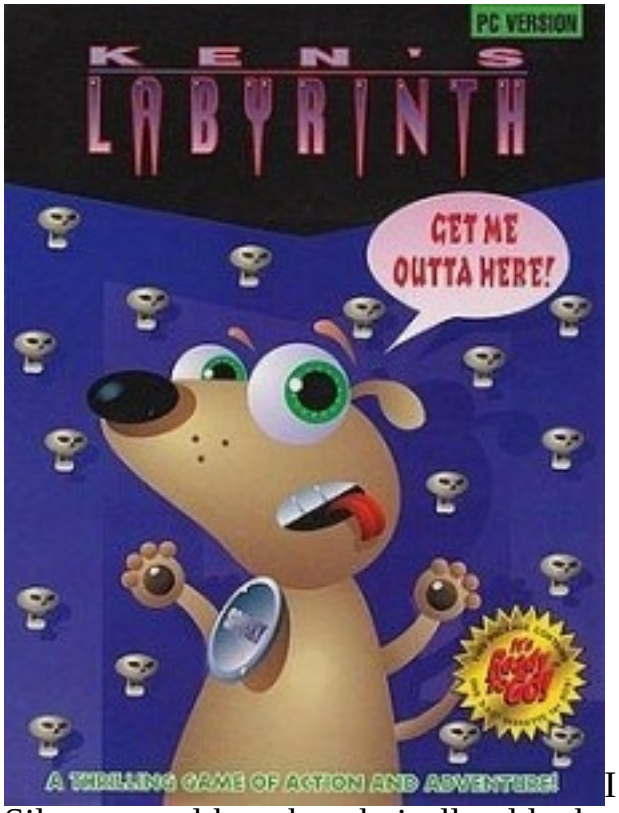
Where to get it:
Playable online for free at wolfenstein.com

- Steam ($4.99 as of March 2015)

Next up on the list is a little title from a kid who would eventually become the wellspring behind the first epic rivalry between FPS developers…

Ken's Labyrinth

1993



I'm the same age as Ken Silverman, although technically older by nearly a year. He accomplished more while he was still in high school than I've done in my entire life though, so he's got me beat there.

Back in 1992, Ken wrote a little tech demo called WALKEN (Walk + Ken) after playing Wolfenstein. I guess he got it in his head that he could make his own Wolf3D, so he did. Just like that. WALKEN was eventually picked up by Epic Megagames (who would later drop the Mega and become an industry powerhouse), made into an actual game and distributed as Ken's Labyrinth.

Sidenote: I'm apparently entirely incapable of spelling labyrinth. I keep wanting to put the r before the y, and thank god for red squiggly lines or I might look like even more of an idiot than I already do.

I remember playing around with Ken's Labyrinth a little bit back in the day, and I unfairly labeled it a crappy Wolfenstein clone and dismissed it entirely. This was a mistake, because the game is actually pretty charming.

Of course, when I was 18 years old, I didn't quite grasp the concept of charming nearly as well as I understood boobs, blood and guns. I didn't want to play some cute little shooter. I needed edgy X-TREME shooters. Because when you're an 18 year old boy, you're kind of an idiot.

Unless you're Ken Silverman, that is. Shortly after finishing Ken's Labyrinth, 3D Realms tapped the teen to create a new engine for their games. It was called Build, and it would go on to power some of the biggest shooters of the '90s. And, in the long list of dumb things George Broussard has done, not throwing money at Ken to keep him working on new tech is right up at the top of the list. And that's saying something.



But I'm getting ahead of myself again. This entry is about Ken's Labyrinth, so let's focus. As I said, it's a Wolfenstein 3D clone – the first one, I think – and it's every but as good as its inspiration, from a technical point of view. Gameplay wise, it's a lighter affair and was clearly done by a kid with a good heart who wanted to make a shooter, but didn't see the need to fill it with blood and guns and gore.

Playing it today is almost zen like, in the sense of relaxation it gives you, which is odd considering the genre. But that's what it does. From the colorful artwork to the calming music, the game just feels like a soft, comfortable slipper. You know, the kind that's all fuzzy on the inside and keeps your feet warm in the winter.

Basically, you just run around and pew-pew things with a red dead dodgeball. There are no scenes of epic violence, no shooting Nazis or Nazi dogs, and everything is handled in a very family-friendly way, which kind of reminds me of my own kid playing "Hunger Games" in Minecraft. Sure, you're running around shooting things, but it's less about killing than it is about pretending.

Ken's Labyrinth is a journey into the world of make believe, fueled by an engine written on the hopes of a wannabe who became an industry golden boy before quietly slipping out of the rat race to devote his time to doing whatever the hell he felt like.

Ken has put a wealth of information and files up on his website, including the complete Ken's Labyrinth, for free. You might as well give it a download and try it for yourself, especially if you have kids. I'm going to install it on my 8 year old's laptop tomorrow, because I want to introduce him to the genre, but I'd rather not do it by splashing buckets of gore on his face.

Retro Rating:

- *OMG! This piece of crap thinks it's Wolfenstein, but you don't even kill any dogs!*

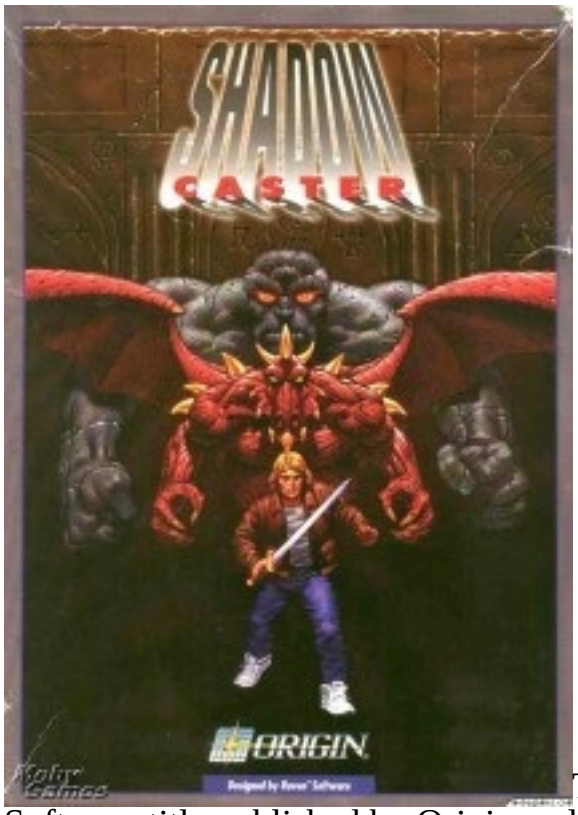
Modern Rating:

- *Try it. You might like it.*

Where to get it:

- Ken Silverman's website (free as of March 2015)

ShadowCaster
1993



This is a weird game. It's a Raven Software title published by Origin and running on a version of id software's Wolfenstein 3D engine that, as far as I know, was unique to this game. John Carmack himself wrote it, called it the Shadowcaster 3D engine, and it sits somewhere between Wolf3D and Doom from a tech standpoint, while it plays like an action-oriented version of Ultima Underworld, but with shapeshifting thrown in.

Like I said, it's a weird game. I remember picking it up and not really being sure what to expect, but it had Origin's name on it, so it had to be good, right? Well, kinda. It wasn't Ultima Underworld, although it had a touch of item management. It also wasn't Doom, because it had things like puzzles and a story mixed in with the pew-pew-pewing.

It starts off with your grandfather sitting you down in front of the fire one

night to tell you that you're actually a good shapeshifter with a MYSTERIOUS ORIGIN from another dimension who can save the world from the evil shapestealers, and then a giant flying gargoyle dog crashes through the window and grandpappy zaps you away in a sparkly blue flash.
You're then dropped right into the game with some kind of…thing coming at you. You'll probably die, because you don't understand the controls. At first, you'll think they're like Wolfenstein's – and they are, except that they're also not. Then, you'll probably think they're like Ultima Underworld's, and you wouldn't be wrong, except that you also would.



They're actually a mix between the two. Before you can fight, you have to select one of your hands (one of which can also hold things like wands, which is how you switch between spells and melee), then use the right mouse button to judo chop or fireball the various monsters into oblivion.

You also have to find keys and shift into different animal forms to get around various obstacles, at least until you hit that one spot with the water that I was never able to get past.

Playing the game today is actually a pretty smooth experience, once you figure out what the controls want you to do. It's a nice blend between the action and RPG genres, and is what I'd consider to be the first Action RPG FPS, if those ever even existed. One big feature of the game is the ability to actually aim when you're pew-pewing with spells, because they zap wherever you have the crosshair pointed, which seems like a little thing, but when you've been playing a lot of auto-aim, crosshair-less shooters, you come to appreciate the little things. You can also jump in the game, which is another revolutionary concept for the FPS genre (outside of Ultima Underworld). You have to activate a button on your HUD first, though, and then right click will send you hopping. It's a little cumbersome, but hey. It's something.

I'm actually probably going to jump back into it and play some more, just to see if I can finally get past wherever that water puzzle was that

stumped me back in ’93. I’m sure I’ll recognize it.

Retro Rating:

- *Hey, you got your Doom in my Underworld! No, you got your Underworld in my Doom!*

Modern Rating:

- *Hey, my pews actually pew where I pew them. Neat! Also, Mighty Cat Morphing Time!*

Where To Get It:

- *I found one copy on Amazon . ($7.37)*

Blake Stone
1993



A lot of people think Blake Stone came out after Doom, but it actually beat it by a few days back in December of ’93. People also think it uses the Doom engine, but people are stupid. It actually uses an enhanced version of the Wolfenstein 3D engine, but what confuses people is the fact that is has textured floors and ceilings, which wasn’t something typically seen in other Wolf3D clones (or games running on its engine). Of course, it didn’t help that Doom shipped a week later and basically crushed this poor game’s dreams of success, even if it did manage a sequel.

As far as Wolfenstein clones go, this one is pretty good. It takes the player from the brightly lit corridors of a dingy German castle and transports the action to the brightly lit corridors of sci-fi military bases.

You start off with a pew-pew laser gun that never runs out of pew juice, then slowly grab new weapons that are totally not just sci-fi versions of Wolfenstein's weapons. You also hunt for keys and open secret doors and, yeah. It's basically Wolfenstein with ray guns.



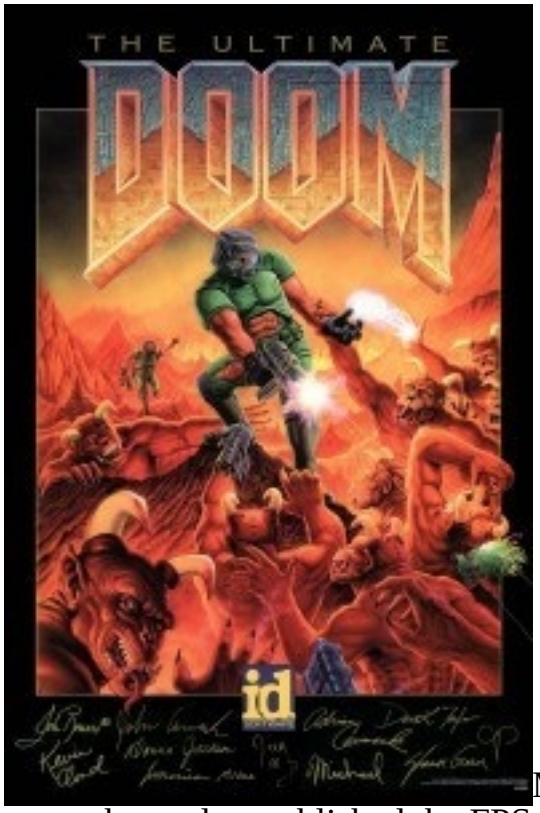
There are a few differences, though. For starters, you don't just kill everything you see. Some scientists are actually good guys who will help you out if you're kind enough to not murder them. Of course, they look exactly like the other scientists who will happily kill you to death, and the only way to tell them apart is to try talking to them. If you say hello and they give you a howdy-do back, you're good. But if you say hi and they try to vaporize your kidneys, then you know you've found a bad one. Pew him to death.

There are also vending machines where you can buy Soylent Green or whatever it is that people eat in the distant sci-fi future, which was a nice touch. But the biggest new feature is the fact that the Big Bad doesn't just sit in his Evil Bedroom, watching you murder all of his henchmen while he does nothing until you knock on his door with a rocket launcher. Instead, he pops up every now and then while you're playing. You pew at each other for a while until his health gets low enough, after which he teleports away back to his Evil Clubhouse or whatever. It's a simple thing, but shows some of the early signs of innovation that would soon come to define the golden age of the '90s FPS.

Retro Rating:
You asked your parents for Doom, then opened this on Christmas morning.
Modern Rating:
It's better than Wolfenstein, unless you just really want to kill Nazis.
Where to get it:

- GOG ($5.99 as of March 2015)

Doom
1993



More than Wolfenstein, Doom is the game that truly established the FPS genre and made it a force that would change gaming forever, for better or worse. Usually worse.

I'm not really going to spend much time on Doom because, let's face it, you've probably already played it. Even if you're 15 years old and just dipping your toes into the classic gaming kiddie pool, one of the first games your grabbed was Doom. Or maybe Doom 2. Or both.

There's a reason this game launched a genre, and that's because it's ridiculously fun. It's tightly designed, has great enemies, satisfying weapons, smart levels and AI bad guys who can piss each other off until they spend more time trying to murder one another in the shotguns than they do aiming their death barrels at your face.

Doom improved on Wolfenstein in every way. It brought dynamic lighting to the table, for example, so you could run into a fully lit room with a lot of ammo and the big, shiny key you needed sitting on a pedestal, and just know that picking it up was going to turn out the lights and unleash hell. Literally.

Doom takes sci-fi chocolate and dips it in the peanut butter of horror to produce a delicious combination of genres that perfectly captured the spirit of "edgy" gaming back in the '90s. It was dark, brutal and bloody, with a touch of demonic hellbeasts to stir up the religious right and give Tipper Gore's bleeding heart more than a few ulcers. And we loved it.

But even more than its single player campaign of shooting monster

demon muderbots in the face with shotguns was shooting your friends in their faces with shotguns, because Doom introduced multiplayer to the world, which changed everything.



LAN parties suddenly became a thing. You'd drag your giant PC over to a friend's house, where you'd meet up with several other friends who were all dragging their giant PCs, too. Then, you'd spend an hour hooking everything up through either a crappy Ethernet hub or ridiculous BNC connections, and another hour getting all the computers talking to each other. But then – eventually – you would launch the game and meet your friends on the battlefield.

And it was glorious.

Pizza, soda, chips, friends and Doom were all any self-respecting geek needed over a weekend, and Deathmatches quickly became regular after-hours affairs at many a workplace. Doom was everywhere, and if you weren't playing it in '93, then you either knew someone who was or you hadn't been born yet.

Playing it today is a bit underwhelming, though. If you screw your nostalgia goggles on tight enough so they just barely cut off most of the circulation to your hippocampus, then you'll probably still have just as much fun with it today as you did back then. However, it's a tough sell. It's still fun, it's still fast, and blowing a cacodemon away at point blank range with your shotgun is still a blast, but there are problems.

Doom's maps may have introduced verticality to the genre, but it didn't really expect you to use it. The predominance of the keyboard as the standard playing method at the time meant that it doesn't really require nearly as much skill today as you thought it did then, simply because the game's auto-aim handles all the hard parts for you. Just vaguely point your gun in the general direction of a bad guy, then press shoot and you'll probably score a hit whether he's above or below you, even though

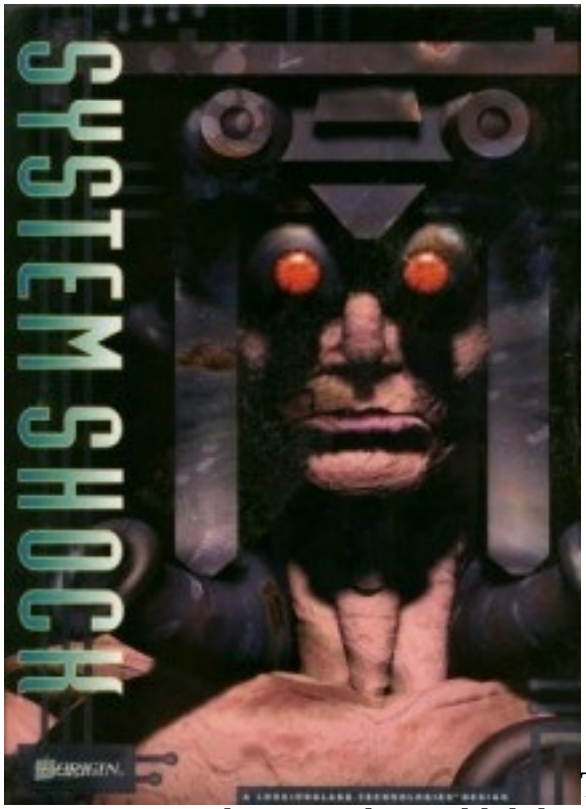
you’re always aiming at eye-level.
The level design is also much more confusing and maze-like than I remember it being, which is fine for multiplayer, but the key-hunting that plagued almost every damn shooter in the early years means you’ll probably spend a lot more time wandering around the same twisting hallways than you think.

Also, the best levels are in the Shareware version. Again. Shareware was a great model for a very brief period of time, but I’m kind of glad that time is over now. Shoving all the best levels into the demo version was a great way to get people to buy your full game, but it also meant that most people just kept playing those early levels over and over again even after they had the full version, because it was almost always downhill from there.

Retro Rating:
Shut up, it’s Doom.
Modern Rating:
It’s Doom. Shut up.
Where to get it:

- GOG ($5.99 as of November 2015)

System Shock
1994



This game made the list for the same reason Ultima Underworld did, which isn’t surprising considering the fact that it was made by the same people. It’s also pretty much

Underworld in space, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. As long as you don't mention the cyberspace bits.
We don't talk about those.

I must confess to never getting very far in System Shock, back in the day. I think this was probably because I had a crappy PC that had a hard enough time running the Underworld games, let along the improved (and much more taxing) engine behind System Shock. Also, I really sucked at the game.

It was just too confusing, to be honest. Maybe I was just stupider then than I am now, but I don't really think that's true. I'm probably just getting dumber with age, which seems to be the standard progression protocol, at least here in Texas. I keep expecting to wake up one morning to discover that I've suddenly turned into a government hating, flaming racist. The longer you live in the South, the more likely that is to happen, for some reason. Show me an old white guy in Texas, and I'll show you an angry Tea Party nutjob.

But anyway, that's Texas. System Shock takes place in space, so we don't have to worry about the cowboys right now. Instead, we have to contend with the most complicated game ever created by man.

> "Always be wary of any helpful item that weighs less than its operating manual." -Terry Pratchett

Seriously, when the very first screen of a game is entirely populated by tooltips, you're in for a rough time. This was hard even in 1994, when games tended to be a lot more complicated than they are now, but even by those standards, System Shock was a beast. It didn't help that the low resolution of the game meant that the surprisingly detailed textures became a cacophony of pixelated madness.



Playing it today is no better. In fact, it's probably worse. I couldn't even get the game running in DOSBox on OS X, as it kept throwing page faults and walls of giant blue text at me with each crash. I booted over into Windows and had better luck, but then I actually had to play the game.

And oh god. It hurt. The interface is basically the same as Ultima Underworld's, but the sheer amount of complexity in the environment makes it a lot more daunting. Plus, I couldn't figure out how to look up at the security camera to bash it with my lead pipe before I was murdered by a homicidal R2-D2.

Fortunately, a guy over in the GOG Twitch chat clued me into the existence of something called System Shock Portable, which makes the game MUCH more playable, by today's standards. It allows for increased resolutions and – most importantly – the addition of mouselook. The higher resolutions helped to clear up the noise of the busy textures, while mouselook and WASD movement made navigation a cinch. Of course, everything comes at a price, and the difference in mouse acceleration between free look mode and using the inventory cursor meant that I was either spinning around in circles like a hyperactive madman every time I so much as nudged my mouse, or slowly dragging my mouse, then lifting it up to put it back where it was so I could drag it some more until I finally managed to move the cursor the two inches I needed it to go so that I could finally drop that audio log I found into my inventory.

UPDATE: *System Shock: Enhanced Edition has been released from Night Dive Studios, which bundles up the best community mods and packages everything nicely into a self-contained game that just works. I'd recommend grabbing it, rather than fussing over getting the original release to work correctly.*

The game certainly doesn't hold your hand, either. In fact, it seems to shun your hand altogether, and probably wouldn't even talk to you at

parties. I spent at least half an hour walking around and around the FIRST TWO ROOMS of the game, because I needed to find a keycode that I couldn't find. Seriously, I don't think it even exists. I listened to all the audio logs I'd picked up, and nobody mentioned the code. I read through my emails and listened to SHODAN ramble on and on, describing every damn area of the entire freaking space station in excruciating detail, but she never mentioned the door code. And I never found it.
Fortunately, I've played other games descended from System Shock, so I took a stab and put in the Shock Code. This, if you don't know, is a code that has appeared in many games of the Looking Glass lineage. When in doubt, try 0451 and it'll probably work. Or, in the case of System Shock, just 451, since the first door has a three digit code.



After finally getting through the impenetrable door while still never having actually found the stupid code, I was plugging along fairly well with the game, which mostly felt like a slightly more cumbersome version of System Shock 2 thanks to the Portable mod, and I was feeling pretty good about myself. Then, I jacked into cyberspace and everything went to shit.

I don't know what liquid Kool Aid acid trip everyone was on back in the '90s that forced them to envision cyberspace as bizarre, LSD-fueled hallucinations into polygonal madness, but there really is nothing good about any version of cyberspace from anything produced in the '90s. System Shock is no exception to this rule.

Once I was jacked in, I was immediately thrust into a wireframe world of floating insanity. I was bumping into walls and picking up spinning cubes of data something or others, then I got hopelessly lost despite the giant arrows littering the place. Eventually, I was cyber-killed by a cyber-dog. And I gave up on life.

Retro Rating:

- *What is this? Is that a? Where is my? Shit, I'm dead.*

Modern Rating:

- *Don’t even try the original version in DOSbox, unless you hate yourself.*

Where to get it:

- GOG ($9.99 as of November 2015)

Doom II
1994



Following hot of the heels of Doom 1 was Doom 2, released a year later. If you want to know what it’s like, take everything I said about Doom The First and apply it to Doom The Second, because it’s basically the same damn game. They added the Super Shotgun though, which takes the original shotgun everyone loved from Doom 1, then throws a second barrel on it and removes half the animation.

Seriously, the shotgun is fun because you shootgun, then watch (and hear) the cool pump-action animation. In contrast, the Super Shotgun has, maybe, 3 frames of animation for reloading. It’s utter crap, and it ruined an otherwise great weapon for me.

Apart from the additional weapon, there’s really not much else that’s new in Doom 2. It’s more or less a level pack with a new gun. The real distinction between the two games is that Doom 1 was shareware, while Doom 2 was a commercial release you had to put on pants for if you wanted, because you had to go out in public to buy it at an actual store. Where people were and crap. It was horrifying.

The levels are a bit more tightly designed than in the first one, with slightly higher levels of complexity; but at the end of the day, it’s really just MOAR DOOMZ. Which isn’t a bad thing.



Animation!

Retro Review:

- *I had to go to the mall for this.*

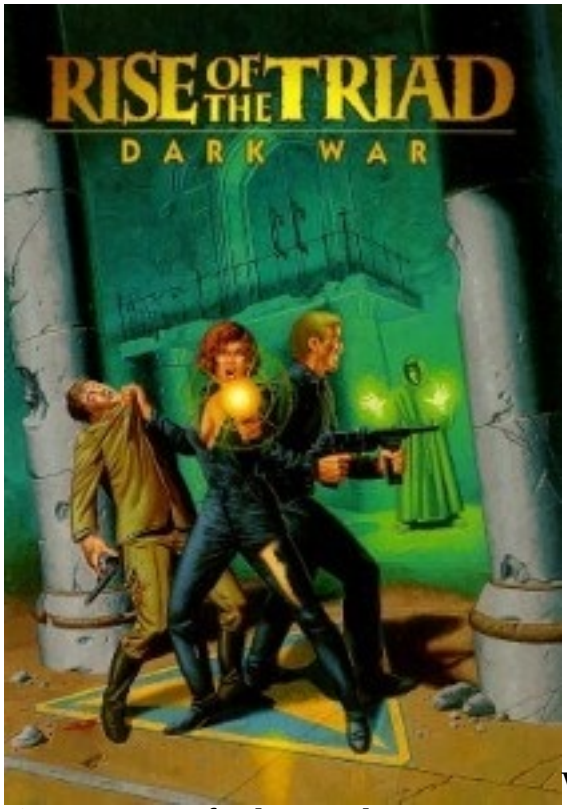
Modern Review:

- *The chainsaw is right behind you on the first level!*

Where to get it:

- GOG ($9.99 as of November 2015)

Rise of the Triad
1994



Where to even start with this game? I'm trying to find something nice to say about every game I put on this list, but I *never* liked Rise of the Triad. I remember downloading the shareware version in '94 and booting it up, then deleting it within the hour. I'm not sure what it was that I didn't like about it back then, but it

was probably mostly because it wasn't Doom. But that's kind of a stupid reason to not like a game, so I booted it back up and gave it another whirl, just to see if age and maturity had finally set in, and I could look at the game a little more fairly.
But no, I still hate it. The maps are just empty arenas of Shit Going On. There's jump pads and platforming in an engine that was never really designed to handle verticality very well to begin with. Then there are the digitized enemies in place of art. This was a big thing in the '90s that a lot of developers thought was super cool, but I was never a fan of the practice. I liked shooting demons and aliens and even evil human bad guys when they were cartoons, but I didn't particularly relish the idea of spraying my shootporn all over real people. (Even if they did end up looking more like a confused mess of congealed pixel jello by the time they were digitized, downscaled, and rendered in the game.)

To its credit though, RoTT did do several interesting things with the aging Wolfenstein 3D engine that would eventually become standard features in future game. Originally planned as an actual sequel to Wolf3D before id backed out of it (because Doom) and left Apogee holding a bag full of Nazis, the team ended up adding several cool things to it, like the aforementioned jump pads (except they were more goofy than cool in RoTT, especially when no animation was given to characters who used them, so you just saw floating puppets flying around everywhere, stuck in mid-air a walk cycles), breakable windows, bullet decals, etc… It even kinda/sorta had dynamic lighting, even if it was rudimentary and faked. It was still a little cool. I guess.



I think RoTT found most of its fans through its multiplayer component, which I never bothered with. But it's the only thing I can think of that might have saved this otherwise forgettable tech demo from obscurity, because it certainly wasn't the single player game. The story is ridiculous, the AI is broken, the level design is garbage, and it just isn't very good. IN MY OPINION. Your mileage may (and probably will) vary.

This game does have its fans. A lot of them, actually. So there's something here for people to like, even if I can't tell what it is. The game

even got a remake in 2013 (which I also didn't like), and legions of people still talk about how much fun RoTT is to this day. I don't know what they're seeing that I'm not, but like I said, the game did bring some cool new features to the table, and the multiplayer is probably pretty hysterical. I can understand the appeal, I guess. But then again, I never thought being able to play a character named Ian Paul Freely was comedy gold, either.

Retro Rating:

- *Oh, look. Platforming!*

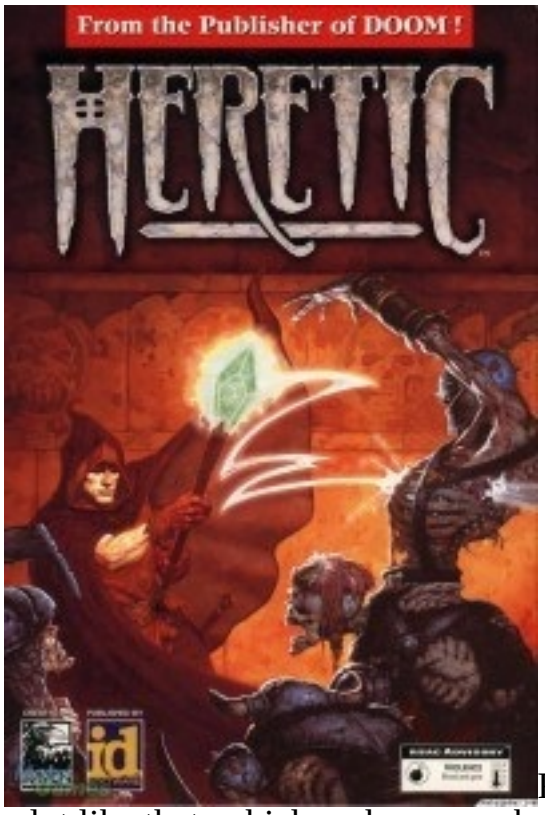
Modern Rating:

- *Prescription-strength nostalgia goggles.*

Where to get it:

- GOG.com ($5.99 as of March 2015)

Heretic
1994



Remember ShadowCaster? Heretic is a lot like that, which makes sense because it was developed by the same studio. However, it's much more Doom than Ultima Underworld this time around. In much the same way as Blake Stone was Wolfenstein with ray guns, Heretic is pretty much just Doom with magic spells. And it's pretty damn cool.

Heretic would go on to spawn several sequels, which isn't surprising. I believe this was the first game to feature the "gibs" that would later

become a standard method of super murder in every FPS game ever released. Gibs, for those kids way in the back of the class who have no idea what I'm talking about, is short for giblets. It basically refers to killing someone so hard that they explode into tiny chunks of gore meat, which is a standard feature of modern gaming that everyone loves. And you have Heretic to thank for it.
In addition to adding gibs, Heretic actually let the player look up and down for the first time in a FPS not developed by Looking Glass, which was nice. There was also some simple inventory management, but nothing too taxing. Mostly, it was just a re-skin of Doom, but that didn't really matter. Once you got tired of murdering people in space, you could switch to Heretic and murder people in a fantasy setting. Variety is the spice of life, after all.



When I say it plays like a re-skin of Doom, I mean it. Even the magic-based weaponry is straight out of Doom. You start the game with your Elven Wand, which not only shoots pew-pew magic at your enemies, but also serves as a stick you can beat them with when you run out of magical pew juice. It's basically a fist/pistol combo. Then you have things like The Gauntlets Of The Necromancer, which is a really fancy way of saying Medieval Chainsaw. And there's the Ethereal Crossbow which is really just a shotgun, the Dragon's Claw that's a machine gun, the Phoenix Rod that's a rocket launcher, etc… You get the idea.

So yeah, it's Fantasy Doom. Nothing wrong with that, though. It's actually still pretty enjoyable, in limited spurts. You're still running around and collecting keys because this is still the '90s and game designers haven't figured out better ways to funnel you through levels yet. But it's fun, surprisingly visceral, and is just generally a good, solid murder game for whole family. If you're into that sort of thing.

Retro Rating:

- *Oh my god. That dude EXPLODED!*

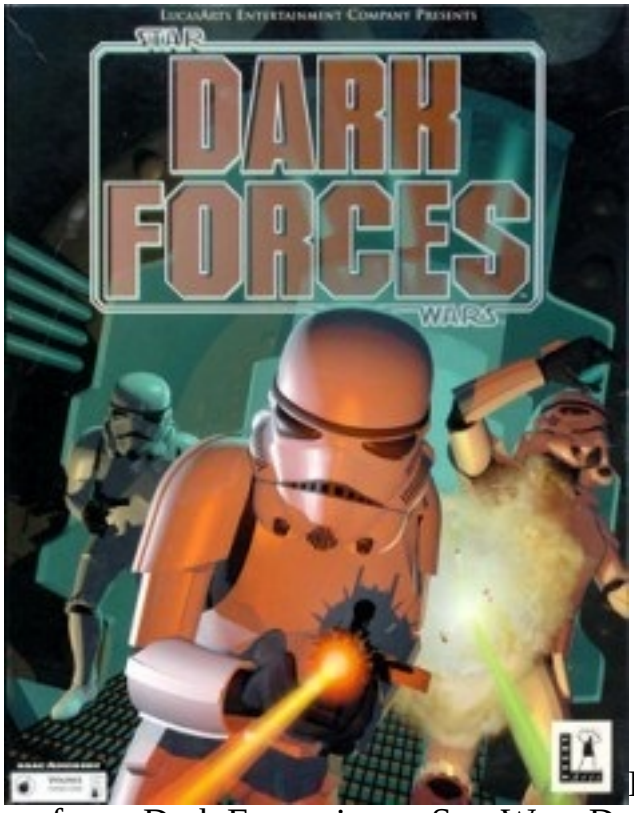
Modern Rating:

- *Chainsaw hands. Enough said.*

Where to get it:

- Steam ($4.99 as of March 2015)

Star Wars: Dark Forces
1995



Let's just get this out of the way up front: Dark Forces is **not** Star Wars Doom. It never was, no matter what that so-called "friend" of yours told you that time before you never spoke to him again. Yes, it's a first person shooter. Yes, you pew pew bad guys. No, you're not a Jedi. No, you don't have Force powers or a lightsaber. Yes, you run around and shoot things. But that's not all you do.

What separated Dark Forces from Doom was more than just an impressive Star Wars veneer. (And it was impressive. Each map had its own texture set, for example, with very few surfaces recycled between levels.) Whereas Doom was all random corridors and arenas designed to make good game-spaces, Dark Forces tried to create game-spaces out of actual places. Sure, they were limited by the technology (which was slightly more advanced than Doom's, with room-over-room architecture, actual 3D objects for many elements in the world, the ability to look up and down, jump and crouch, etc…), but LucasArts did its best to at least try and recreate the *feel* of a, say, the inside guts of a Star Destroyer.

Dark Forces also had an actual story, with cutscenes sprinkled between briefings, mission objectives, and lots of flavor text. It also had puzzles. Lots and lots of puzzles. Too many puzzles, really. And some of them were just ridiculous.

There was this one bit in a detention center where you somehow had to figure out that you needed to find a secret room that would let you enter the elevator shafts you didn't know you could go into, which would then allow you to cross over the tops of the elevators you didn't know you needed to carefully position, just so you could access an area you didn't even know existed. There was a lot of trial and error. And rage quitting.



A long time ago, in a bathroom far, far away…

It's not an overly difficult game on the surface, but one thing Dark Forces did that every other FPS has had the good sense *not* to do was bring Lives to the party. Player lives, I mean. For some occult reason known only to whatever dark, antediluvian gods the project leader had probably sworn allegiance to, LucasArts turned back the video game clock to 1980-something, grabbed the most annoying holdover from the coin-op arcade days, and added it to their run and gun, puzzle-solving shooter. But they didn't stop there. They also implemented an extremely wonky checkpoint system that would always revive you very near to where you died. Within inches, sometimes.

This was great when you'd just cleared a room of bad guys and didn't want to have to cover a lot of the same ground you'd just run across before some random Stormtrooper punched your ticket, but it wasn't so great if you hadn't actually managed to clear the room yet. More often than not, Dark Forces just respawns you almost exactly where you died, which means the lasers that just killed you will start killing you all over again immediately upon your unfortunate resurrection. It's even worse if

you're in, say, a hazard area where the very floor leeches health from your tired Rebel feet. And it's even more worser (that's a word) if you hadn't managed to find the stupid exit before you died.



But random nitpicks aside, the game was a lot of fun – and it still is. In fact, when I started playing it again to refresh my memory before writing this entry, I got sucked right back in and couldn't stop pew-pewing Imperial jerks until I'd finished the game. It's not terribly long, unfortunately, but that was really more of an issue when it cost 50 bucks instead of the paltry $6 it'll run you today.

At the suggestion of another friendly member of the GOG Twitch chat, I played through the game using the XL Engine , which brings a bit of the modern FPS to the old warhorse. Most importantly, it give you mouselook; but it also allows you to run the game in higher resolutions, which is a godsend when trying to play a 320×200 shooter on a modern display. However, the engine also applies texture filtering by default, so you'll probably want to turn that off unless you're an idiot. Applying anti-aliasing filters to detailed sprites just so you can blur up perfectly crunchy pixels is how the devil gets inside you, kids. Remember that.

A couple of words of warning about using the XL engine, though. First, you'll likely hit a game stopping crash bug in the Nar Shaddaa level, but you can get around it by launching the engine with -nosound on the command line. It kinda sucks, but it's not that big of a deal. Once you've finished the level, just quit the game and re-launch it normally. The other big problem happened to me at the end of the game, when defeating the Big Boss glitched and didn't trigger the final event and I ended up having to finish the game by way of watching the ending on YouTube, which kind of sucked.

Retro Rating:

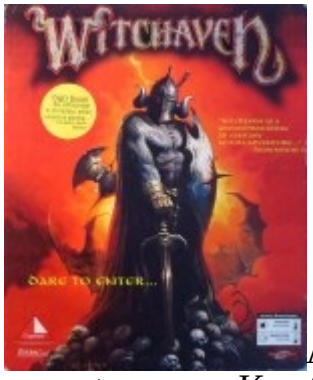
- *The force is strong with this one.*

Modern Rating:
Punching Gamorrean guards never gets old.
Where to get it:

- GOG.com ($5.99 as of March 2015)

Witchaven

1995



A lot of people think Duke Nukem 3D was the first game to run on Ken Silverman's Build engine, but that particular honor actually belongs to William Shatner's TekWar, which actually came out slightly before Dark Forces. But, since I didn't really feel like playing two awful games built on a solid technical foundation, I thought I'd go with the lesser of the two evils. Just take my word for it on Billy Shat's TekWar, though. No good can come of it.

Witchaven was billed as an Action Roleplaying Game, but it's a lot more FPS than it is RPG. Yes, your character gains experience levels, there's magic and swords, and you spend the game running through a castle/dungeon, but there's never really any roleplaying going on, unless maybe you shout Elizabethan slurs at your computer when you play it or something. In which case, you're probably a little scary, so let there be a plague on both your houses and let's move on.



Technically, there's not much S in Witchaven's FPSing. Unless maybe you change the word from Shooter to Slasher, because there's a lot of that. Most of the game is built around melee combat with various fantasy weapons like daggers, magical swords and halberds, all of which involve walking right up to the nearest braindead monster and clicking your mouse to slash, bash, or stab it to death in its squishy bits. If there's any nuance to the combat, it's that you might need to back up between swings so the beastie doesn't hit you. SO EXCITING.

There are spells too, which all have very limited ammo in the form of scrolls you'll need to be able to cast any of them. (You also need to be a certain level for some spells.) They're as close as the game gets to

shooting, if you don't count the broken bow and arrow mechanic that I don't count because it's broken.
The game looks nice, I guess…if you're into digitized real-world hands for you avatar, along with the different weapons. You can also finally smash barrels in this game, so there's that. Personally, I didn't like the graphics back in '95, and I don't like them today. There's too much digitized work going on, along with rudimentary pre-rendered 3D for the monster sprites (although it could be rudimentary claymation, for all I know). I just never really liked that style, but you might. So hooray for you or whatever.

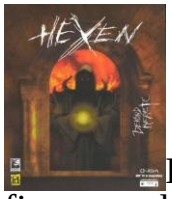
Retro Review:

- *Hey, who took my guns?*

Modern Review:
At least the X-TREME GORE is funny.
Where to get it:

- Amazon ($0.89 on a bundle disc, along with a bunch of other crappy games)

Hexen: Beyond Heretic
1995



Hexen is the first sequel to Heretic, and probably one of the first recorded cases of *Sequentialnumberingaphobia* that plagues so many developers and publishers today. Why it couldn't just be called Heretic 2 is a mystery, especially when the next sequel is called Hexen 2 instead of Heretic 3. And then there's the actual Heretic 2, which came out after both Hexens and now I have a headache and need to lie down.

Hexen takes the brightly-colored, yet "dark" fantasy world of Heretic and throws a few heaping fistfuls of '90s grunge at it. As a result, everything looks much darker and a lot more brown than the world of Heretic did. I don't know, it's probably edgy or x-treme or something.



For some reason they probably thought was a good idea at the time, the developers also decided to add some kind of rudimentary lighting falloff from the player's perspective. By this, I mean that things up close to you are "brighter" while things in the distance are "darker". But there's never any actual change in the luminosity of textures because that sort of thing hadn't been invented yet. Instead, they went with a sort of newspaper comic style of shadowing distant objects, by way of randomly slapping black pixel dots all over the screen. And it really looks awful.

Graphics aside, Hexen is basically just a grittier version of Heretic, so if you liked the first one, you'll probably like the second one. Unless, of course, what you liked about the first one was the graphical style that Hexen took out behind the barn and crapped all over.

Retro Review:

- *Medieval Grunge. Needs more flannel.*

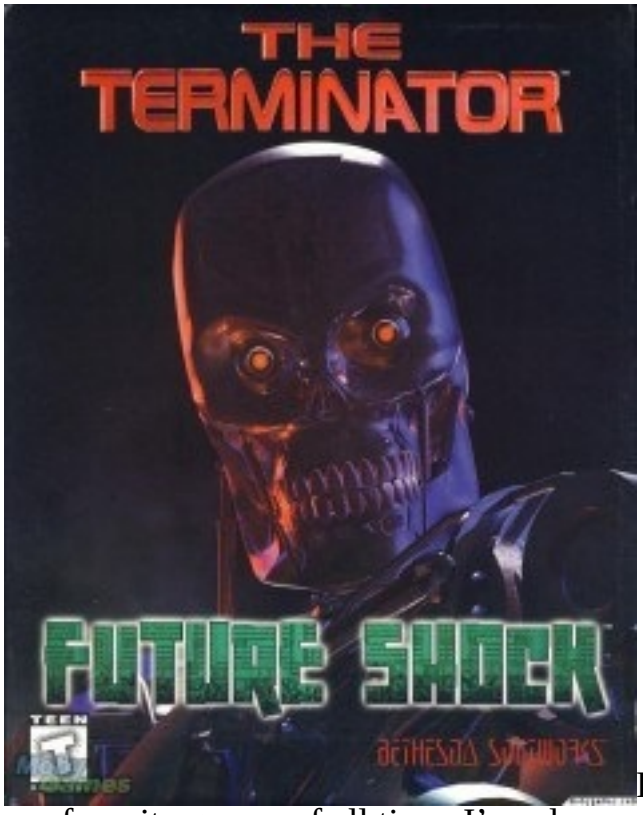
Modern Review:

- *I'm attacking the darkness!*

Where to get it:

- Steam ($4.99 as of March 2015)

Terminator: Future Shock
1995



Full disclosure: This is one of my favorite games of all time. I've always had a soft spot for the Terminator film series, but there were never really any good game adaptations until Future Shock came along. Unfortunately, it never really got the recognition it deserved, either at the time or in hindsight. I'm not really sure why that is, because this game had a couple of very important firsts.

Well, I take that back. I know exactly why Future Shock isn't recognized for its contributions to the FPS genre, and that reason is called Quake. Everything that Quake did in 1996, this game had already done a year earlier, only no one noticed. It was the first fully 3D game, with polygonal geometry and world objects (cars, burned out buildings, etc…), and it was the first game to feature mouselook. In general, people tend to give these kudos to Quake, probably because whoever was in charge of marketing at Bethesda in the mid '90s hadn't figured out the Internet yet.

The game still features some sprites for weapons, various pickups and some level decorations (like bodies and mass skeletal graveyards…you know, things that really tie a room together), but most of the game was made up of textured polygons in 3D space. This meant that mouselook was a vital inclusion to make the game playable, especially with the level of verticality Future Shock brought to the table. I have very distinct memories of my palms actually sweating while I climbed precarious catwalks high into the air, or crossed tiny beams over large chasms while trying not to fall. No game since Future Shock has been able to do that to me.

The game also features a slight story along with mission briefings, but mostly it's your typical Run Here, Pew That, Go There affair. However, the environments are very sparse, and it's a little too easy to get lost in them. It's not because they were designed as mazes, was the case with most FPSs up to this point, but because so much of everything looks the same. In part, this was by design, since you're supposed to be running around the desolated landscape of a post-nuclear war, but it was also due to technological limitations and budget constraints. Still, once you getyour bearings, the game becomes remarkably immersive.



Or it did, at least. Back in 1995. As much as I love this game, it's probably something best avoided today, unless you never played it and just want to experience what the first true 3D game was like for the sake of posterity or whatever. If you're one of *those* people. However, if you're one of the lucky few who actually played Future Shock back in '95 and loved it, you might want to keep it safely locked away in your memory. If you do insist on trying it today, know that it runs decently in DOSBox, but there's no frame limiter built into the game. This means you're going to be constantly modifying your CPU cycles on the fly as you play, otherwise everything will move way too fast in some places and way too slow in others. It's not a deal breaker, but it's something to consider.

But the hardest part about playing it today is just playing it today. My nostalgia goggles are prescription strength when it comes to this game, but even they were having a hard time throwing enough rose tint at my screen while I tried to enjoy myself. The world is just *too* empty and too desolated, with not enough going on at any given time when you're not being attacked by mechanical muderbots. This emptiness somehow worked in Future Shock's favor back in '95, but playing it today after having experienced better post-apocalyptic landscapes in other games, it's really hard to find the immersion again.

Still, if you can stick with it and somehow temporally transpose your

mind from the here and now to the there and then, there's a lot to love about Terminator: Future Shock, but you're going to have to work at it. You know, like with marriage.

Retro Rating:

- *I have vertigo.*

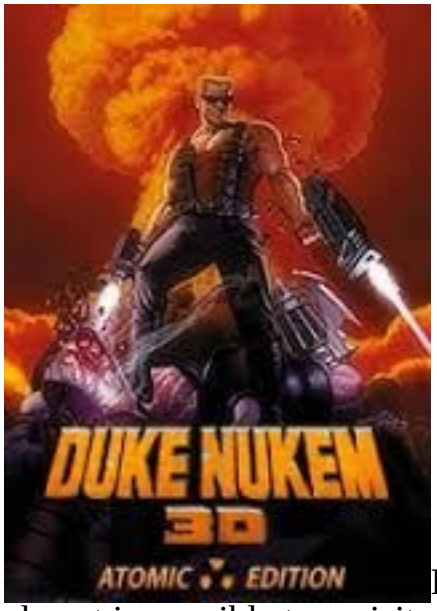
Modern Rating:

- *The goggles! They do nothing!*

Where to get it:

- Amazon (from $19.99 to $39.99 as of March 2015)

Duke Nukem 3D
1996



How do I describe Duke Nukem 3D? It's almost impossible to revisit without two decades worth of social change and personal maturity coloring my views, but there's no doubting Duke's influence on the genre. Apart from anything (and everything) else Duke Nukem 3D did, it brought Build into its own, and showed what the best 2.5D FPS engine was capable of. It also really ushered in the era of developers exploring inventive, crazy weapons and items that would come to define much of the '90s FPS landscape. That, coupled with a high level of interactivity in the environment and some great multiplayer, was enough to make Duke stand out from the crowd. However, to talk about the other things the game did, I'm going to have to channel my inner 20-something and give you both his perspective from '96, followed by my perspective as a 40-year-old father today.

20-Something Me In 1996: Holy shit! Duke is freaking amazing! The multiplayer is so sweet! I seriously, like, shrunk my friend and then squashed him to death with my foot. EPIC! And dude. Dude. DUDE. The game has, like, boobs in it and shit. And you can pay strippers to dance

for you, it’s so edgy! And Duke says all this crazy shit from, like, Army of Darkness and shit. It’s SO funny. Oh, and you’re on a mission to save the world’s chicks because alien bastards are abducting them getting them pregnant and shit. And they’re all naked too, but they’re covered in green goo so you have to mercy kill them. And you can blow up buildings and shit and even play pool. Seriously, dude. You gotta try this game. It’s so dope and shit! Everything about is just the bomb dot com and shit. Word to your mother. And shit.

40-Year-Old Me In 2015: Ugh. This is actually one of the worst Build engine games. The distortion from looking up or down is terrible, the enemy AI is crap, and the only really good levels were in the shareware version, which were mostly only fun in multiplayer, which nobody’s even playing anymore, so there’s not even any point in that. And then there’s the misogyny. Good lord. I get that he’s supposed to be an over the top action hero, but does Duke have to be such a freaking pig? And why is an action hero defined by strippers shaking pixel boobs, anyway? I never want my son playing crap like this, that’s for sure. Objectifying women to an almost laughable (if it was so disgusting) degree, running around spouting catch phrases like it’s not at all obnoxious, this is probably one of the worst retro games anyone could let a kid play. Just…ugh. Oh, and about those catch phrases. Enough with the damn movie quotes. It’s not funny. It’s just appropriating someone else’s material for you own use. It’s lazy and stupid, and Seth MacFarlane’s already got that market covered.

Retro Rating:

- *Come get some!*

Modern Rating:

- *Why did I ever like this?*

Where to get it:

- GOG.com ($5.99 as of April 2015)

Quake
1996



There weren’t many FPS games of note released in 1996, and for good reason: because Quake changed everything. This, more than any other shooter on the list thus far, is the game that truly defined the ’90s FPS. Everything else was just getting us here. Everything after was just refining and building on Quake’s foundation. This is what brought the modern FPS to life, with its true 3D texture-mapped, polygonal maps, character models, weapon models, effects, a soundtrack by Trent Reznor, and two guns that actually fired Nine Inch Nails into people. The game had everything.

Of course, it would take a little bit of time for GLQuake and Quakeworld to fully manifest id’s masterpiece, but even out of the box, the game was great. It was schizophrenic, had no idea what its theme was and no story to speak of, but the gameplay was like nothing anyone had ever experienced before. Rocket jumping became a thing. Mouselook became the accepted control method. WASD keyboard movement became standard. Everything we know and love about first person shooters today truly started with Quake.

And it still holds up. Use something like Fitzquake to play it today, and it’s never played better. It’s just as fast and as crazy as you remember it, and every bit as good as you’ve heard if you never played it. Throw in some of Steve Polge’s Reaper Bots, and you even have excellent single-player deathmatch (which is nice, since most of Quake’s environments were designed as deathmatch maps more than they were as single player gameplay environments).

I can’t say enough good things about Quake. Just go grab it and play it for yourself. If you played in back in the ’90s, you’ll be thrilled by mainlining the nostalgia heroin. And if you’ve never played it, you owe it to yourself to give it a try. You won’t be sorry.

Retro Rating:

- *Frags! Gibs! NiN!*

Modern Rating:

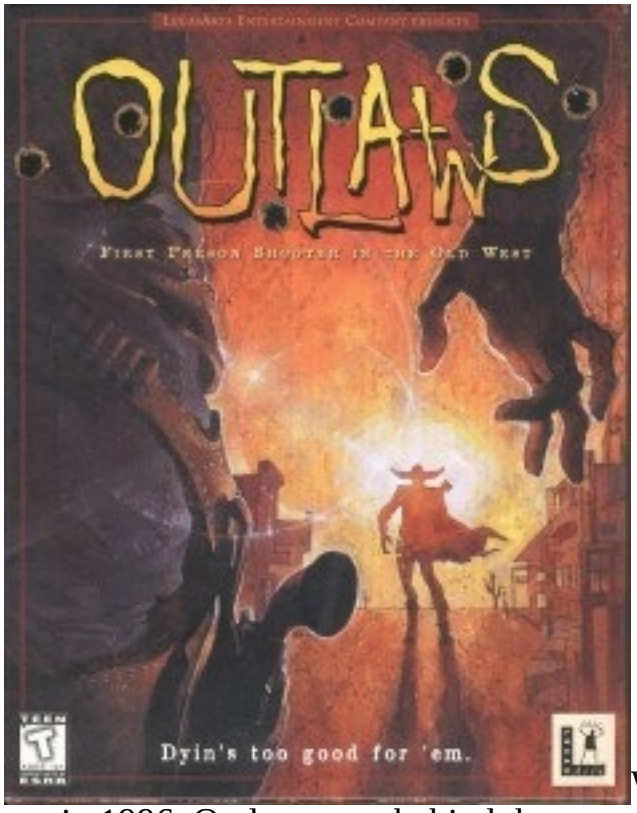
- *I really miss the ’90s.*

Where to get it:

- Steam ($9.99 as of April 2015)

Outlaws
1997

Note: The FPS really took off in earnest in 1997, after which each year just gets bigger and more overcrowded than the last. From here on out, I’ll be breaking every year into manageable chunks, so as not to overload your browsers or my server.



With Quake having just come out in 1996, Outlaws was behind the curve when it meandered onto the scene in 1997. A lot of people obsessed with chasing the technology dragon overlooked its 2.5d graphics, and they missed out on a great game.

Sure, it was blocky and filled with sprites, but everything else about it was great. First, it was a Western game back when there was no such thing as a Western game, outside of maybe that horrible Custer’s Revenge game on the Atari 2600 where the whole point of the game is to rape Native American women. (Seriously. That was an actual thing, back in ’82.)

Second, the cutscenes and music really sold the spaghetti western vibe the game was going for. You basically play Not Clint Eastwood on a tale of revenge, and it’s every bit as campy and cliched as you’d expect it to be –

which is a good thing. It all just…works.



I remember playing on the hardest difficulty settings, where getting shot once or twice was the end of you. It felt “realistic” to me at a time before the genre had ever considered adding any realism. On the standard difficulty settings, it was a basic Doom clone with cowboy paint – but that paint job went a long way. Plus, the levels were all designed with at least some amount of practical logic to them, since you were meant to be running around towns and settlements and such, although the corridor-crawl is still present in the various caves and such you’ll be running through.

You also had to reload your guns in Outlaws, which I think was probably the first action-based FPS to feature that mechanic, although I could be wrong. It happens.

If you’re a fan of 2.5d shooter or westerns in general – or at least the spaghetti westerns of the ’60s – then you should totally check it out. You won’t be disappointed.

Retro Rating:
I hope you plant better than you shoot!
Modern Rating:
I’m your huckleberry.
Where to get it:

- GOG ($9.99 as of November 2015)

Shadow Warrior
1997



Riding high on the success of Duke Nukem 3D, 3DRealms began milking the Build engine for all it was worth with Shadow Warrior. They also went back to their well of shocking-for-shock-value's-sake and created another game with an unapologetically sexist hero, but this time cranked up the shock value by making him an extremely stereotypical Asian character.

Oh, and there's lots of bewbs, too. Basically, just replace Duke's strippers and captured women with anime babes, and you have Shadow Warrior's female characters.

You play as a character named Lo Wang. The first episode is called Enter the Wang. You routinely shout, "Who wants some Wang" as you play. Get it? HAW HAW HAW!

The game is offensive as can be – but it's done in a tongue in cheek way, and makes no apologies for it. I remember not really liking the game very much because of this back in '97, as it felt infantile to my refined 20-something brain. Which is saying something.


Revisiting it now though, and accepting it for what it was, the game isn't bad. It's got some great weapons representative of the inventive design of the era, it's difficult and demanding, and it might even make you chuckle once in a while. Not

because of how funny its horrible jokes are, but by how truly awful they turn out. It's like a MST3k version of an FPS, if that makes any sense. The title was recently rebooted in a much better game of the same name, but the original is still fun to run around in and pew pew enemies. It's level design can get pretty convoluted though, so expect to spend a large chunk of playtime wandering in circles while George Broussard mocks you through the mists of time.

Retro Rating:
I found a girl taking a shower!
Modern Rating:
Don't go chasing waterfalls.
Where to get it:

- GOG ($5.99 as of November 2015)

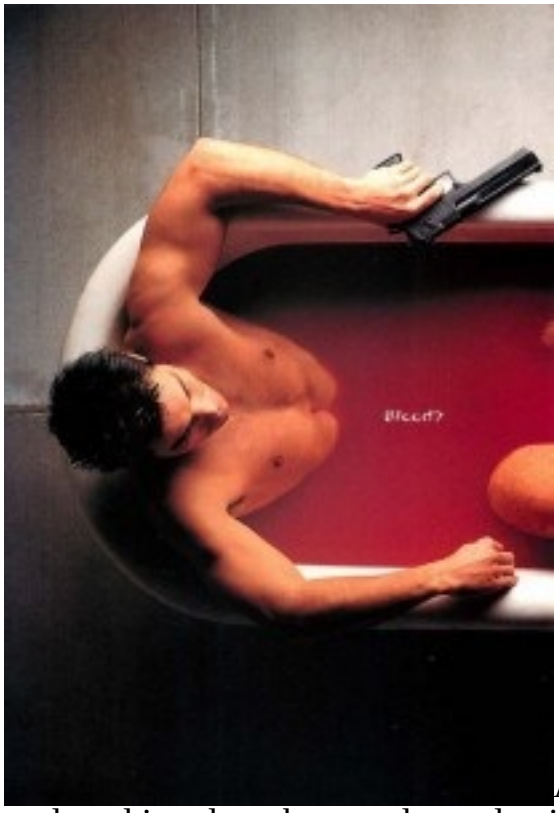
Blood
1997



Returning to the trough with their dead horse, 3DRealms continued to crank out more Build engine games with yet another Build-powered series: Blood. (The sequel, released a year later, limped along on the LithTech engine.)

Blood is everything that Duke 3D and Shadow Warrior weren't. It was still grotesquely violent and still mired firmly in B-movie sensibilities, but the puerile stabs at humor were mostly gone. It still had plenty of jokes, but it was a darker game. With hardly any boobies in it at all!

Being a horror fan, I was immediately drawn into Blood's gothic world. You start the game in a grave, wielding a pitchfork for crying out loud. The whole game is a love letter to horror fans.



And it works. Still works, too. I replayed it at length recently, and enjoyed my time with it every bit as much in 2015 as I did in 1997. I'm not sure what it is about Blood that works so much better than either Duke's non-shareware episodes or most of what Shadow Warrior had to offer, but it does.

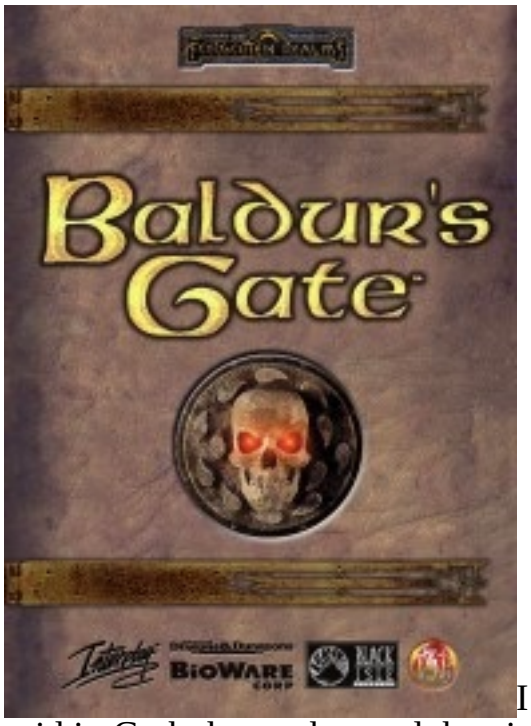
Maybe 3DRealms was just maturing. Maybe their design skills were improving. Maybe it was just an ephemeral, inexplicable *something* that Blood did right. It could be the weapons, but all of 3DR's games had great, inventive ways to murder angry sprites. It could be the level design, but it's still on the weak, maze-heavy side of the design equation. Maybe it was the art direction, voice acting, or music. I honestly have no idea, but Blood was – and remains – my favorite Build engine game.

UPDATE: *The always groovy Dave Allen pointed out that, perhaps Blood holds up because it wasn't actually developed by 3D Realms. And he's right. Turns out, it was only produced by 3DR; it was developed by something called Q Studios, which was absorbed into Monolith's monolith (who would later go on to create some great shooters, after they figured out how to make LithTech not suck). This goes a long way to explaining why Blood feels like it handles its subject matter so much more skillfully than Duke3D and Shadow Warrior did.*

Retro Rating:
Looks like there's killing to do.
Modern Rating:
I live…again!
Where to get it:

- GOG ($5.99 as of November 2015)

Life Bytes: Baldur's Gate



I’ve never liked Baldur’s Gate. There, I said it. Grab the torches and the pitchforks, and it’s pistols at high noon or whatever. I don’t care. There are many reasons why two of Bioware’s *mo st famousest* games never clicked with me, but I’ll go into most of those whenever I get to the late ’90s section of Life Bytes . For now, let’s just say that I’ve been trying to like these damn games for well over a decade, and it just ain’t happenin’, kids.

First, let’s just get the 800 pound dragon out of the way up front: Advanced Dungeons and Dragons. I hate it. But I also love it. But I hate it, too. I’ve always loved D&D, ever since I got my first red box starter kit. I created tons of characters with detailed back stories, complex relationships and interesting motivations. I designed intricate campaigns with branching plot lines and living NPCs. And then I didn’t do anything with any of it.

BONUS FEATURE: Baldur's Gate

- Introduction
- Part One
- Part Two
- Part Three
- Part Four

- Part Five

Part Six

The Complete Life Bytes Series

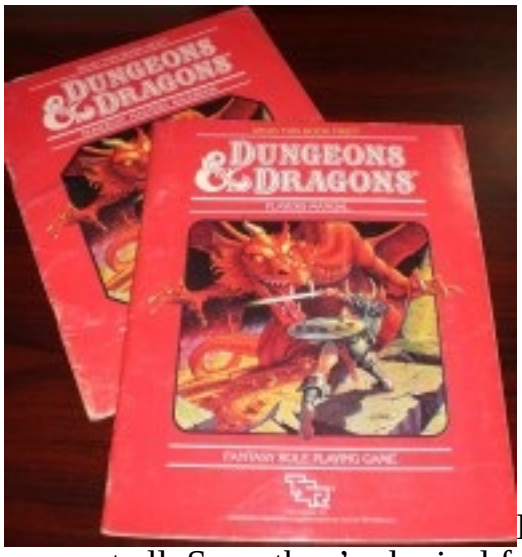
- Growing Up Geek: Introduction
- BONUS FEATURE: Baldur's Gate
- BONUS FEATURE: Baldur's Gate 2
- BONUS FEATURE: FPS Retrospective
- BONUS FEATURE: Star Wars Games

I never actually played D&D, because I didn't have anyone to play D&D with. Sure, I had friends; I even had nerdy friends. But my geek friends were on the shy side, and way too self-conscious to roleplay where other people might see their loincloths, while my friends of the non-nerd persuasion would only get as close to Dungeons and Dragons as it took to punch whoever was playing it. Any friends I had between the two extremes who might've actually played D&D had religious parents of the sort that thought rolling dice is how the devil gets inside you. (This being during the Satanic Panic years of the '80s coupled with living in the Deep South, parental prohibition of RPGs was a pretty common childhood trauma.)

In short, I never really got to play with the AD&D rules apart from pretending to play the game in my head whenever I'd crack out my rulebook and work on a new character. And Baldur's Gate is nothing if not slavishly devoted to the AD&D rules.

Which are stupid.

And I hate them.



Honestly, some of them just make no sense at all. Sure, they're logical from a mechanical perspective, but the

fiction wrapped around some of the game systems just makes no sense at all. Take mages, for instance. They have to memorize spells every night, then go to sleep to fully commit them to memory (for some reason) before they can be cast. This makes sense from a gameplay perspective, as it adds an element of pre-planning to encounters. But on the other hand, it's batshit crazy.
Imagine being a mage in the D&D universe. You work hard and master a new spell, memorize how to cast it and then excitedly fall asleep, eager to wake up the next morning and cast Magic Missile at the pre-dawn darkness or whatever. So you do that. AND IT IS AMAZING.

Then what? You're standing there, all zippy-zap happy with yourself, AND YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW YOU DID WHAT YOU JUST DID. Because you forgot the instant you cast the spell.

Imagine this same logic applying to anything else in the D&D universe. Learn to tie your shoes? Great job! Just pray they don't come untied during the day, because you're not going to remember how to how to do that neat bunny rabbit trick until you teach yourself anew and fall asleep all over again. Learn a new sword technique? Awesome! You use it to kill an orc that was attacking you, but now you're just standing there, clueless and clutching your sword, wondering where the pointy end goes. You'll need to learn how to fight again before bedtime. Meanwhile, you were just murdered by an angry rabbit. Sorry.

D&D mages are all madmen. They have to be. Every moment of their lives dangles on the precipice between absolute power and complete imbecility. Sisyphus had it easier.

But anyway, back to Baldur's Gate. I'm determined to figure out what people love about these games – *and boy, people do love them* – so I've started playing through the first one. **Again.**

Why? SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO.

You are welcome.

If you want to jump down this lunatic rabbit hole yourself, you can pick up the original game (with all expansions) DRM-free for $9.99 over at GOG.com , or you can grab the Enhanced Edition for $19.99, also at GOG.com and DRM-free. I'm playing the Enhanced Edition, if you're curious.

Part One

SHUT UP, IMOEN!

Oh, god. I forgot about this useless mess of pixels called a companion. Her name is Imoen, and her voice is the best example of why having limited voice acting in these games is a blessing. Although ostensibly a thief of some repute, she is basically useless in all things that don't involve annoying the living shit out of me every five seconds.

She's also the first companion you get, once you finally make it out of the tutorial town with all of its creepy green-robed monks groping at your tender bits under the guise of "helping" you. Yeah, I know what you're about, Mister Raperobe. We *all* know.



It begins.

Anyway, once you leave the safety of Candlekeep, your foster father or stepdad or cradle-robing sketchy uncle spirits you away under cover of darkness. And is immediately blown up.

You get ambushed, and he tells you to RUN! So your character slowly – and good lord, do the characters in this game putter about with all the speed of a tranquilized sloth – meanders off the screen while a whole bunch of fizzledly-plop happens with magic and particle effects until your great grand-dad or wise old mentor or whatever the hell he was finally blows up and dies, not necessarily in that order.

After that, you wake up the next morning and fuck me, if it isn't Imoen coming merrily down the way, cheerfully proclaiming that you're a queer fellow before acknowledging that, yeah, she knows the guy who raised you as his own child was just brutally exploded before your very eyes the night before. But hey, she really wanted to get out of Candlekeep and see the world, so heya! She's coming with you, whether you like it or not.

So, fine. Come on, maybe you'll die soon. I don't really care.



Ugh.

We quickly come across a couple of shady dudes named Xzar and Montaron, because you always meet people with high scoring Scrabble names like Xzar in these sorts of games. They both seem intractably evil, and Xzar is obviously insane, but who the hell cares? I need meat shields. Join up!

They want to explore some mine or something, but I'm supposed to go to the Friendly Arms Inn and meet someone named Khalid or something. According to my uncle grandpa or whatever he was, Khalid will help me in my quest. I don't doubt this, because there was a guy named Khalil who owned a convenience store near my house when I was in high school, and he never checked IDs. I figure they're probably related, so I've already got an opener.

Unfortunately, before we get there, Imoen runs the fuck off to chase butterflies or something because god knows the pathfinding in this game is EXCEPTIONAL, and the next thing I know, she's being attacked by a wolf. So we run over to save her sorry ass, and Montaron bites the big one. Sorry to see you go, weird little dude. But them's the breaks.

I mourn his passing by taking all his gear, then we head on our way. Finally, we arrive at the Inn.

And we're immediately attacked.

Xzar gets blown up, but we kill the bad guy.



Let us mourn his passing.

I loot both their corpses, then take a pee on Xzar’s cold body because he quoted Hannibal Lector earlier for some reason, which just kind of pissed me off because this is supposed to be the one damn fantasy world where Anthony Hopkins *doesn’t* exist.

Anyway, it’s just me and gods-damn Imoen again because she just refuses to die, so we head into the Inn to meet Khalid.

Hopefully, he’ll kill her for me…



Hooray! Half of us made it.

Part Two
DAMMIT, IMOEN!

I meet Khalid in a corner of the inn. He st-st-stutters, either from an

unfortunate speech impediment that I would never make fun of, or because he's a terrified little weasel, crapping himself at shadows. It could go either way, really.
He introduces me to someone named Jaheira, who talks with that perfect THIS SOUNDS FOREIGN accent used by C-list actors everywhere, and tells me that they need to go to the same damn place the other guys I picked up needed to go to.

Everybody wants to go to the Nashkel Mines, I guess. Which is kind of like Nashville, but with less banjo and more medieval stuff or something. Whatever. I just don't care anymore.

Jaheira tells me, "We'll leave as soon as you're ready, though it should be soon." Which I take to mean, "Take your time as long as we leave right the hell now, idiot man-child." So we leave.

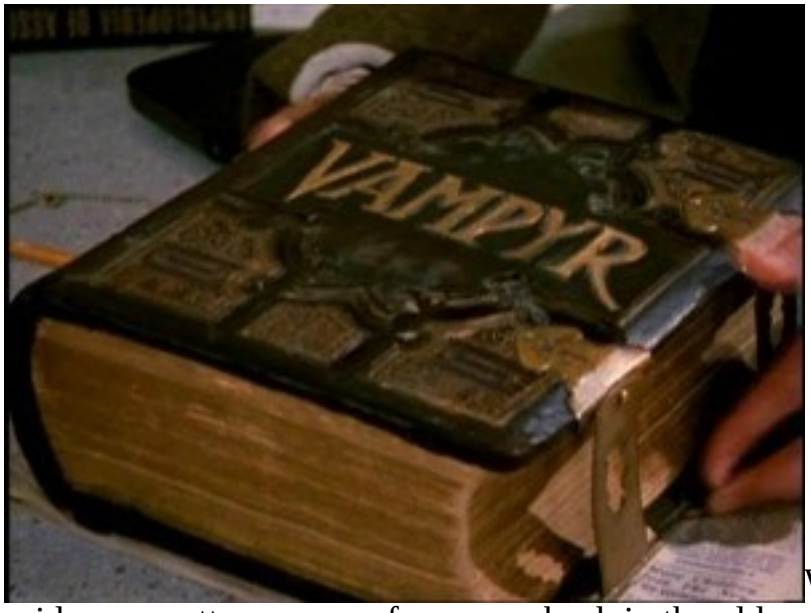
Or try to, at least. As soon as we hit the door, a disembodied voice scolds me from the beyond. "You must gather your party before venturing forth," it commands.

GODS DAMMIT! Where the hell is Imoen?!

I find Imoen continuously walking back and forth between a very fat man and a very inanimate chair. Clearly, she was stymied by their lack of movement. Mother frakkin' Imoen…

I take the shoe-licker by her hand and lead her to the door, and now we leave. But not before I notice that I'm apparently carrying around two corpses with me.

The dead guys we picked up along the way are still dead, and their portraits are blanked out on my screen. Why? I don't know. Because the game doesn't tell you shit. It's like that. Instead, it wants you to CONSULT THE MANUAL.



Which, it must be said, was pretty common for games back in the olden times. However, whereas most manuals often included as much flavor text and lore as they did instructions, Baldur's Gate wasn't about to hear any of that world building noise, and instead hits you with a GIANT TOME OF ARCANE MATH. 125 pages of it, to be exact. And don't even think about skipping it, or you'll be lugging around corpses with no clue what to do with them other than continue apologizing to everyone you meet for the smell.

It turns out, I can resurrect the poor bastards at a temple. Great! There was a temple back in Candlekeep, where I grew up. We'll just fast travel back there, bring these decomposing wretches back to life, and head on to fortune and glory in the mines.

TO CANDLEKEEP!

Except of course it couldn't be that easy. We trek back to the place I just left not two days ago, which takes TWENTY HOURS of game time to get back to, and I strut up to the door. I say howdy do to the friendly guard at the door, who then tells me to piss off and I can't come in.

Why not? Because suddenly those little green raperobe monks need A SPECIAL BOOK THAT I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS before they'll let me back in gates of the town I spent my entire life in, minus the past couple of days when I was out saving the world and watching my stepdad foster uncle whatever be blown into tiny fleshchunks right in front of me. You'd think that'd get them to cut me a little slack, right? WRONG.

Fine. Bitches. BACK TO NASHKEL!



“Egh…how tedious all this becomes.”

We walk all the way back to Nashkel, Tennessee, where I wander around, looking for a temple. Along the way, I meet up with some kind of untamed witch or something who has a voice almost as annoying as Imoen’s. She tells me that some bandits are after her, so I help out and murder them by clicking I don’t know what until they’re all dead. Then, she joins my party and I walk into the Inn to rest from my wounds, where I am subsequently MURDERED IN THE PANCREAS BY AN ASSASSIN.

MOTHER DAMMIT, THIS GAME.

I load my quick save and try again. And again. And again. I eventually kill the amazing murderbot sent to destroy me, but not before she KILLS EVERYONE IN MY PARTY except myself…and gods damn Imoen.

“Heya! You’re a queer fellow!”

ARGH! @%(*%(@#%*@%). Fine, Imoen. Just…fine. Let’s go find the stupid temple.

We find the stupid temple, which happily resurrects my fallen comrades for a paltry 100 damn gold pieces per useless twat, which is up from two useless twats at this point, to four useless twats. Not counting Imoen, of course, who remains a useless twat, but who stubbornly refuses to die.



400 gold coins? They aren't worth a
single piece of eight.

So we're all resurrected, and we go back and rest at the Inn, which is now blissfully free of assassin murder droid wizard thingies. A good night's rest later, and it's finally off to the mines…

We make to it to mines without much incident, although I slay enough Gibberlings – whatever the hell those are – until I just stop feeling. Anything.

I meet some dude named Something Stupid That I Don't Remember, and he tells me something like, "Oh, wailey wailey! The mine's is overrun and the iron has all gone bad and save us, won'tcha please and thank you kindly!" Only he gives me just one day to do it, (but the joke's on him, because I end up sleeping at least three weeks inside those damn mine shafts while I heal between every incessant battle with ridiculous kobold maniacs).

We enter the mines. We kill things. Lots of things. I feel nothing. I eventually even stop looting the corpses of my fallen enemies because I've lost the will to care anymore. Plus, it's an enormous pain in the ass and I keep running out of inventory slots, and what the hell does any of it matter, anyway? I mean, what's the point of it all, when you get right down to it?

Hope is a fragile tinderbox.
We are lost.

blink

Um, sorry. Kind of zoned out for a second there. I'm back. Where were we, again? Oh, yes. The mines. We're fighting kobolds and killing kobolds and ignoring the bodies of kobolds while working our way ever deeper and deeper into the labyrinthine depths of Tennessee's forgotten iron mines. Until…we aren't anymore.

We go down what appears to be yet another shaft, and suddenly emerge into daylight. This can't be right, though, because we haven't cleared the mines or whatever the hell we were supposed to do yet, so we have to go back in.

Only we can't go back in.

BECAUSE OF COURSE WE CAN'T GO BACK IN.



This is what I missed.

The exit apparently crumbled behind us and there's no way back in from this side. We'll have to go all the way back around to the main entrance, then make our way down THE ENTIRE FREAKING MINE SYSTEM AGAIN.

It was at this point that I felt myself beginning to lose the will to live…

Fast travel back to Nashville. Zoom down to the mine entrance. Go inside. Murder more kobolds. Descend. Murder more kobolds. Descend. Murder more kobolds. Descend. Aaaaaaaand…here we are, right back where we were before we left out of the exit that didn't look anything like an exit.

I start sliding my cursor around the screen, looking for something –

anything – I might have missed. And I found it. Apparently, there's a "cave" inside the mines, which I thought were already kind of a cave but you know what? Fuck it. What the hell ever, I don't even give any shits anymore.
ONWARD!

I walk into the cave, kill some more kobolds, then meet a funky wizard named Xan, who asks if he can join my party. Sure, pal. Why not? The more the merrier!

But my party is full. He can't join unless I leave someone behind. Oh, what to do? What to do?

GOODBYE, IMOEN!

She protests, but screw her. Seriously.



Cry some more.

Xan joins up, and I move to another room within the cave, where there's a bad dude named Mulahey who's behind the whole tainted ore business with the kobolds or something. They've been dripping some sort of vial on the iron that makes it go bad or I don't even freaking know. Or care. I ATTACK.

It's at this point that I suddenly discover that I've recruited YET ANOTHER USELESS TWAT into my party. Xan has apparently memorized exactly zero spells the whole time he's been sitting alone in this cave with literally nothing else to do other than memorize his damn spells. SO HE DIES.

Fortunately, so does Mahoney or whatever his name was, and now I can finally end the quest and reveal the truth except mother humper, my inventory is full again and this guy was carrying a metric ass ton of crap

that I have to lug back and gods dammit anyway.
So I make with the round robin of inventory distribution until I've picked his bloated corpse clean, and we go back out the exit that supposedly was rendered impassable when we passed through it earlier, but which is now totally fine for whatever holy hell reason, and we leave. BUT NOT BEFORE PICKING UP IMOEN. AGAIN.



Imma shank a bitch

We head back to Narwhal and I go up to the mayor to tell him the good news. Except it wasn't the mayor because who the heck can tell people apart in this damn world of endless pixel clone people. Instead, it was a dude named Minsc.

He wanted to know if he and his hamster could join my party and sure, you've got a miniaturized giant space hamster or whatever, but adding you means I can kick Imoen to the curb again, so you're a beautiful bald bastard and I love you.

GOODBYE, IMOEN!

Part Three
GO FOR THE EYES, BOO!

I pick up Minsc and start looking for the mayor again. I wander over near the inn where I was attacked by the murderbot assassin earlier, and I'm attacked. Again.

Neera, my untamed wild mage, dies in the fight, but then a monk appears and asks me if I have a moment to talk about his lord and savior, The Sun or something. I didn't really pay much attention, but he asks if he can join my party. He's a monk in Dungeon and Dragons, which means he's probably a Kung Fu master or whatever the Forgotten Realms equivalent

of Kung Fu mastery is, so I take him on.
But my party is full again, so I have to let someone go. Jahiera has, up to this point, been fairly useless in the sense that she has served absolutely no purpose whatsoever other than entangling the entire party in her magical Entangle vines every damn time she's cast the stupid spell. So I let her go.



I get waylaid a lot.

She openly questions my wisdom, then stomps off in a huff, taking Khalid with her. Apparently, they're a package deal. Explains the stuttering, at least.

I head inside the inn to rest and start identifying all the different magical items I've picked up that I don't know what they are. This involves a lengthy cycle of having my crazy, Hannibal and Oppenheimer quoting madman of a mage memorize two Identify spells a day, then sleeping all night so he can cast them in the morning. And then memorize them again, then sleep all night again, then cast them again, then repeat until I'm a hollow shell of my former self.

Eventually, we identify everything (only 1/10th of which are actually useful items) and head over to a merchant to sell all the crap I don't need. I haggle with him and buy some plate mail to protect my sorry ass on the field of battle with these assclowns I call companions watching my back, then we head back outside to try and find the mayor. Again.

After much clicking on and talking to random people who look just like the mayor but totally aren't, I eventually stumble across him. He thanks me for clearing the mines, pays me some gold and I'm on my way. To find out what way that is, I go to open up my journal, when I suddenly

realize that I'm down a party member.
With Jaheria having taken her boy toy with her when I kicked her to the curb, I have a vacancy. Which can only mean one thing…



NOOOOOOOO!

Sigh. I think I remember Imoen mentioning that she'd wait for me back at the Friendly Arm Inn, so I make the laborious trek back there to fetch her sorry hide. Twenty some-odd hours of walking later, and we arrive. I check the ground floor. She's not there.

I check the next floor. Every room. She's not there.

I check the third floor. I get yelled at by poncy noble persons aghast that I had the unmitigated gall to walk into their rooms when they left their doors wide open. She's not there.

Then, it dawns on me. SHE STAYED IN THE MINES!

Mother suck a dammit, Imoen. Why are you so awful?!

Resigned, I return to the mines. Or try to, anyway. We are waylaid by a pack of wild dogs. We kill them. Then we're waylaid again, this time by a group of thugs led by some dude named Pat Senjak and his totally literate life partner, Vanna White. Except she goes by the name Doratea in D&D, for whatever reason. It's pronounced like tortilla, and now I want tacos. I shouldn't play games on an empty stomach.

Anyway, Senjak tells me I'm going to die if I don't buy a vowel or whatever, so I get ready for a fight. Then, his little gang of thieves starts dropping dead for inexplicable reasons when a wild Dorn suddenly appears!

Dorn is a half-orc something or other, who is on a mission of vengeance against Pat and Vanna because I guess he got the one puzzle without an R, S, T, L, N or an E in it and he's never quite moved on, so he starts wailing on them. I join in. We wail until people explode. Good times.

After the fight, Michael Dorn asks if he can join my party. At first, I'm hesitant because I remember what a weakling Worf actually was, but hey, whatever. People can grow. Join up!

Bonus: I have a full party now. Sorry, Imoen!

I go to check my journal when I notice that I leveled up. FINALLY! Let me see what new skills I can get…



Ding! And then you don't get any points.

So I leveled up and gained absolutely nothing. Of course. Fine. My journal says we need to go to a place called Beregost that I passed through earlier, and talk to a guy named Tranzig about something. ONWARD!

We head to Beregost and are waylaid by wolves. We murder them.

Arriving in Beregost, we head to the inn and, for once, we aren't attacked by murderous assassin droids, which is nice. We find Danzig rocking out to some death metal up on the second floor and, yep. I spoke too soon. He attacks me.

I kill him and search his warm corpse. He's carrying a note! It tells me that I should travel to Larswood or Peldvale next, wherever that is. I note that my journal tells me I should travel to this place OR that place, when

we both know full well that it really means I’m going to have to go to this place AND that place. Lying piece of crap journal.
Having no idea where these places are, I decide to head back to Nashville and start looking from there, which makes a kind of sense, from a video game logic perspective. Natural progression, sort of thing. We head back and fan out, then stumble upon a carnival. A CARNIVAL!

It’s got whimsical tents and everything. Some guy named Zeke barks at me to come rescue a woman who was turned to stone by giving him 500 gold coins. I decline. (So far, it’s exactly like an actual carnival.)

Sidenote: I swear I keep hearing the same background laughter sound from Rollercoaster Tycoon. It’s eerie.

I walk into a random tent and a guy tries to pick my pocket by way of ANNOUNCING IT TO THE ENTIRE PARTY. I murder him in the face and take back my money.

We head back outside and come across a guy calling himself The Great Gazib and the Amazing Oopah, who is apparently the world’s only exploding ogre. I talk to the guy, then an ogre appears and explodes into ogre bits. Neat.

I talk to Gazib again, and Oprah explodes again. Then, he comes back and Gazib runs off and the Queen Of Daytime TV tries to kill me for unclear reasons. We murder it in a violent rage, after which some random performer starts reciting poetry at me like nothing at all just happened.

This is a place of madness.



Carnivàle

I look around for the Great Gazib, but can't find him in the sea of pixels that look exactly like the Great Gazib but aren't, and I don't feel like bothering with it. I leave and wander the wilderness like Kwai Chang Caine.

After a lot of being waylaid by wolves and dogs and bandits, I eventually discover Larswood. (Hetfield Forest, however, remains elusive.)

We take no more than five steps into the woods before Rasaad starts talking about his damn cult again. He really won't shut up about it, but the dude can explode people with his fists. I consider it a fair tradeoff.

We run into a guy named Teven, who demands I surrender my yadda yadda whatever. Rassad hits him with the five-point-palm exploding heart technique. He explodes.

We find Stonehenge and some guy named Osmadi, who thinks I killed his brother and attacks me. I murder him, but he has friends who are cave bears. They kill Dorn, Xzar, and Neera, but Rassad levels up his explode fist. So there's that. Silver lining and all.

A guy named Corsone meanders over to me, apologizes for Osmandi trying to murder me and all, then tells me about some bandits and leaves. I guess that completes the Larswood portion of my quest. Onward to Peldvale!

I make a quick return trip to Tennessee first though, so I can resurrect my useless companions at the temple. After everyone is alive again, I check the map, and there's a Bandit Camp to the north that I can't fast travel to yet, so I take a gamble and bet that Peldvale is on the way there.

Found Peldvale!

Ignored Peldvale!

We walk straight through this important questing area because screw it, who cares? I just keep shouting, "North, Miss Tessmacher! NORTH!" at my party until they stop asking questions. We go north.

Found the Bandit Camp! We storm the camp, murdering bandits left and right. We push our way into the biggest tent, where we find the bandit leader. We murder the shit out of him.

And he returns the favor.



Dead bandits are dead.

Everyone dies except for me, Dorn and Rasaad, and I'm barely holding on. I got poisoned somehow, and don't have any antidote potions on me. If I die, it's Game Over because none of my worthless buddies I've been bringing back to life this entire game can be bothered to haul my sorry carcass over to the temple when I bite the big one, but whatever. Screw them.

I just keep sucking back healing potions until I don't die from the poisoning. Eventually, it goes away and I'm all better. I spy a chest in the corner of the tent, so I go open it. AND ALMOST DIE AGAIN.

Turns out, it was trapped, because of course it was. I get zapped with lighting and almost die from static cling, but I find a note in the chest that tells me I need to go to someplace called Cloakwood next, so it's an overall win. It talks about something to do with a hidden base and a competing iron mine. I half expect some Jedi to suddenly come down and settle a trade dispute with Naboo or something equally lame, for all the excitement this plot has going for it so far.

But at least there's no Jar-Jar, so there's that.

Of course, there's always Imoen…

Never mind.

With most of my party dead, I decide to schlep their useless bodies back to Nashville again, so I can bring them back to life at the temple. Again.

We get there, I pay 100 gold coins for most of them, although anyone

who has leveled up suddenly costs 200 gold pieces, and everyone is alive and happy again.
Well, almost everyone. As soon as I RETURN THE GIFT OF LIFE to Minsc, he goes bugfuck and tries to murder me in the kidneys. It seems he's come back from the dead full of rage because I haven't done whatever the hell it was that he wanted me to do as fast as he wanted me to do it, so he decides that murder is the only option.



So long, Minsc.

Rasaad explodes his pancreas, and Minsc is no longer of this world.

Which means I'm down another party member again.

Dammit, Imoen!

Part Four
The Plot Gets A Slight Coagulant

I start making my reluctant walk of shame all the way back to the Narwhal mines. To find Imoen. Gods help me.

I know I don't need her. I know she's useless and does nothing but annoy me, but I can't abide an empty party slot, and Minsc's sudden and unexpected betrayal has left one open. There's nothing for it. I must find her.

Except she's not there. Anywhere. I search every nook and cranny of those mines; I even go back to the cave within the cave where I thought I'd left her when I picked up whatever useless mage it was whose name I

don’t remember. But nope. VANISHED.
Then it hits me. I picked her back up after what’s-his-name died, and didn’t drop her again until I met Minsc. Back in Nashville. DAMMIT, IMOEN!



Ugh.

I leave the mines and head back to town, where I find the daffy girl still standing there, staring at her shoes. She jumps at the chance to re-join my party for the umpteenth time. I guess she digs me. Whatever.

I check my map, and it looks like I can actually fast travel to Cloakwood Forest, even though I haven’t been there yet. Hooray!

I fast travel. I wander around, not noticing that I’ve already dispelled the entire fog of war for the area; and when I do notice, I chalk it up to maybe one of those notes I read that sent me here had a map scrawled on the back of it or something. I don’t question it too much, until I eventually realize that I’m not in Cloakwood at all. I’m in the FIRST DAMN AREA OF THE GAME after the tutorial. You know, where my grandpa uncle stepdad was blown up.

I check my map again, and see that Cloakwood is actually farther north. I only thought this was Cloakwood because I guess we didn’t have Dora The Explorer when I was growing up, so I never learned how to Map. I mostly just learned how to change my shoes after school for inexplicable reasons thanks to Mister Rogers, and what doing acid probably feels like thanks to The Electric Company.

Anyway, we head north and finally get to Cloakwood. Hooray, progress!

There’s a giant house here. Seriously, it’s huge. On the outside. But then I go inside and it’s like some kind of freaky reverse TARDIS barn, because it’s absolutely tiny in here. The impossible geometry of this mad world is as inexplicable as it is horrifying. I mustn’t dwell too long on it, lest I lose my delicate grasp on what precious little of my sanity remains.



Outside



Inside

AWAY, INTO THE FOREST!

We step into the next section of Cloakwood Forest and are immediately

assaulted by a kid named Tiber, who is all panicked that his brother, Chelak, was named after a resin secreted by the female lac bug because his parents clearly hated him. Also, he took some kind of spider-slaying sword into the woods and hasn't been seen since. Things do not bode well for Shellac, but I promise Tiber that I'll keep my eye out for his desiccated corpse, should I come across it.
We push further into the deep woods, in search of the hidden Iron Throne mine. AND WE FIND IT!

Except we don't, because that would be too easy. Instead, we find a cave that looks a lot like it could've been a mine, if only it had tried harder in school. We walk in and find a morbidly obese, naked spider man. No, I'm not even kidding. Here, check out the screenshot.



So fleshy

What in the actual fuck is that? Honestly. I'm too traumatized to even try and remember exactly what we did in there, but I do recall that it involved dying. A lot.

SO MANY SPIDERS. And Fatty McGee sitting in the middle of the web there was just barking orders the whole time, and I'm not even sure if it was a man and dear god, how does it go to the bathroom and holy hell, does it have a mate? And if so, how do they even…NO. STOP IT.

Some mysteries are best left unanswered.

We kill all the spiders by luring them out of the cave and killing them outside, a few at a time. We do this for two reasons. First, because killing two or three spiders at once is easier than killing a dozen at the same time. Second, because who in the nine Hells could possibly concentrate

on fighting when that…thing was undulating all over the place in there. Just. No.
After the spider slayings are done, I go back inside and quickly loot the stash fat boy is sitting next to. Or standing on. Or squatting beside, or lying on top of, or I don't know what. It's impossible to tell. Inside, I find a bunch of loot and, yep. Surprise! The desiccated remains of the unfortunately named Chelak brother. I pick him up because he obviously weighs nothing now that his insides have been liquified and sucked out, so he fits neatly inside one square of my inventory. Which I guess represents a pocket or something. I have no idea.

Anyway, we had back to Tiber and break the news to the poor lad. I pull out the dried up husk of a body from my back pocket and ask him if he can identify this pocketful of his brother. He does, then runs off crying. Like he didn't see it coming, the big baby.

He lets me keep the sword though, which comes in handy as I spend the next seventeen years of my life murdering – and being murdered by – giant spiders in the incalculable number of screens that make up Cloakwood Forest.

At some point, I looted the corpse of some creature or another, but ran out of inventory space. I handed a tiny little gem to Imoen so I could pick up a huge sword from the body, and we went on our merry way across the rest of the map. Well, I say *we*. What I meant was, *everyone but Imoen*.



Dammit, Imoen!

Giving her that gem was just crossing the damn Rubicon or something with her, because it broke the camel's back AND SHE REFUSED TO MOVE. My entire party walked all the way back over to her to see what

her damn drama queen problem was, and she just stood there like the useless lump of pixels she is.
Apparently, carrying more that a fistful of arrows and an aggressively cheerful attitude is just too much for her delicate flower of a body to handle. She was over-encumbered BECAUSE OF THE GEM THAT DIDN'T WEIGH ANYTHING, so she was just stuck. Completely. Like a turd in a punch bowl.

I took the gem and gave it to someone else who can carry more than half a pound and not die from exhaustion, and she was back to her normal, annoying self. We pushed on.

We killed more spiders, and were killed by more spiders. Much quick saving and re-loading were had by all, mostly thanks to all of the traps Imoen set off that she never detected, despite Detecting Traps being the one damn thing she's supposedly good for. We pushed on.

And on.

And on.

Seriously, Cloakwood goes on for days. It stopped feeling like "exploring" about three screens ago, and now it's just Clicking Through Bioware's Cut And Paste Trees for the next few hours. In one section, I meet Eldoth. He looks like kind of a d-bag, but he offers to join my party. I'm not sure he'll be good for anything other than simply Not Being Imoen, so I hire him immediately.



Goodbye, Imoen!

Eldoth tells me about some scheme he has to liberate some gold from

somebody I don't give a shit about because I'm not paying attention, and he asks me if I'd be interested in helping him out. I tell him sure, whatever, and we push on.
MOAR CLOAKWOOD!

Wait. I think we found the mines. Finally! We rush in.

Nope. Not a mine. Just a cavern full of murder dragons. Move along, move along.

EVEN MOAR CLOAKWOOD!

Hey, I think we actually found the really real mines this time! I can tell, because the next area that popped up on my map is called Mines. I'm good with context clues.

We rush toward the mines, where we're immediately assaulted by Iron Throne guards. I fight them for a while, but then I accidentally have Xzar cast Horror instead of whatever the hell other button I meant to push, and IT IS AMAZING. All of the bad guys get little shiny disco balls of terror over their heads, and they run around all skibber-skabber instead of trying to poke me with pointy things. It is most excellent.

I meet a guy named Lakadaar next, who asks me what my business is. I tell him that we're here to investigate the evil Iron Throne he works for. He nods and says, "Okey dokey." Then, he tries to kill us all.

Xzar uses Horror. IT'S SUPER EFFECTIVE!

We walk right by.

We run into some more guards, but I forgot to rest, so Xzar has forgotten how to cast Horror because I didn't have him memorize it again and he's an idiot. So I click another random spell I haven't bothered with until now, and Neera casts Sleep on a group of thugs.

AND OH MY GOD, it's even better than Horror, because it basically throws The Sandman at bad guys and knocks them right the frak out. Then, they just lie there like little drooling morons (not entirely unlike Imoen) and I get to stab snoring people in their throats until they die. Good times.



ZzzZzzZz. STAB!

We storm the fort and kill a bunch more bad guys while they dream of gumdrops and lollipops, or whatever it is that evil guardsmen dream about. Could be naked fat spider people, for all I know. To each his own.

I run into yet another assassin, who was called Drasus back when he still had a body. But he doesn't anymore, because my Kung Fu monk found a magical katana. And that's all I have to say about that.

A guy inside the guard barn tells me that the miners are being held to the east, and asks me not to kill him. I spare his miserable life, and head off to save the enslaved miners.

GO EAST.

We go east, to another guard house. We head inside, murder some more baddies, then find an elevator in the basement. It takes us down to the mines. At last!

I find myself actually starting to have fun with this game for the first time in ever, which is unsettling. I shake it off and remain focused. I have a job to do. This is no time for feelings.

Once inside the mines, I kill a few guards and talk to some half-naked miners. I don't know why they're half naked or why precious little mining seems to be going on, but I don't ask too many questions. I walk up to one of the freaky freaks who's standing next to a giant circle on the wall. It looks a lot like the door of a bank vault.

He tells me that it's actually a giant plug stuck into the side of the mines,

to keep the river out. Wait. What? There's an actual plug leading to the river? So the mine is underwater, but someone went ahead and left this big hole in it, just in case anyone ever needed to come along and open it to flood the mine? HOW CONVENIENT FOR MY PLOT NEEDS!



Almost as dumb as the mystical drain plug on the Lost island. ALMOST.

Of course, we can't simply pull the plug. It's somehow locked, so I have to find a key first. And maybe try and free all the naked man slaves wandering around the place so they don't get drowned or whatever. I'll see what I can do.

I wander around the mines for a bit, killing the odd guard here and finding the occasional secret door there, until I find another new party member! This guy's a dwarf cleric who goes by the name of Yeslick. Yes, lick. That's his name. And he's locked up down here in the mines with the naked man slaves and nope. Not even going there.

He asks to join up with me, which I'm fine with because he seems a lot more interesting than the ukulele-strumming hipster douche we picked up earlier. Sorry, Eldoth. Them's the breaks, kid.

After Yeslick joins up and Eldoth whines at me, a guy named Rill comes up and asks me for 100 gold coins so he can bribe the captain of the guard in order to sneak his fellow slaves out of the mines before I murder them all with plug water. I acquiesce and emancipate his proclamation. He runs off to free his people, like a good little Moses.

I continue working my way through the mines, when I come upon a murder death kill room. There are corpses everywhere and the buzzing of flies echoes off the dark walls. An ogre mage appears and declares me a

dead man.
I laugh, and Rasaad katana kills him.

Down, down, down.

We finally make it to the bottom of the mines, and a secret door reveals…BOSS FIGHT!

Evil baddy Davaeron appears and goes all pinky-purple with a Ghostbusters 2 slime wall protecting him while a bunch of guards and murder spells try to kill us.



Funkadelic!

We fight off the guards, and slowly work away at Davaeron's funky fresh teleporting dance moves until he's all out of pink slime. After that, it just takes a few sword thwacks to take him down. We manage to kill him without anyone in our party dying, which is a good thing. I AM LEARNING.

He was a pain in the ass, though.

Anyway, I get a surprise cinematic telling me that I need to go to Baldur's Gate next.

Wait. What? You mean THE Baldur's Gate? Really?

Finally. THE TITULAR CITY!

On my way out of the mines, I bump into Stephan, Davaeorn's apprentice. I squeeze him for information by way of clicking various

dialog options with impunity. He sings like an exposition canary, and I find out that the whole iron shortage was concocted by the Iron Throne in order to drive up demand so that they could then come in with their iron supplies and be the Big Damn Heroes and sell their stock at record profits. So basically, this game is the plot of Wall Street, but with swords. Whatever, Bioware.
I let him live and catch an elevator back to the plug floor.

We pop the cork and flood the mine.

QUEST COMPLETE! And no sign of Imoen this time. Life is good.

Onward to Baldur's Gate!



It's about damn time.

I travel through the wilderness for ages, like some sort of cartographically challenged caveman, until I eventually get to the Big Ass Bridge leading to the city of Baldur's Gate. We strut across it all heroically, but before we can enter the city, we're accosted by some guy named Scar who demands six gold pieces per party member for entry. He then insists that I investigate the suspicious death of someone named Mufasa. Or maybe it was some mega-boring crap about a trading group short selling their assets or OH GOD WHAT IS WITH THE ECONOMIC NONSENSE of this game? NO ONE CARES.

I tell the jerk what he wants to hear, then cross his palm with silver and he lets me in.

FINALLY!

Part Five
The Flaming Fisting

We finally enter the city of Baldur's Gate. The fog of war is literally everywhere. I don't know where anything is, and I can't even see very far in front of my face. Has no one heard of a visitor's center in this place? A tourist map would go a long way.

I consult my journal, which is predictably useless, as usual. The main quest notes just basically say to GO TO BALDUR'S GATE AND DO A THING, so I guess that optional side quest from Scar is optionally mandatory, because I don't know what the hell else to do in this giant city. My journal entry for his quest tells me to go to the southwest corner of the city and investigate the Seven Suns, which totally sounds like a Heaven's Gate style cult. I guess I need to get there before they drink their cyanide Kool Aid and go up to the alien mothership or whatever. Rasaad will probably love these people.



The Seven Suns!

We take five steps, and Dorn pipes up about some other city called Lusker or something, and tells me how it's totally just like Baldur's Gate and some other things about his vengeance quest I don't care about. I just nod until he stops talking.

We press on.

We make it to the docks, and some creepy guy named Kesheel comes up to me out of nowhere, talking about how strolling along the docks is good for thinking. He then tells me what I think is supposed to be a joke about

poop decks or something, and goes away.
Oh…kay…

A block later, another guy comes up to me, uninvited. This one is called Kerrachus, and he warns me about the dangers of slippery cobblestones and goes away. Good to know, dude.

We finally make it to the southwest corner of the city as instructed, and I still have no idea where to go, because the inky blackness of the damn fog of war permeates my very soul. I wander all over the place for about half an hour, then find the damn Seven Suns building about 10 meters from where I entered the stupid area.

Sigh.

We go inside. A merchant comes up to me and tells me the place has been overrun by shape-shifters because I guess whoever wrote this piece of shit story was really into David Icke at the time. He has no other useful info, so we go upstairs.

There are several more merchants here, who all look and talk exactly the same, and say the exact same damn things whenever I talk to any of them. Maybe Icke has been right all along. I decide to keep my eye out for trans-dimensional reptilian alien overlords. Because you never know.

There's nothing upstairs, so I start pixel hunting until I find a door I missed back on the first floor. Except that it's actually more like stairs, which lead us down into the basement.

We are immediately attacked by something called a Doppleganger. We kill it and talk to some guy named Asshole, who turns out to be the leader of the Seven Suns, and is being held captive by the shape-shifting goons.



Icke was right!

Oops. Sorry. His name is actually Jhasso, but either moniker fits. He accuses us of being in league with the devil and talks about his noggin.

We assure him that we're quite nice people, actually, and tell him that Scar sent us for help with getting Simba to Pride Rock before the hyenas eat Nala and what does any of it matter, anyway? He just goes on about how the shape-shifters took over his business and drove profits into the ground. It's just more boring economic shit and I don't care anymore.

I end the conversation, and Jhasso runs off upstairs, emboldened by the one Doppleganger my weakling mage was able to kill by whacking it on the head twice with his walking stick, and vows to reclaim his business. What an Jhasshole.

We go back to the first floor, where the fat Santa-looking merchants from earlier suddenly all start attacking me, because they're actually Dopplegangers who apparently didn't give a damn that the guy they've been holding prisoner in the basement for the past several months just ran past them on a holy quest to balance his checkbook or whatever. I kill them all.

We go upstairs, and murder the merchant bastards up there, too. Because screw them.

We leave the building, and a guard walks up to tell me that I need to go see Scar over at the Flaming Fist headquarters building. Wherever the fuck that is.

We go back to the bridge, but Scar isn't there. We then spend the next hour aimlessly wandering around the eleventy-hundred screens that make up the urban sprawl of this accursed city, only to finally find the damn Flaming Fist HQ was ALL THE WAY BACK IN THE SOUTHWEST CORNER WHERE I ALREADY WAS.

Sigh.



Useful signage

It starts raining. Dorn gets struck by lightning. No, really. He just shrugs it off and we push on. Badass.

We find Scar, and tell him that Timon and Pumbaa were really shape-shifters or whatever, and he pays us for our time before offering us another quest I don’t give a shit about.

I decide to just wander around the city until we trigger the next story event.

We eventually stumble into the giant Iron Throne castle I didn’t notice earlier, and some guy named Triadore comes running up to me, babbling about how he has no time to chit-chat, just before he starts chit-chatting with me. He tells me that there’s madness here that he cannot stand any longer. FINALLY! Someone in this game I can agree with. I tell him to calm down, then he yells at me some more and leaves.

We wander deeper into the castle. A guard stops me and looks ready for a fight. I slip him 200 gold pieces, and he looks the other way. We head upstairs.

An archer named Dra’tan approaches me, because you can’t throw a damn rock in a fantasy world without hitting someone with ridiculous apostrophes in his name, and he asks me where I’m going. I tell him that we’re on our way to the fifth floor to deliver a message to someone I don’t know, which is risky because I’ve never been here before and I have no idea if there even is a fifth floor, but screw it. I live on the edge.

He buys my story, then warns me about more damn shape-shifters. Yay.

On the next floor, another guard accosts me. I bribe this one too, since I guess there's no such thing as an honest cop anymore, and we continue making our way upstairs.

We meet a bartender, who asks me if I want a drink. I tell him no, so he tries to murder me. Seems fair.

I murder him right back. And his little friends, too.

However, I start to get the nagging feeling that I shouldn't have done that, so I cast a magical *fluxus capacitorus* spell and reverse time with the Load Game button. We try again.

I ignore the bartender this time, and go up to a little dude named Destus Gurn. Oh, boy. HE'S AN ACCOUNTANT. He throws a wall of text at me about trade negotiations and blah blah blah. I pick a random dialog option, and he tells me I can go upstairs.



Numbers, numbers. Math, math, math.

Before I leave, I notice that there are a bunch of bookshelves here. I remember that asshat back in Candlekeep saying that I needed to bring him a book titled I don't know what, so I have Xzar steal every tome from this library. The right one is bound to be in there, somewhere.

We head upstairs, and some guy who sounds like Foghorn Leghorn tells me to fear his wrath, for it is great indeed, I do declare. I try to tell him that I'm someone else, but he sees through my clever little ruse and attacks. His friends rush to his aid.

Neera tries to put them to sleep, but fails. Xzar tries to horrify them, but isn't scary at all today. Things go badly.

I reload.

The fight is intense, but we eventually win. I lose my mages and the monk with the Kung Fu grip, but I'll resurrect them at a temple soon enough. No big deal. Meanwhile, one of the Iron Throne leaders tells me that the REAL bad guys are back in Candlekeep.

OMG!



SHOCKING!

I let him live, and find a bunch more books in a cabinet. I steal them before I leave.

We walk outside, and a city guard tells me that Scar wants to see me again, but I've no time for needy bastards. Instead, I head to the nearest temple and resurrect my slightly-less-useless-than-they-were-before companions, and we ready ourselves for battle.

TO CANDLEKEEP!

We arrive, and saunter confidently up to the jerk who wouldn't let us in earlier. However, despite carrying AN ENTIRE LIBRARY'S WORTH OF BOOKS with me, I apparently DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT ONE, so I still can't go in.

FINE. I guess talking to Scar again was important, after all. I hope so, anyway. Because if he doesn't have whatever this magical mystery book is, I'm screwed. I don't know where to find it, or even have any idea what it's called.

Back to Baldur's Gate!

We fast travel back to the Flaming Fist headquarters, murdering anyone

and anything foolish enough to waylay us along the way. My party starts bitching at me about needing rest, but screw them. Ain't nobody got time for that. They can sleep the next time they die and I don't resurrect their sorry butts. That shit's getting expensive.
I talk to Scar, who refuses to help me because I haven't bothered investigating whatever other crap he wanted me to look into that I assumed was optional, but I guess isn't. I poke around the Flaming Fist HQ for a while, hoping to find the secret book of wonders hiding somewhere, but come up empty. We're on our way out when Scar approaches us again.

He tells me not to bother with that other thing that was super important five seconds ago, and tells me that Duke Ellington wants to see me about the Iron Throne. We go meet him.

The Duke of Earl then asks me to investigate the Iron Throne that I've already investigated, then commands me to report back to him with the findings I've already found. He offers to pay me 2,000 gold pieces for my trouble, then ends the conversation.

I start it back up again, and tell him that I've already done all that shit and to show me the money. He tells me I need to go back to Candlekeep, which I already know, but then he GIVES ME THE BOOK OF SECRETS! This little bastard was just sitting on it the whole time. Jerk.

I get a quick little cinematic with a picture of a book titled Baldur's Gate while I'm in a city named Baldur's Gate and playing a game called Baldur's Gate. OMG, SO META!



Inception

After the little scene, the game dumps me back outside Candlekeep, where I drop all of the useless books I've been lugging around for absolutely no reason, and I free up a ton of inventory pockets in my pants. I walk up to the asshole at the gate.

"Oy! Asshole! I've got yer book, ya miserable bastard."

He lets me in.

We make our way to the central Keep and start climbing the stairs. Every now and then, we're stopped by some old friend or another who I don't even know, but who tells me what a great boy I was growing up, and how everyone loves me but screw you if you come back home without a book we want, you wretched little orphan. Whatever. We keep climbing.

Eventually, we find the Big Bad Guy named Realtor or something. Probably goes back to the whole economics plot of the game, maybe something to do with a property scheme. Forget it, Jake. This is Baldurtown.

Anyway, he mocks us, so we murder him. And a bunch of his friends. WE HAVE SAVED THE DAY!

For our efforts, we're thrown in jail. Because of course we are.



Good job!

We're just chilling in our spacious cell when some guy in a red robe swings by and totally doesn't believe that we're bad guys because he remembers me from when I was a little tyke and used to pee in the town

fountain or something. I don't care. He teleports us away to the secret catacombs beneath the Keep, and we make our escape.
We're attacked by a woman named Phlydia, who thinks we stole her book. We probably did, though. I've lost track of all the crap I've nicked since this whole mess started, so we kill her and move on. She was a Doppleganger anyway, so who really cares?

The catacombs go on for days, and are trapped to all hell and back. We "explore" the entirety of the labyrinthine nightmare, only to find that the exit was pretty much right next to the damn entrance.

Sigh.

We leave. Or, at least, I *thought* we were leaving. Apparently, there are multiple levels to these catacombs. OH, JOY.

I kill a few guys, slap around a bunch of skeletons, then quick save and rest. I'm greeted with a dream sequence that usually signifies the end of a chapter. THANK GOD.

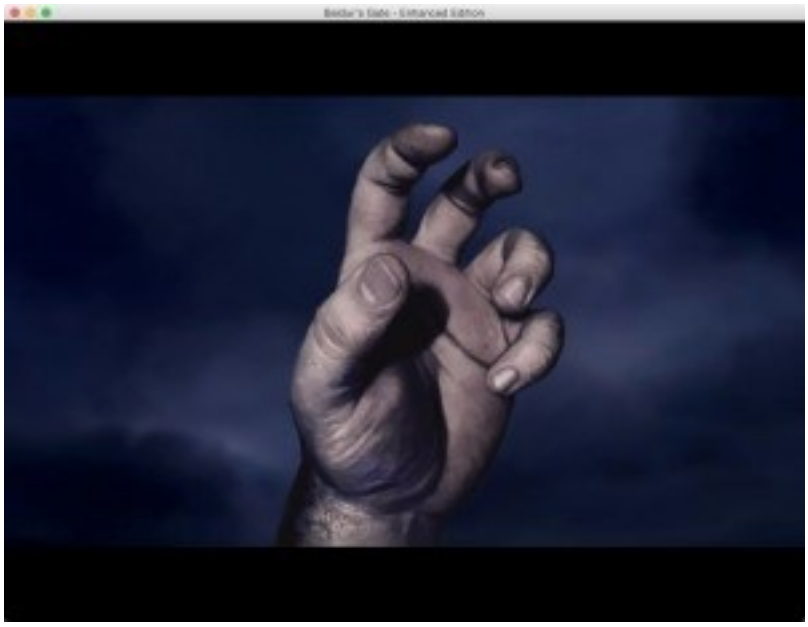
I wake everyone up, and we move on. We run into a guy named Elminster, who's dressed like Rincewind from Discworld. I accuse him of being a Doppleganger, but he says, "Nuh-uh! Am not!" so I'm like, "Oh, okey dokey, then. I believe you!"

I tell him that I'll follow him out of the catacombs, and he leads us onward. We start walking past some monsters, but Elminster Rincewind doesn't seem at all concerned. I start to wonder about his lackadaisical attitude toward our imminent peril, when suddenly…yeah, he's totally a Doppleganger. And so are his friends.

FIGHT!

Xzar and Neera put most of the little buggers to sleep, but Elminster is apparently a Greater Doppleganger, which I guess means he's immune to nappy time or something. We punch him to death and leave.

We emerge into a cave system that's above the catacombs, but below the Keep. Which makes total sense in this place of insanity.



My cold, dead hand.

We then run into a guy named Prat, who turns out to be a total badass, despite his stupid name. He kills us all. Repeatedly. I try sending my entire party after him as a distraction, hoping to run away to the exit while they all die in agony for the greater good, but the caves are filled with all sorts of nasty monsters that chop, slice, bite, and/or explode my insides before I can get very far.

This is going to require some effort.

And we were so close!

Part Six
I'm Finally Finished

I managed to cast Horror on some of Prat the prat's friends, and we killed him a lot. Once he was dead, we ran away while his horrified buddies were busy shitting themselves.

Then, we ran into basilisks and were turned to stone. And we died. A lot.

Like, seriously. A lot.

I search through all my spells, and I don't have any anti-petrification anything, not that it matters because petrification is apparently insta-death. Which is really annoying when I get hit and immediately die, then have to sit and wait for the stupid dead hand animation to play over and over and over again.

We go back up to where Prat was, and start picking off his friends one by one, who are now scattered all around the caves. We murder some spiders while we're hunting them down, but none of them – even the mages – have a protection from petrification spell, which I learned is a thing that exists because I CONSULTED THE MANUAL. Again.



I need the Sword of Gryffindor!

So I go back and try to fight the basilisks some more. I manage to make it through once, but my entire party gets turned to stone and is dead to me, which I figure might make the endgame a little too difficult.

I reload and try again. And again. And again. One time, I manage to kill the little bastards, but Neera dies. She's finally a decent mage at this point of our quest, and I hate to lose her. So I reload and try again. And again. And again.

I'm about to give up, when I go digging through my characters' inventories, looking for anything that might help me. I find a quiet spot in the caves, load the mages up with Identify spells and rest a bunch of times, because spiders keep waking us up. Eventually, they sleep long enough to learn the spells by whatever magical, scroll-under-the-pillow brain osmosis they're using, and I make them start identifying every unknown thing we own.

Which is a lot of stuff, because we haven't had a chance to find a good resting spot since we stormed the Candlekeep Keep. I find some scrolls in Yeslick's pockets and Xzar identifies them. Turns out, the little bastard was sitting on a Protection From Petrification scroll all this time.



Dammit, Yeslick!

Of course, no one in my party can actually learn the spell for some unknown reason handed down by the freaking AD&D Lawgivers, but whatever. I cast it on myself and charge the basilisks alone.

They try their best to turn me to stone, but since I'm immune to that trickery, they've lost their nuclear option. I wail on them with my +1 Long Sword until they're basilisk pudding. I call out to the useless twats to come join me, now that the danger is over.

They come running. We continue onward, toward where I hope the exit is.

We run into a guy named Diarmid, who thinks I'm Prat because I guess evil henchmen lackeys don't get invited to company picnics, so they've never met each other in person. He tells me that we must not keep whatever the hell The Sarevok is waiting, and laughs about how we got that poor bastard Jeet locked up. (That's me, by the way. Just in case you're a little slow on the uptake.)

He thinks everything went as planned, so I tip my hat and tell him good day, then get ready to stab him in his miserable back the second he lets us walk past him. Yeah, it's like that, bitch. You lock me up in jail, you get prison rules. Deal with it.

Except I never get the chance, because the little weasel hightails it out of there like his ass is on fire.

Recognize!



I stand alone.

We exit the caves, and I get a new little cutscene that tells me I have to go back to Baldur's Gate again, because what would an adventure be without the indescribable joy of incessant backtracking. I have to hunt down whoever this Sarevok person is.

Fine. Let's do this. To Baldur's Gate! AGAIN!

But first, I decide to get some rest before we try to fast travel and end up being waylaid by +10 Ogres Of Malfeasance or something. We light up a campfire, bust out the marshmallows and tell ghost stories until we drift of to dreamland.

That's when a giant, skull-faced baboon with horns shows up. It's another one of these damn dream visions I keep getting that mostly consist of pretty bad narration and a wall of text. Apparently, the blood of someone called Bhaal runs through my veins and has something to do with my origins that I was either never told about, or wasn't paying any attention when I was. It could go either way, really.

Anyway, evil baboon dude is Sarevok, I guess. And I need to go kill him. FOR REASONS.

Awakened from our momentary slumber, we find ourselves getting bitched at by a guard for sleeping out in the open. He tells me to go to the Inn if I need to sleep and not, you know, back to the prison cell where I'm supposed to be right now, since everyone thinks I've gone on a murder rampage across the Sword Coast. But hey, whatever. This guard's cool. He's not going to bust us.



MUPPET OF DOOM

We try to go to the Inn and crash for the night, but we're outside of the town walls and that bastard at the gate won't let me in again, unless I bring him another damn book.

FINE. Screw you guys, we're leaving. We'll just sleep whenever we get to Baldur's Gate, and my companions can bitch about being tired all they want because I just don't give a damn anymore. We'll find an Inn when we get there, then go to sleep and wake up the next morning, ready to complete the final and epic chapter in my battle against whatever the fuck has been going on all this time.

ONWARD!

We get a good night's rest in the most expensive suite at the Blade and Stars because why the hell not, we've earned it. I check my journal, which tells me GO BACK TO BALDUR'S GATE AND DO ANOTHER THING that I don't know what it is, so I guess that means it's time for more directionless wandering. VERY HOORAY.

I mosey about the city for awhile, just walking around and enjoying the sites like a damn tourist because I don't really know what the hell else to do. We're busy movin' on up to the East Side and looking for a deluxe apartment in the sky high, high when a guy named Marek comes up and harshes our mellow.

"Could we have a moment of your time?" he asks. Uh oh. The royal We. No good can ever come of it.

I ask him what he wants. He tells me that he and his companion, a

presumably invisible dude I can't see named Lothander, work for the Iron Throne, and they would very much like it if I would stop murdering all their friends, please and thank you.
I tell him to get stuffed, and get ready for a fight that never happens, because they just disappear. Weird place, this city.

We walk a little farther, then some asshat yells, "I SURV THA FLAMIN' FIST" in what I can only assume is the equivalent of whatever a Texas accent is in the Forgotten Realms universe. He calls me a murderer since the whole world is against me now I guess, because I'm the hero Baldur's Gate deserves, but not the one it needs. I murder him in the face.



Gawl durn it, y'all!

My reputation goes down, but what do I care? Everyone who's never even heard of me has turned against us, so I don't really give a shit what they think.

We press on.

I run into a guy name Delthyr, who tells me he represents "those who harp". I have no idea what that means, but I'm assuming he's talking about those women who play unobtrusive music in the corners of fancy wedding receptions. Or maybe he's talking about people who drone on and on about the same thing, day after day, month after month until you finally just want to tell Gary that no, your stupid fascination with that television show you love is of no interest to me or anyone else and I swear to god, if you make that joke with the coffee pot one more time, I'm going to cut you and leave your body out by the dumpster for the dogs to choke on, you miserable piece of brown-nosing shit.

Wait. Sorry. I kind of blacked out for a second there. Anyway, Delthyr here represents those who harp, whatever that means and I don't care. He tells me that Scar was assassinated, and Duke Ferdinand has come down with a mysterious illness and is probably about to die. He also says I've been accused of murder like I didn't already know, and that Sarevok is the new Iron Throne president. Oh, and the Flaming Fist has a warrant out for my arrest, which explains all the fisters I've been murdering in the streets.

Delthyr walks away, then another exposition bot named Tamoko comes up and tells me that the healer curing Duke Wellington isn't a healer at all. MOAR PLOT TWIST!

Ah, screw all of this. I'm tired and just want it to end. All of it. We decide to storm the Flaming Fist Castle and damn the torpedoes. If we're going out, we're going in a blaze of flaming, fisting glory.

CHARGE!

I'm in the middle of storming the castle and murdering fisters when Tamoko pops up out of freaking nowhere and demands that I not kill Sarevok. She says she wants to help him live his life as a man, not as the god he thinks he can be. I suspect this will lead to the Good Bioware Ending, so yeah. That's not going to happen. I tell her to piss off, and I return to swinging my big ass sword at the bad guy in front of me.

We make our way into the castle, and are immediately attacked by all the everyone. It's a tough battle, but we manage to murder them all, then head upstairs to finish the job.

Clark Kent is waiting for us. He's a former fister who remembers me from when I helped Scar all those many, like, few hours ago. But he's had enough of the new leadership and wants out. He warns me that the healer in the next room isn't a healer at all, which I already knew, then runs off to a phone booth somewhere. Or possibly Kansas.



Smallville

We walk in and surprise Rashad by stabbing at him with pointy things until he dies. Before he shuffles off this mortal coil, he reveals himself to be a Greater Doppleganger, shocking no one.

After we're done murdering Rashad, we wake up The Duke and tell him hush now, baby. Everything's going to be alright. Daddy's here. He looks at us like we're crazy, but then just goes with it and asks me to carry him to the Harbor Master's building, wherever that is. He coughs a bunch, then tells me that I need to find Slyth and the Family Stone, and someone named Krystin before Sarevok turns everything to shit.

I stuff him into one of my inventory pockets, and we make haste to the Harbor Master's building, which I'm guessing is somewhere by the harbor.

QUICKLY! TO THE DOCKS!

But first, we stop off at a nearby Inn to try and get some rest because it's a pain in the ass that this whole endgame takes place inside the city, where the damn guards won't let you sleep outside. However, when I go into the Inn, the little bastard innkeeper turns me away because he's fucking Yoda or something and senses evil in me, which he'll have none of in his fine establishment, thankyouverymuch.

Fine. Whatever, dude. We're outta here. We didn't want to stay in your stupid hotel anyway. Jerk.

We fast travel out of the city, sleep in the woods, then head back to the docks. The second we step foot into the area, some dude named Kolvar

runs up to tell me that The Black Network sends its regards, whoever the hell they are. He then tells me everything I already know about the Iron Throne and Sarevok and the little dying Duke I have in my pocket. I guess he was the backup exposition guy, just in case I went to the docks before I went to the Flaming Fist.
He wanders off, then we make our way to the Harbor Master's building. Of course, everyone is bitching at me about being tired again, because it apparently takes EIGHT DAMN HOURS to travel outside the city walls and back in again, so everyone is already sleepy after we just sneaked outside to sleep. Whatever. I gotta do something about this Duke in my pocket. He's creating an unsightly bulge.

I whip him out and give him to the Harbor Master, who scurries off into the darkness. I guess that wraps that up, then. Nothing left to do now but storm the Iron Throne and murder the crap out of Sarevok.

TO BATTLE!



One, two, we're coming for you. Three,
four, better lock the door…

Or, more accurately, TO WALKING! And being talked to by a whole bunch of rats fleeing a sinking ship. Apparently, the other members of the Iron Throne have had enough of whatever it is Sarevok has been doing, and they're all shipping out on the next boat to anywhere but here. Can't say as I blame them, either. I'm about to paint the walls with some blood up in here.

We make our way to the fifth floor, where some woman named Cythandria starts shouting at me about how she's Sarevok's lover and that I'm gonna be real sorry and so on. She also says I share some sort of

“true” heritage with Sarevok, because it wouldn’t be a hero myth without a MYSTERIOUS ORIGIN, so I’m probably Voldemort’s final horcrux. I’m fine with that.
She puts up her dukes. Let’s do this.

I rush her, but she has two giant friends appear out of nowhere. We make a break for the stairs, and head down to the bar where we pick off Ughh and the other Ughh without Cythandira’s magic getting in the way. Once they’re dead, we head back up for the witch or concubine, or whatever the hell she is.

We beat the crap out of each other for awhile, before she eventually cries uncle and begs me not to kill her. She tells me that Sarevok is hiding out in the Undercellar, which I can get to through the sewers. Because of course, we have to go to the sewers. What kind of roleplaying game would be complete without a trek through some damn sewers.

I let her live, though. Because I’m a gentleman and shit.

We leave the Iron Throne castle and hop down the nearest sewer grate. It’s time to end this.



Why did there have to be sewers?

We roam around the sewers for hours, killing gelatinous bits of goo called Mustard Jelly or something, talk to a few rats that go squeak, get prophesied on by the Sewer King, and murder the entire Ratchild kobold gang. Eventually, we meander down yet another identical tunnel and emerge in some kind of brothel. In the sewers. Sounds hygienic.

Slyth and Krystin are here, and I kill them for having stupid names. After

they’re dead, I search their corpses. Slyth was carrying an invitation to the Ducal Palace, so I guess that’s where we’re headed next.
I find an exit from the brothel, but we’re stopped by a guard who demands 10 gold pieces from each of us before he’ll allow us to enter the place we’re already in. We pay him just to avoid any unpleasantness, then promptly leave.

We pop up inside an Inn where the owners don’t think I’m an evil bastard, so I rent a room and let everyone get some rest so they’ll stop bitching at me about being exhausted. We awake refreshed and ready for more murder.

Next stop, the palace!



I’ll be the belle of the ball!

We make our way to the palace, but keep running into Flaming Fist assholes along the way, which sucks because I can’t kill any more of them, or else most of my goody two-shoes companions will leave me because they don’t want to work for a murderer. Well, a mass murderer, anyway. Semantics.

I just keep quick saving, reloading, and doing my best to avoid confrontation as we make our way to the palace.

Finally, we approach the palace gates, and are met by a guy named Bill, who asks to see our invitations. I show him the pages we ripped off the cold, dead body of Slyth. He doesn’t seem to mind the blood stains, and lets us in.

Once inside, another Flaming Fist yahoo yells his stupid Texan battlecry

and demands to see our invitations again. We give them to him, and he leaves us alone. Lot of security in this place.
When we walk into the main room, some mucky muck named Lila Jannath starts speaking. And I mean, with actual speech. There's so little in the way of voice work in this game, I can only assume this means shit's about to get real.

I get ready to kill. But first, I have to sit through a lot of bickering nobles, before Sarevok finally chimes in. He blames all the world's problems on everyone but himself, then moves to America and the Tea Party elects him President. Or they probably would, if I didn't stop him right here and now. For freedom.

But first, I have to deal with all the people who just turned into Greater Dopplegangers. And by deal with, I mean murder with extreme prejudice. I'm in the middle of disemboweling one of them when Saverok pauses the action to call me an assassin, then instructs all of the people who are already trying to kill me to, I dunno, kill me harder or something, I guess.

I eventually finish off the last one, then some guy named Belt thanks me for saving his life and he is eternally grateful and whatnot. This pisses Sarevok off something fierce, and he comes at me with his spiky horn helmet.

Bring it on.

He farts all over the mother fucking room, and nearly kills us with his gas cloud. And here I was thinking I was about to have an epic confrontation with the Dark Lord. Instead, I get freaking Pig Pen from the Peanuts gang. Fine. Whatever.



Fart joke.

We wail on each other and I gag on his stink cannon for awhile, until he eventually chickens out and runs away. Belt comes up to me and tells me that the only way to end this is to end this, so I give him a gold star for obviousness, and he teleports us to the Thieves' Guild.

The thieves tell us that Sarevok came storming through only moments ago, and tore off down the stairs. We take off after him.

Descending into the basement, I come across an injured little…thing called Voleta Stiletto. She or he, or whatever it is tells me that Sarevok has gone into a mother humping maze, which just freaking figures. It's not enough that I've thought this game was over three different times already, but now there's a damn maze to contend with.

WHAT NEXT IN THE PARADE OF CONSTANT AGGRAVATION?!

Fine, then. I guess we'll be maze runners.

Sigh.

I cast the bones and summon the ancient oracle of Googleardium Leviosa to guide me through the maze. (In the common tongue, that means I looked up a damn map on the Internet because screw you; I don't do video game mazes.)



Screw this.

We make our way to the exit, killing various beasties and setting off a

bunch of traps on the way that Imoen wouldn't have bothered to notice had she been here anyway, so I don't feel the least bit bad about leaving her wherever the hell I left her. I hope she died screaming.
Lying near death at the exit is a guy named Winski Perorate, who was apparently Sarevok's mentor or something. He tells me that we are of the same blood and a whole bunch of other stuff I'm too worn out from trudging through this maze to bother reading, so I click out of the conversation and leave him to rot.

We exit the maze into a cave of some sort, or possibly an underground graveyard. I have no idea where I am anymore. We plod along for a brief walk before we're set upon by other Iron Throne board members who are pissed about their stock options or something. I explain to them that I'm trying to take Sarevok down, but they don't give two shits and just start slinging spells at me.

We get our asses kicked a few times, but Yeslick eventually manages to silence their mages before one of them can launch what I can only describe as a thermonuclear magic death missile, and they go down pretty easily after that.

We loot their corpses and push on. The Tomato girl from earlier appears out of nowhere again, and she still doesn't want us to kill Saverok. We tell her that we still do want to kill Sarevok. She tells us that now she wants to kill me, so I kill her and move on with my life.

We stand ready at the doors of some dark temple.



Eldritch horrors await.

LET THIS BE OUR FINAL BATTLEFIELD!

We throw open the doors and rush inside, where every bad guy starts casting protection spells. That can’t be good.

Within seconds, the spells start flying. Sarevok shouts at me, and a couple of his allies materialize in Ghostbusters slime and start flinging death balls at me. My mages fling death balls right back at them.

Sarevok uses his ungodly fart power, and we’re caught in the cloud. We retreat, killing one of his allies along the way. Probably confused because someone forgot to program an AI subroutine to counteract my strategy of Not Knowing What The Fuck I’m Doing, Sarevok’s other allies don’t bother with me after that. Instead, Sarevok himself sprints over to me and starts bashing my head with his sword.

I bash him right back, while Xzar and Neera throw magic missiles in his face. Rasaad is five-point-palm exploding his heart all over the place, while Yeslick is shouting something in dwarfish, and Dorn is…doing whatever it is Dorn does. This goes on for a few minutes, with a few healing spells tossed into the mix for good measure, when suddenly…

SAREVOK IS DEFEATED. The game is won!

It is over.

Finished.



VICTORY IS MINE!

I can hold my head up high, now that I’ve finally completed this game after 16 years of not giving a crap about it. I still don’t quite understand what all the fuss is about, though. It’s not a *bad* game, but it’s certainly

not a *great* one, either. But, like I said, I'll go into more on that when I get to the late '90s section of my Life Bytes series.
For now, I will say that I eventually ended up having a lot more fun with Baldur's Gate than I ever thought I would going in. Sure, it took me over half the game to get there, but once I did, I enjoyed playing it more often than I didn't. Except for the sewers and the mazes and all the stupid bits, of course.

The game created a final save file for me when I killed the Big Bad, which it said I can import into Baldur's Gate 2, should I be foolish enough to try it. I might, but I don't think I have another one of these features in me for a while, especially not while this one has less than a few hundred Likes or shares.

So if you want me to give Baldur's Gate 2 or any other game this treatment, let me know by clicking one of the social media buttons. It won't kill you. Share this with your friends, post the link on your favorite forums, etc… Feed me the precious lifeblood of attention I so desperately crave, and I'll probably relent.

Until then, goodbye and enjoy the rest of the Life Bytes series , whenever I get around to finishing it.

THE END…

…BUT NOT REALLY.
(Click here for the journal of endless torment I call My Time With Baldur's Gate 2.)

Life Bytes: Chapter Six



See?

I've been trying to get these entries out every couple of days, but I've been under the weather with a severe case of manflu recently and I'm probably dying, so cut me a little slack. I've also been spending a ridiculous amount of time over in the GOG.com Twitch channel , watching streams and getting to know the amazing community. Seriously, I think it's on a different Internet than the one I've been using for the past 20 years or so, because everyone there is decent. Nice, even. Generous, in fact.

Not a day goes by that some community member isn't raffling off a free game for anyone to grab in the chat, along with the standard gift codes the GOG streamers give away during most broadcasts. I've been getting to know a lot of interesting people, and we've had a bunch of great, spontaneous discussions involving everything from Star Trek to the '90s RPG crash, to Polish scandals and vampire erections. (Don't ask.)

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We also have a lot of irreverent fun. During one show, for example, a guy from Canukistan (up Canada way) by the name of flaose started streaming a playthrough of Realms of Arkania, and he grabbed different

users from the chat to use as his party members in the game. I ended up being cast as a grumpy, mostly inept wizard who clearly thought he was above everyone else in his party, even though his spells had a 97% failure rate and someone dumped a bucket of poop on his head. No, really. It was a lot like middle school.
I'm enjoying finally getting back to writing this series, and I have the GOG community to thank for that. I just hope the massive amount of people who aren't reading it are enjoying whatever the hell else they're doing that's so damn important that they can't be bothered to give me a click. The lousy so and so's.

Once I'm done – and if I think this little project ends up being anything worth reading in its entirety – I might try to wrap a little narrative around it, using my experiences with GOG community in the present to frame my nostalgic romp through the past. Which I guess I'm kind of already doing every now and then with these little chapter intros you're probably scrolling past anyway. Still, it's an idea.

Chapter Six



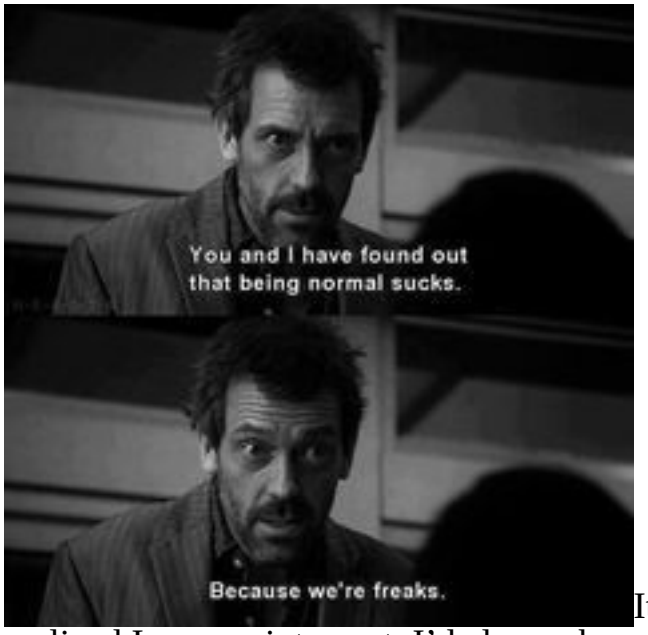
Everything has been leading up to this. Seriously, the previous five chapters were just setting the stage for The Big Picture. Or at least that's what I'm telling myself. I just had to introduce the various highways and byways along my slow slouch toward techno-Bethlehem so I would have a framework upon which to hang The Whole Rest Of My Life. Which starts now.

Or rather, then.

Back in 1989, to be exact. Freshman year. High school. The year I became a man. (And by man, I mean a scrawny, bird-like boy creature with a stupid haircut and a really real computer.)

Freshman year was rough. Not middle school rough, where the only thing I really had to worry about was whether or not I was wearing the right shoes or could at least pretend to like the right bands, but it was actually rough. As in shank a bitch rough.

Back then, my high school was separated into two distinct campuses: West Brook Senior High, which was for 10-12th graders, and Little Brook, which was for the plebeian interlopers in 9th grade; like me. It was also on the other side of town and completely walled in by a giant fence and iron gates, with armed prison guards stationed at every entrance. We called the warden a principal, and tried to avoid making eye contact. It was a basically Shawshank, but without all the Morgan Freeman.



It was around this time that I realized I was an introvert. I'd always known I was a nerd, but now I was a nerd who didn't even like other nerds most of the time. Back in elementary school, I could throw a pre-LAN party for my birthday by putting a bunch of small television sets into our living room and hooking each one up to as many game consoles as possible, and nobody cared. But then The Hormones happened.

As my friends started to take an interest in things other than video games, fantasy books, or the stars both Trek and Wars, I became more and more solitary. I began to look inward for fellowship, and I found my friends in books and movies and, most importantly, in games. My best friends started to have names like Shamino and Dupre, Bernard and Green Tentacle, Christopher Blair and Jeannette Devereaux, Guybrush Threepwood and Elaine Marley, etc… And I loved every minute of it.

Even the shitty minutes.

Especially the shitty minutes.

Get picked on at school for being a nerd?
Escape to games.

Get bullied for being too skinny or too fat or too whatthefuckever?

Escape to games.

Openly mocked by your crush?
Escape to games.

Your best friend moves across the country?
Escape to games.

I could go on, but you get the point. It didn't matter what was going on in my life, as long as I had my books and my games and my movies to rely on. But mostly, it was the games.

With games, I actually got to interact with "people" who respected and needed me, and we'd go on epic quests and save worlds together. One day, I'd be a crawling though an eerie dungeon while slaying evil creatures with my companions at my side, and I'd be a swashbuckling pirate with my own crew the next. A fierce warrior with loyal troops. A tunahead rescuing my girlfriend. An archaeologist searching for Atlantis with my research assistant. A Persian prince. A karate master. A travel agent in the land of the dead. I could figuratively become anyone I wanted, any *where* I wanted, any *time* I wanted. The worlds were mine.

Once I had the key, that is.

Which was technically an 8086 IBM clone with a 10 megabyte hard drive, EGA graphics, a 1200 baud modem and a turbo button. But to me, it was the Narnia wardrobe, and my personal Stargate to other worlds. I jumped into it as often as I could.

The first game I remember playing on that big, beautiful grey beast was Maniac Mansion. I can't be sure if it was *actually* the first thing I played, but it's the game that pulsates the hardest deep inside the squishy folds of

my nostalgia hypothalamus, so let's go with it.
Maniac Mansion is a point-and-click adventure game and the place where cut-scenes come from. (It's true. Ron Gilbert coined the term. Go on and Google it, if you don't believe me. Philistines.)

I had no idea what I was doing while I was playing the thing, but I knew that I was loving it, whatever it was. I got to put a hamster in a microwave, break a crystal chandelier with the power of rock, and have an evil, sentient space rock arrested by the Meteor Police on live tv. Good times.

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Maniac Mansion took my love of text adventures and raised the stakes with graphics, a mouse pointer and corny jokes.

I was hooked. In a bad way.

Seriously, I even watched the horrible Maniac Mansion TV show that nobody but me seems to remember. That's dedication, my friends. That's dedication.

Next time: *How appropriate. You fight like an Avatar.*

Life Bytes: Chapter Five

Chapter Five



I got my first Nintendo in either ’85 or ’86. I can’t remember exactly which year, because you just don’t pay close attention to time when you’re a kid, since you have so damn much of it. It’s not until you get older and start noticing how much more sand is in the bottom of the hourglass than the top that you begin keeping track of all the individual grains. Or something like that, anyway.

I played with the NES off and on throughout my childhood, but I only have a couple of standout memories involving the console. The first one involves a guy named David, who was my best friend at the time and who now goes by Dave for some reason. And my own NES isn’t even part of this story, since I didn’t have one at the time.

I was hanging out over at his house one day, when he showed me this cool new game he had called The Legend of Zelda. It was an amazing thing to behold, all golden and glistening in the moonlight. (Except the moonlight was just a normal incandescent light bulb illuminating an already lit bedroom in the middle of the afternoon in a suburban neighborhood, but just shut up and let me set the scene.)

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Now, I'd been playing RPGs for a while at this point, but I'd never played anything like Zelda before. It was half Nintendo game, half RPG. Or maybe half Nintendo game, one fourth RPG and one fourth Adventure. It really doesn't matter, because I've never been very good at fractions and what it did was take a little bit of computer game magic and sprinkle it into a console game. THAT YOU COULD SAVE.

You see, up until Zelda, games reset every time you turned the console off. There was no such thing as Save Anywhere back in those days, because it was all Save Nowhere until Zelda came along. It really was a revolutionary thing, to be able to save your progress in a console game. Before Zelda, the closest you could get was writing down an impossibly long "password" or "code" when you quit a game that you could then come back and put in the next time you wanted to play that would kinda/sorta pick up where you left off. But not really.

Zelda changed all that. You could save exactly where you were and what you were doing, along with your inventory and stats and all that good stuff. But there was also a problem with it, especially if you weren't familiar with the idea that you could actually save a console game. And *especially* especially if you were easily confused by the often questionable Japanese-English translations of early games.

Which is how it all went wrong…

So I was over at David – er, Dave's – house, and he was showing me this really cool new game called Zelda. He took me through a bit of a dungeon and showed me how to fight Octoroks and plant bombs to blow up hidden passageways to secret rooms, and all sorts of fun stuff. Then, he quit his game, handed me the controller, and left the room.

And I was left sitting there, looking at this screen:



Seems harmless…

Notice there at the bottom where it says ELIMINATION MODE. Now, what do you suppose that means, exactly? Because to 10 or 11 year old me, that meant something amazing. Probably. I'm not sure I remember exactly what I thought it meant at the time, but from what I can recall, I believe it had something to do with me thinking that messing around with ELIMINATION MODE would let me increase Link's ability to ELIMINATE THINGS. I guess I thought it was a stat screen or something. Maybe I thought it was an arena mode where I could just go fight endless waves of monsters. Like I said, I don't remember exactly. I was a dumb kid. Leave me alone.

Anyway, what ended up happening was that I selected ELIMINATION MODE and then used it on the Link character my friend had probably already spent hours upon hours playing, presumably to buff his stats or whatever the hell I was thinking it would do. But it didn't actually do anything like that. Nope, what ELIMINATION MODE actually did was DELETE THE SAVEGAME I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW EXISTED.

I guess Nintendo of

America hadn’t bothered to figure out what Delete meant yet, so they just ran the original Japanese through whatever the 1980s equivalent of Google Translate was (probably a guy named Steve down in Accounting or something), and just dumped the results out on the screen with nary a second thought.
(This actually happened a lot, back in the olden times of yore. Some of the poor translation jobs have even been picked up by pop culture and are part of the non-gamer lexicon now. Things like, “Someone set us up the bomb” and “All your base are belong to us” are pretty much universally understood now, but they weren’t then.)

Just like ELIMINATION MODE wasn’t. Which is how I ended up wiping my friend’s savegame and then shutting off his NES in a panic when I realized what I’d done. I don’t remember what happened after that, but I probably experienced a sudden drop in my desire to play video games and we went outside and rode our bikes or something. Like cave people.

The other main memory of the NES I have is buying games from Toys ‘R Us. Back in the ’80s, there was a giant wall dedicated to nothing but NES games at Toys ‘R Us. But it didn’t actually contain any games. What it had was a picture of the front and (if you were lucky) the back of the box, with a stack of little paper ticket things underneath. The idea was that you’d grab the ticket for whichever game you wanted, which you would then take to the nice teenager working behind the bulletproof pawn shop deathglass cage near the front of the store, who would then match your ticket with the proper game and sell it to you.



So badass.

Also around this time, game shows for kids were beginning to get popular. Often, the grand prize on these shows would be a Toys ‘R Us shopping spree, with the idea being that you would get five minutes to run all around the store, stuffing your cart with as many toys as you could before time ran out. And it was a sucker’s game.

But I had a Plan. *If I ever went on one of those game shows*, my young prepubescent mind would conspire, *I would know exactly what to do*. I’d ignore all the stupid plastic toys and gewgaws that so entranced the insipid shoelickers of my peers, and go straight for the damn game aisle. And that’s when I would bankrupt the store.

I reasoned that I could probably pull every ticket for every game off that wall in five minutes, with time to spare. Then, I’d be left with 50 copies of every NES game available, 49 of which I would sell at cut rates to friends and family out of the trunk of my dad’s car. I would have every game I ever wanted AND get rich while doing it. It was the perfect plan.



Of course, I never got a chance to test that theory, because I never made it on one of those kid game shows. The closest I ever came to anything like that was being featured for all of five seconds on The New Mickey Mouse Club, where I barked like a dog for reasons unknown to me other than that some crew member shoved me in front of a camera and told me to. And I never even saw it when it came on, nor have I ever seen it to this day.

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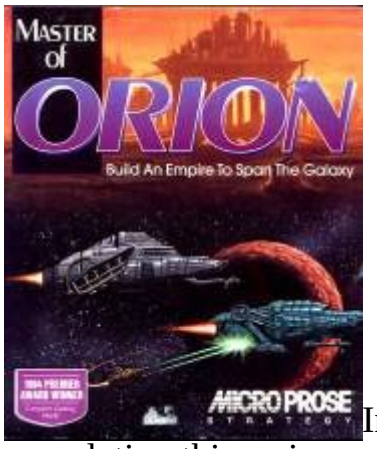
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But that didn't mean kids at school wouldn't see it, though. Because they did.

Did I mention how much I hated middle school?

Next time: ***It all comes together. Or not.***

Life Bytes: Chapter Four



Interestingly enough, what brought me back to completing this series was something I've never been interested in before: Twitch streams. Specifically, the 96-hour gog.com stream for their Insomnia sale promo. The chat room there (also accessible via IRC, I would later discover) was not only filled with pleasant people, but there were absolutely no Internet People in it. And by Internet People, I mean the horrible trolls who stalk the various strands of the world wide web in

search of prey. It was impressive.
During one of the streams – all of which were great fun to watch – a guy named Geordy Jones started playing a game of Master of Orion 2. With it sitting on my GOG shelf having never been played, I quickly downloaded it and fired up a game myself. I used the same settings as Geordy, and my plan was to follow along and learn the game as he played. And then I blew up.

But more on that later. For now, let's get back to it…

Chapter Four

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Enter middle school in the '80s, otherwise known as Lord of the Flies with Izods and Swatch watches. Sixth grade was a pretty terrible year for me, which is saying something considering most of middle school was a never-ending parade of unrelenting sorrow, but I made some new and lasting friends who were on the nerdier side of the social spectrum, and that was fine by me. One friend in particular – his name was Mark – even had a laptop. A LAPTOP!

In truth, it was more of a "portable computer" in the same sense that almost anything is portable as long as you can put wheels on it and have a vehicle powerful enough to pull it a few feet. It was a monster of a thing, really. The screen was some sort of neolithic LCD affair, all monochromatic and impossibly slow. I'm not sure if it technically even

had a refresh rate, but if it did, it was less interested in Hertz as a frequency and more in Hertz as the rental car company. But only very slow and unreliable rental cars. It was the broken down Pinto of monitors.



BEHOLD ITS GLORY

Anyway, we were playing around with it one day when he showed me the most amazing thing mine young eyes had ever seen. He pulled the phone cord out of his football phone (whimsically shaped phones were an ’80s thing best not reflected too deeply upon) and **plugged it into the computer**. *WHAT SORCERY WAS THIS?!*

He pushed a few buttons, and a minute later the machine began to emit these strange mating calls of antediluvian god-beasts, until they were eventually silenced and replaced by words on the screen…

Welcome To CrazyBBS!

I was enthralled.

It was an electronic **B**ulletin **B**oard **S**ystem, and my first exposure to a brave new world that would eventually become the Internet, right there on that tiny, crap-ass little screen. He showed me message boards and ASCII games called Doors, file shares and messaging. It was amazing, and I was amazed by it.

Then, he pushed a button to page someone called a sysop (pronounced sis-op, and I’ll hear no more on the subject from you psy-sop buffoons, thankyouverymuch). A moment or two later, the screen wiped (ok, that

took more than a few moments, since the magical little gnome inside the wonder box had to erase and redraw the screen with his tiny little gnome hands), and someone named Pebbles started to chat with us.
She was a girl.

A girl our age.



One of the first gaming websites. But without the web.

As soon as we were done chatting with her, Mark unplugged the phone line from the computer and back into his football phone. Then, I immediately called my Mom to ask if I could spend the night. And the rest is history.

(*Sidetone: I don't actually believe he had a football phone, now that I'm thinking about it. But I had one shaped like a frog, so it'll do for the sake of Painting You A Mind Picture. So shut up.*)

I became obsessed with BBSs after that. I begged and pleaded with my parents to buy me a modem, which eventually paid off when my birthday came around. That January, I made a wish, blew out some candles, and unwrapped the most beautiful package I had ever held: my first modem.

Three hundred bauds of pure telecommunicative bliss.

Respect.

Of course, in these modern times of broadband and cell phone data plans, 300 bauds seems quaint. And maybe it was, but I didn't care. Sure, it was slower than delivering data packets by way of hopping on a Big Wheel and 360 Spinning your way down the street to your friend's house, but it was magical. For the first time, I didn't have to be a scrawny little nerdbody. I could be whoever I wanted, and as long as I could type convincingly, people would never even know that I was a little 5 pound nothing of a boy.



So I learned to type. Fast. *Very fast*. But I developed my own system, which would later come to haunt me in typing classes when I would get into heated arguments with the teachers regarding their inefficient and ridiculous keyboarding rules taught unchanged from 1943. But they would eventually shut up and go away once I'd shown them how much better my method was by way of typing a whole lot faster than they could, and I'd be left alone for the rest of the semester. Which was nice.

So anyway, I learned to type fast. And smart. I developed a better vocabulary and learned the rules of grammar, not to get good grades on some stupid test in school, but so that I could pass for Not A Stupid Kid on BBSs. And it worked.

Those were happy times for me. I made some great friends, met interesting people, and made a lot of useful connections over the years that I would later learn is called "networking" and is something that responsible grown-ups supposedly do. But all I knew then was that I was talking to people who took me seriously, and I loved it.

Bulletin boards would stay with me through the rest of the '80s and well into the '90s, until the dot.com boomed and the Internet became a viable thing. So don't worry, they're hardly making their last appearance in this series. This is just how I dipped my first toe into the turbulent waters of online living. Of course, I eventually had to say goodbye to my 300 baud modem and get with the times.

Which led me to getting my first IBM-compatible PC: an 8088 with a 10 megabyte hard drive, an EGA monitor AND a Turbo Boost button. I was hot shit.



“Enhanced” Graphics Adapter

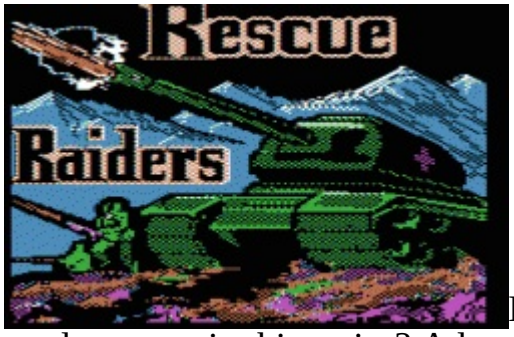
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But before that happened – between my glory days with the Apple][and my first PC – a little Japanese playing card company changed everything.

Next time: ***It’sa me!***

Life Bytes: Chapter Three



It’s been, what, three years or so since my last entry in this series? A lot can happen in three years, although most of what happened probably isn’t any of your business. Or it’s really boring. Whichever. Anyway, let’s pretend this never happened (wow, a wild Jenny Lawson plug appears!), and just move on to…

Chapter Three

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I played a lot of games on my Apple][. *A lot of games.* But only a handful managed to wedge themselves firmly between the squishy folds of my memory so tightly that they're inseparable from my thoughts of childhood. There was In Search of the Most Amazing Thing (which I've already talked about) and there was Rescue Raiders, which was a favorite of my Dad's, much to my horror. He was always stealing the computer to play it. An unforgivable crime.

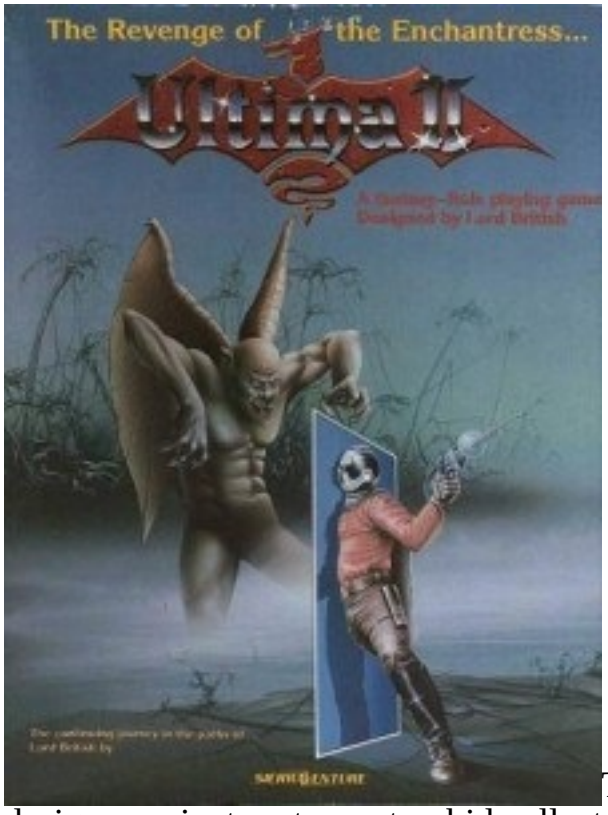
He would do things like insist that I do my homework immediately after dinner under the pretense that it would probably build character or whatever, but I knew his real agenda was just to squeeze in some time in the chopper before I could get to the computer.

And if he was in the middle of a particularly tense battle, I could just forget about claiming my birthright whenever I got finished with the reading and the writing and the arithmeticking. He'd sit there for however long it would take him to either save the day or go down in flames – sometimes for what seemed like hours – all the while making this obnoxious little sucking sound with his teeth each time he pressed the fire button. Each and every time.

Seriously, it wasn't right. It was both a sucking and a hissing sound at the same time, as if he was both inhaling and exhaling simultaneously with a blatant disregard for the laws of human physiology. And it was super annoying.

But computer time wasn't *always* competitive. Not when Ultima was involved.

Ultima II was my first Real Computer Game, and my first exposure to the roleplaying genre. I loved it immediately.



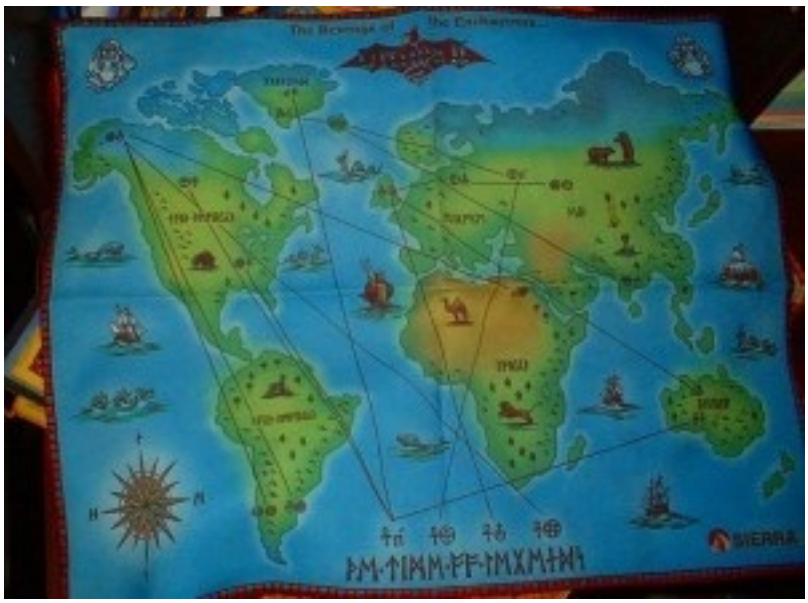
The brainchild of famed game designer, private astronaut, rabid collector and all around groovy dude, Richard Garriott, the Ultima series literally consumed my childhood. Starting with picking up a copy of Ultima II at Software Rental (the cleverly named store that rented software for the five minutes or so back in the ’80s when you could actually rent software) and ending with never (because I still go back and play through some of the games every now and then, to this day), Ultima came to define much of what I remember about growing up geek in the ’80s.

It had dungeons and it had dragons and, in the case of the early Ultimas, it had spaceships and time travel and ultimate evil overlords that you could only defeat with the aggressive use of punch cards. (Seriously. Don’t ask.) It had magic and wonder, and over the course of the series, it became its own world. My world. Mine and my dad’s.

Suffering a bit of downsizing around the time Ultima II came out, my Dad suddenly served a brief stint as Mr. Mom for a period. During this time, my Mom went back to teaching, and my Dad stayed at home and took care of the housework and the picking up of the kids from school, and that sort of thing. And ordering a whole lot of crap with UPC symbols and coupons clipped from god knows where, but we ended up with a cool porcelain Pillsbury DoughBoy cookie jar and some sweet Kool-Aid plastic dinnerware. Or maybe just a pitcher shaped like the Kool-Aid Man and some cups. It’s all a bit hazy.

Anyway, one Friday we went and rented Ultima II along with a nifty little program called Copy][Plus that let you copy most any game the store had in stock. It cost more to rent, of course, but since you could use

Copy][Plus to copy Copy][Plus and then use it again whenever you wanted, it was a good investment. So we copied Ultima II (and later III and IV, but not V because it needed, like, 64 whole Ks of RAM, and I only had a measly 48), then set about on our quest to save the world. (Yes, we pirated three of the first four Ultima games. But Lord British officially pardoned me a little while back, so everything's fine now. Don't call the cops.)



Every Ultima came with a cloth map.
Ultima 2 took place on Earth. Others
took place in Brittania. My second home.

We invented co-op gaming before there was co-op gaming, by way of sharing a save file between us. The deal worked like this: Dad would play in-between doing the dishes or watching his stories or whatever the hell else he did while I was at school, and I'd play in the evenings after I finished my homework. We'd fill each other in on what we did and what we discovered at the end of each shift, and we worked our way through the game one little bit at a time.

Eventually, it became a race to see who would be the one playing when we completed the game. (Spoiler: it was me.)

One random morning when I'd woken up and gotten myself ready uncharacteristically early, I sat down to squeeze in a little play time and try once again to defeat the evil sorceress Minax, whose castle we'd made it to, but who neither one of us had yet figured out how to defeat. Until that morning.

It was tense, but I figured out whatever puzzle it was that had us stuck. I think it involved needing a ring or some such to pass through some forcefields or whatnot, and I'd put it on and away we went. But the crafty witch just kept teleporting all over the place every time I'd hit her, so the

final battle was a long and tedious affair of running all over creation to slap her around a little bit until she eventually croaked.

I'm passing on the father-son gaming tradition with my own son, who has become Richard Garriott's biggest fan.

It ran long. And I got my first (and only) free tardy note from my Dad for being late to school due to a video game. Because some things are important. (It wasn't my first free tardy note, though, or my last. I regularly got them whenever the space shuttle launched before school, because I was a huge nerd and just had to watch it go up each and every time I could.)

And we kept playing. We played Ultima III and defeated the evil giant robot demon with the aforementioned punch cards. We played Ultima IV, and became virtuous avatars of enlightenment. Then we played Ultima V and it crashed after the intro because I didn't have enough RAM and Richard hates me.



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We'd eventually get around to playing again with Ultima VI, but that's a story for later, since it involves my first IBM-compatible PC and a whole new era of my life. You'll just have to wait on that, because between Ultima IV and Ultima VI, a little thing called the BBS happened.

Next time: ***I develop a new obsession…***

Valentines For Married People

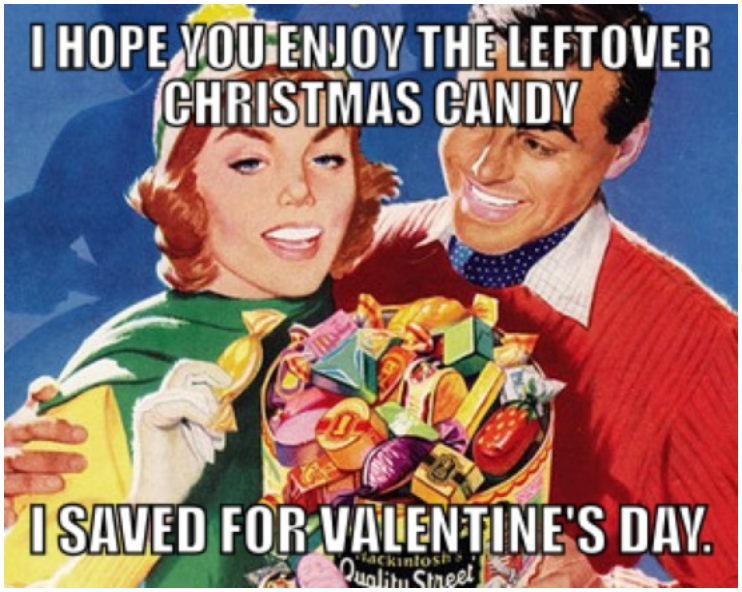

Looking for the perfect Valentine's Day card for that special someone in your life? Then you've come to the wrong place! These are for married people.

In what seems to be turning into an annual tradition here at Coquetting Tarradiddles, I've worked up a stunning new batch of the best expressions of marital love you'll ever see, just in time for Valentine's Day! I suggest you send one or all of them to your spouse. Remember: it takes little embers to keep stoked the flames of passion. Or something. Whatever.

I went the meme route this year, as opposed to the someecards direction I took last year . Why? Because variety is the spice of life, and I care enough about my readers to use ~~the very best~~ mostly adequate free software that requires minimal effort on my part. It's just one of the many ways I work tirelessly to bring you a superior blogging experience.

YOU ARE WELCOME.

TOP TEN VALENTINE'S DAY CARDS FOR MARRIED PEOPLE
2015 Edition



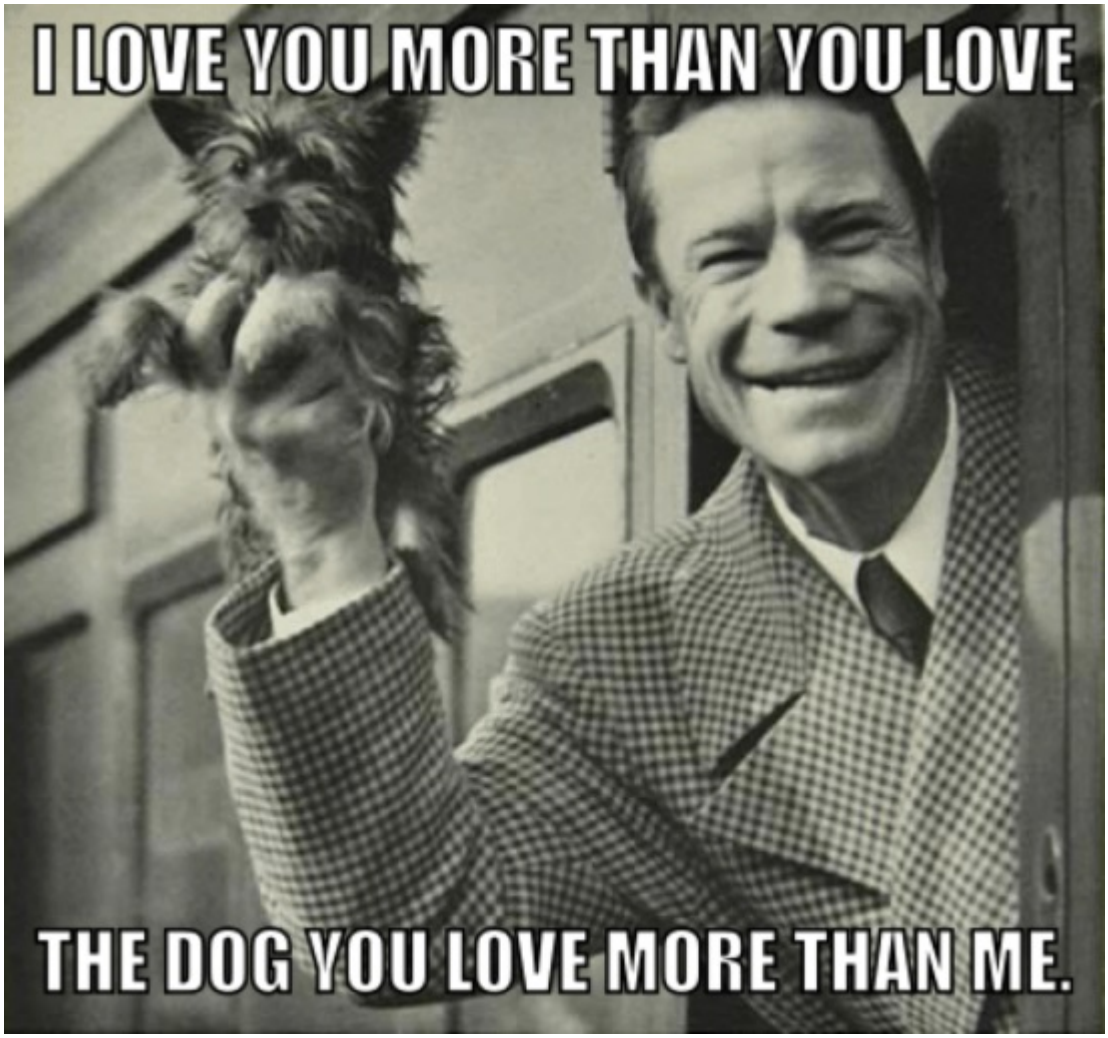
Nothing says, “I love you” better than frugal spending.



For real, though.



When you find something that works, you stick with it.



This is a universal truth of marriage.


ROSES ARE RED, VIOLETS ARE BLUE.
SEX IS TOO MUCH EXERCISE,
LET'S EAT SOME PIZZA.

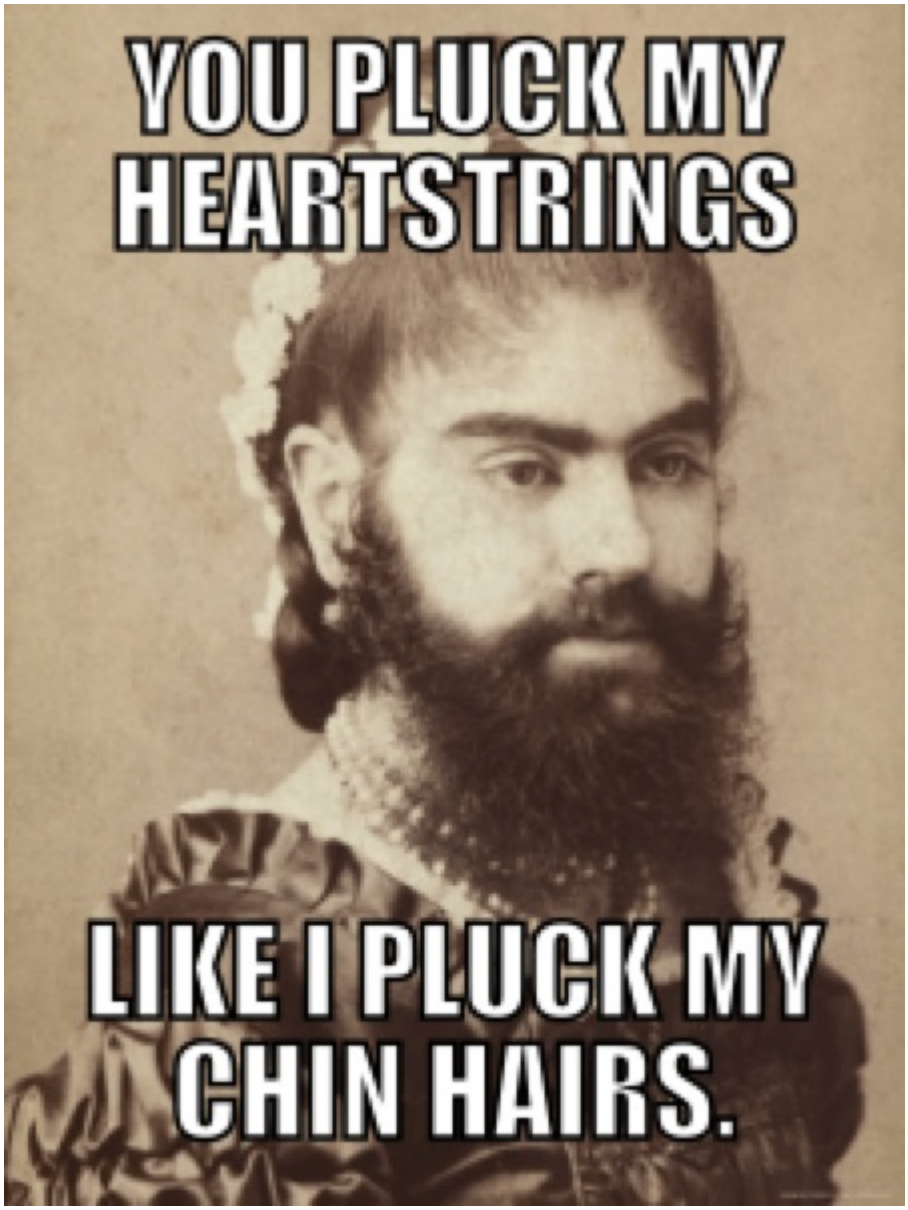
Mmmmm, pizza.


I JUST ATE AN ENTIRE BOX OF GIRL SCOUT COOKIES.
AND I LOVE YOU MORE THAN I HATE MYSELF.

Every year.


MY LOVE FOR YOU GROWS LARGER WITH EACH PASSING YEAR.
LIKE MY PANTS.

Mmmmm, pizza.



With tweezers.



The original vampire diary stories or something.



The truest expression of love.

Happy Valentine's Day!

If you want, you can check out 2014's Married Valentines , or be my Facebook Valentine . You know, if you love me.

Like guns? Great! Now shut up.



ANOTHER DAMN UPDATE: *Another day, another shooting in America. This time, it comes just four days after I wrote about guns again . It happened at a church in Charlston, South Carolina , left nine people dead and the gunman got away. And again, it's being identified by the city it happened in because of course is it. And it's just "a shooting" and not terrorism because the shooter is white. And he's a shooter, not a thug. Also because he's white. And he attacked the congregation of a black church with "Confederate States of America" on his car, but it's not about race. Because he's white. In America.*

UPDATE: *Just two days after I wrote this – **two fucking days** – and we have another shooting here in America, this time at Marysville-Pilchuck High School, in Marysville, Washington (about an hour north of Seattle). This marks the 87th school shooting since Sandy Hook happened, way back in the distant past of barely two years ago. Go ahead and tell me again about how we don't need to make it harder to buy firearms because you're afraid of Obama or don't feel like filling out some damn paperwork. Go on. I fucking dare you.*

This is not about the shooting in Canada . Well it is, but only as a springboard for something else. Something that won't make me any friends at all here in Pew Pew, Texas …

But while this isn't specifically about the shooting that happened in Ottawa today, I'll be damned if it's not pretty telling that, when something like this happens in the US, the breaking news headlines are usually along the lines of, "Shooting reported at this place in this city in this state."

Because we have to pin that shit down to a specific location, otherwise we might get it mixed up with any one of the other shootings in our seemingly endless stream of crazed gunmen.

But when it happens in Canada, it's just, "Shooting reported in Canada".

Imagine the headline, "Shooting reported in United States". It would never work, because shootings here are so common that such a headline just wouldn't contain enough information to be informative.

But "Shooting reported in Canada" does, because shootings like the one that happened today are the exception in Canada, rather than the miserable rule of reality we live with here in the states.

Why is that, do you think? Keep in mind that I live in Texas, where the only suspicious people are the ones who *don't* have guns. They're up to something. Probably liberals. And gay. And communist socialists with Muslim tendencies. Or something. Because that's just how Texas works.

But the simple truth is that **we have more shootings here because we have more guns here**. That's not me being "anti-gun". It's just math. The more Legos your kid has, the more likely you are to step on one during a midnight visit to the bathroom. It's how probability works.

You have more guns / You have more people shooting guns / You have more people getting shot

Sorry, NRA people. Them's just the facts.



Now, before you label me as a soft on crime, liberal loving Democrat progressive namby-pamby whatever, hear me out. Because I'm not anti-gun. I'm fine with guns. I think you should have a right to buy guns and own guns and shoot guns and make sweet, sweet love to your guns when you're home alone and no one's watching. Whatever fuels your engine, chief. Not my business.

But I do think it should be slightly more difficult to buy a gun than, say, a pack of gum. (And don't start with the old NRA line of "We need to enforce existing laws before making new ones!" – because you won't let

us enforce the existing laws. That's the whole point .)
Right now, at least here in the Lone Star State, you can go to any gun show (there's at least a dozen going on within driving distance of wherever you are in Texas, whenever you're in Texas) and buy as many guns as you want. No ID required. No background check. No waiting period. Just go crazy.

So people go crazy. And they buy guns. Lots of guns. And they'll be damned if they're ever gonna let them damn shifty-eyed Feds know that they have them because that's what Hitler did and then Nazi Socialism something-something whatever. It's a slippery slope, sort of thing. Because isn't it always?



The problem is, these same God, Guns, and Jesus folks are the ones pushing for all the damn VoterID laws that they claim are all about maintaining the integrity of the electoral process, and not at all about disenfranchising the voting rights of minorities and the poor. Some of them probably even believe that, too.

Except that it kinda falls apart when you need an ID to vote, but not to buy a gun. Or many guns. Or all the guns.

So I got to thinking…what if we applied the rest of all that good 'ol boy, southern Tea Party faux-Libertarian rhetoric to guns? What would happen?

Well, let's see. We'll start with the Mexicans. According to the hard Right, our neighbors from down south are stealing our jobs, soaking up our tax dollars, bringing infectious diseases that will kill us all, cashing in on our benefits, exploiting our resources, and just generally being royal pains in our patriotic asses.

So we need to build a wall. And have an armed militia patrol it. And keep

ISIS out because radical Islam and tequila go hand-in-hand. And then we need to identify, round up, and deport every illegal immigrant currently living in this country, whether they're eight years old or eighty. And we need VoterID to keep them from usurping our elections.
But they can buy guns.

That's right. They're supposedly a terrible threat to the very fabric of our nation, but what the hell. We can't start requiring ID and background checks and waiting periods and all that bleeding heart crap when it comes to guns. What's the worst they can do? Gather together to stockpile weapons while "training" in the forest and plotting the violent overthrow of the federal government?

Wait. No. That's crazy ass white people. Never mind.

"But when you make guns illegal, only criminals will be armed!"

True, but nobody – NOBODY – is saying to make guns illegal. Or to ban guns. Or to do anything at all to whatever precious boom boom phallus you already own. This is a strawman the Right loves to trot out whenever the issue of gun control comes up, as if anyone is seriously proposing any such thing.



That doesn't mean it shouldn't be harder to buy a gun, though. Because when you start requiring ID and background checks and waiting periods, do you know what happens? The law-abiding citizens can still buy all the guns they want, but the criminals can't. Not at a gun show, anyway. Not legally. They'll have to buy their guns on the black market – which they will –

but it would cut down on the number of guns they have legal access to, and it'd make the ones that are out there more expensive to buy. *Illegally*. Because that's how contraband works, whether it's guns or drugs or unpasteurized milk.
No one is saying we should get rid of all the guns, because everyone knows that's just not feasible. We have so many guns floating around the country already, that if we stopped all gun production right now, we'd still have plenty of firearms out there to last us years and years to come. So shut up with that shit.

All I'm saying – all anyone is saying – is that it shouldn't be quite so freaking easy to buy a gun. And you should have to prove who you are to buy one. And you need to be an American citizen to buy one. (The Tea Partiers should like that one, at least.) And you need to have a clean record. And you need to not have mental health issues that might cause you to snap and start murdering a bunch of people.

"But knives kill people! Why don't we make it harder to buy knives?!"

Because don't be a fucking idiot, that's why. Yeah, knives can kill people, but last time I checked, they had a pretty limited range and a helluva reloading time. Well, compared to a semi-automatic rifle with a full magazine, anyway.

Tell you what. When a knife comes along that can murder 900 people per minute, give me a call. We'll do lunch. Until then, shut up. (And don't tell me 900 rounds per minute isn't a thing. Because it's totally a thing .)

"But we need to be able to stand up against the oppression of the federal government if they ever go too far!"



Yeah, call me when you have a Navy and an Air Force. Also, tanks. And drones. Lots and lots of drones. With missiles. Read up on military strategy and tactics, too. Historical and modern. Then, whenever you finally figure out that your little AR-15 and your band of merry men don't stand a chance against the combined might of the largest, most highly funded and well-trained

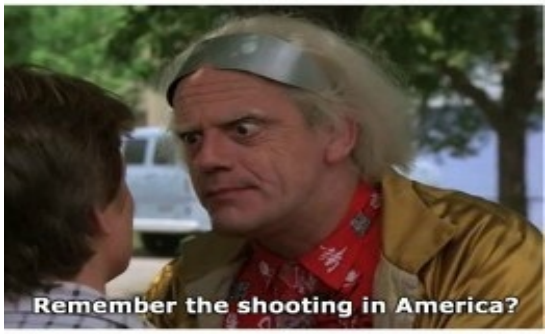
military force the world has ever seen, you can go ahead and shut up, too. Anyway, I hope I've made my point. Because the shooting in Canada was awful, but the shootings here are awful, too. And they're plural. Because they happen way too often, because we can't seem to pull our collective heads out of our cavernous asses long enough to come together and say, "Hey. Hey, guys? You know what I was thinking? I was thinking maybe we all might live a little longer if we stopped being so damn stupid about every damn thing all the damned time. For once."

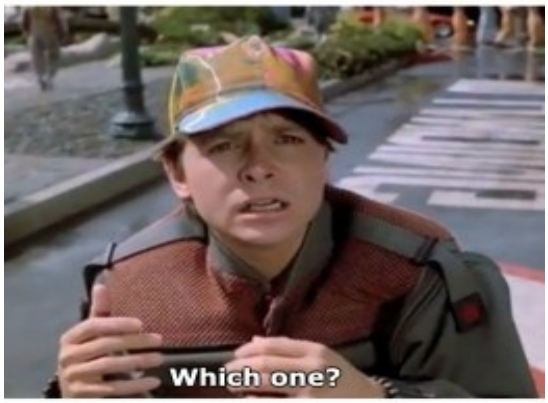
Ah, but I'm a dreamer.

Goodnight, kids. I leave you now with an actual conversation from the future. Seriously, it's totally legit. I have a flux capacitor and a Mr. Fusion and everything.


Remember that shooting in Canada?


Yeah, Doc. That was awful.


Remember the shooting in America?


Which one?



Yeah. It’s like that.

Great! You voted. Now shut up.



We get it. You voted. We know, because you posted the pictures of you voting to Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and wherever the hell else you could, so that everyone would know that you voted. And that you did it as hard as you could. We’re all very impressed.

Now can you please shut up about it?

For real, though. Just stop talking. I understand that voting makes you feel very accomplished and patriotic and dutiful and any other noble-sounding adjectives you feel like throwing on to the pile, but it doesn’t really mean much of anything. I mean, you do realize that, don’t you?

And no, I’m not going to sit here and preach about how the two party system is an illusion and that all politicians are the same and are controlled by the secret IRS Benghazi Bilderberg Trilateral Illuminati Brotherhood. Or corporations. Or whichever nebulous, creeping evil is creeping nebulously into the trendy-verse today.

What I *am* going to do is tell you what really matters in a democratic republic, and it’s nothing at all to do with voting. Voting is just the People’s Choice Awards in a three piece suit with a flag pin tacked on. It doesn’t really do anything other than contribute to the validity of the election cycle and perpetuate the myth that going to the polls is The Most Important Thing You Can Do as a citizen.

Hint: It’s not.

The most important thing you can do is not give a damn about who is in office. Because it doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t.*

*(*Ok, sometimes it does, like when the crazies are in charge. But I’ve already written enough about the Tea Party, and it’s Tuesday. I don’t like to repeat myself on Tuesdays.)*



What matters is holding politicians accountable to the will of the people. Of the *majority* of the people, not just the really loud and obnoxious ones that stand outside of abortion clinics or coat shops and throw pig's blood on people. The majority of people are most of us that are just trying to survive and leave the world a little better than we found it. Or at least so far as it applies to you and yours. Or me and mine. Whichever.

In the end, the only time voting actually matters is when direct policy decisions are involved. Those matter a lot. But deciding who gets to hold an office? Meh. Remember that time the incumbent ran on a position of strength while the challenger ran on a platform of change? Good times. It's like that episode of Law and Order where they solved a crime that one time.

The duty of a good citizen is not to just show up on election day and stuff a ballot in a box. Any idiot can do that – and a lot of idiots do. The job of true patriots and concerned citizens has more to do with what happens **after** the election, not before or during.

It's the petition drives, the grassroots efforts (real ones, mind you), the social media campaigns, the protests, the rallies, the educating, the investigating, the exposing, the policing, the holding of their damn feet to the proverbial fire that really affects policy.

Also, just because someone chooses not to vote does not mean that they give up their right to do any of these things. They don't give up the right to complain about injustices, they don't give up the right to push for change, and they sure as hell don't give up the right to pay their taxes and be a damn citizen. They just didn't participate in the reindeer games of voting for Your Guy or Their Guy, but that doesn't mean they're any less of a citizen than you. It just means they have priorities. (Or they honestly don't give a crap. Apathy – like shit – happens.)

If we just go to the polls and vote, then wipe our hands and pat ourselves on the back for a job well done, then we have failed as a people and as a nation. Because leaving everything up to elected officials never ends well.



For example, if we'd left things up to our elected officials here in Beaumont, Texas, we'd still have a corrupt school board ruining the city. Instead, citizens took action, local residents filed complaints and fought tooth and nail to draw attention to the problems that were occurring, and they demanded action. And it – eventually – happened.

Because that's how it works. It didn't matter that we had one of the most golly-shucks-geewillikers morons in the nation for a governor. It didn't matter than our city mayor didn't give a damn. It didn't matter than the Chamber of Commerce couldn't care less, or that getting the state's interest at all was an uphill battle of Sisyphean proportions. It didn't matter, because the people didn't leave it up to elected officials who either didn't care, or were directly involved in the corruption and scheming. They took action, they worked hard, and they saw it through. Because the elected officials were the problem, not the solution. Which has typically been the historic case in all things…

If we'd left things up to our elected officials, we'd still have segregation.
If we'd left things up to our elected officials, we wouldn't have labor laws.
If we'd left things up to our elected officials, we wouldn't have environmental protections.
If we'd left things up to our elected officials, minorities and women wouldn't even be able to vote.

In short, if we'd left things up to our elected officials, we'd be a freaking banana republic in every damn sense of the word. (Some would say we already are . I wonder how we got this way?)

So while I'm very glad that you took time out of your busy day to spend more time posting about how awesome you are for voting than it took to actually cast your ballot, could you please – and I say this with all the kindness and sincerity it deserves – please, pretty please, just shut the fuck up about it?



kthxbai
