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[Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach](#)

Pen & Paper and PC mixed together in the witches' cauldron

Publisher and online subscription entertainment operator Turbine Inc. became quite a famous name in the MMORPG world, known for Asheron's Call, Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach and the ongoing development of The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar. Wizard of the Coast franchise Dungeons & Dragons, it is the grandfather of all role playing games, the trend that started it all roughly 30 years ago, when pen and paper games were top of the line technology. Undoubtedly a generation molding concept, it was later on picked up by the rebel world of computer gaming and eventually made it into multi-user dungeons, or online text-based games known as MUDs. But that wasn't the end of the line. As computers became widely available and were recognized as the number one home entertainment devices, it was only natural that the idea needed to be exploited in a fully immersive video and audio universe, thus the MMORPG evolution could be spotted on the horizon. The franchise made its way into Turbine's hands, the developer to ultimately unleash Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach upon the unsuspecting PC audience, on February 28, 2006. **Story** Created by Keith Baker and developed by Bill Slavicsek and James Wyatt, Eberron is the latest fantasy setting created for the D&D adventures. Specially designed to address a new breed of role-player, the fresh world raises up to the task of being an enjoyable experience for the modern day gamer as well as a landmark for old school fans. It's effectively a mix between the rigors of 3rd edition rules and new implements that slightly bend the rules in favor of a more realistic experience. Eberron is usually identified with Khorvaire, a continent once ruled by the goblinoid races of Dhakaan. But now, it's high time humans cover most of it, living in the area known as the Five Nations. To the Southeast lies Aerenal, a land ruled by the elves and their ancient traditions. Giants used to reside to the South, in the jungle continent of Xen'Drik and to the north are the frozen wastes of Frostfell. Two other continents complete the landscape of Eberron, Sarlona being inhabited by the magical Quori, creatures from the Region of Dreams, and the dragon inhabited land of Argonnessen. Twelve moons spin the fates of Eberron, while some sages think a thirteenth moon also exist, banished and vanished from plain sight. **Gameplay** Directly from the player handbook, the races of DDO: Stormreach present distinct flavor in a line-up of six: Human, Elf, Halfling, Dwarf, Warforged and the Drow as a latest addition. The Warforged are living constructs inherited from the last war as a faction to be taken into consideration. Their bulky massive build is suited for powerful melee classes, ready to take all the heat of combat on their own while the rest of the team is safely behind. Their ability to shake off damage is uncanny and it makes me wonder exactly how well balanced this race is, compared to the rest. For the record, I miss the good old half-orcs that used to provide an evil incentive for playing the barbarian. Class options are just as varied, with Fighter, Paladin, Barbarian, Rogue, Ranger, Cleric, Wizard, Sorcerer and Bard as professions. Unfortunately, there are no prestige classes available at this time, but given the very generous world and as the title thrives on, they're not an improbable addition. Characters need both strategy and raw power to complete quests and evolve as they will eventually meet some of the deadliest creatures from the D&D universe, including the Mindflayer, Ogre Magi or Red Dragon. Small party settings stimulate players to create balanced groups using a variety of classes, which in turn does not remove the possibility of solo play. D&D always had unique combat control systems and required tactical thinking, now doubled by the quick reflexes needed for a PC title. Characters can block incoming attacks with a shield, dodge to the side and tumble in the heat of battle. But fighting is not all, as players face devious traps, intricate puzzles and challenging monsters in the

dungeon depths. Prior to any dungeon run, you have to get as many quests as possible in the area. Most of the time, it's a good idea to bring together a couple of friends for backup, as varied as possible class-wise. After all, D&D was the one to introduce the classical setup for a dungeon run, namely the Warrior, Mage, Priest, Rogue combo. To this end, there is a looking for group (LFG) option, best activated in highly populated areas such as taverns. With a full line-up, our adventure begins. Unlike most online role playing games, raw power is not that effective in the scavenging of ancient relics, hence each class must follow its standard role. You actually use your listening skill passively and the computer-run Dungeon Master will let you know details concerning the surroundings. Always fun, it's sometime useless, like hearing the sound of glass falling on the floor of a tavern from the outside, or more impressive, like goblins laying in wait behind a dungeon door, ready to ambush out party of adventurers. Definitely a good port from D&D rules, but I can't help wondering if it was really necessary, since a computer game has other direct ways of letting you know such details. Turbine did a good job in adapting the Pen&Paper skill and spell systems to the computer world requirements, with the introduction of moderate cool downs to allow repetitive use of skills and mana costs to make up for the spells-per-day limitations. Wizard spells used to have a limited number of uses per day and required long periods of rest prior to use, the same applied to some powerful weapon skills. I can't say I know a better way to implement spells into the game mechanics, but it still feels strange to know I'm playing a D&D game and have a mana bar at the same time. On the other hand, while implementing D&D rules into the core might seem as a great advantage to the old time franchise fans, it can be a hassle for the open minded visitor that is unfamiliar with the original restrictions. Thus, the younger audience might have a problem understanding the proper use of active non-combat skills like Search, Repair, Heal or Hide. A level cap of 10 doesn't help either, although I am sure it's more of a marketing move than anything else, as Turbine will do something about it in future expansions.

Concept First published in 1974, Dungeons & Dragons is the game that defines the role playing genre. Continuous evolution brought about the third edition D&D, providing a needed revitalization and revision to the rules system in 2000. It was no easy task to turn Eberron into reality and mould it according to the now legendary 3.5 rule set. Players enjoy an imaginative social experience, within a rich fantasy world, by creating heroic avatars to guide through an ongoing series of adventures. Working together to defeat monsters and other challenges, players grow in power and glory attaining a deep sense of achievement. The rules cover all game aspects, from character customization, combat, items, crafting, to a bestiary, deity worship and Dungeon Master duties. Trying to explain the complex D&D rule system in just a few words is a doomed endeavor from the start. Upon character creation, there are attribute points to be distributed among primary stats, with the possibility of further minor increase during the later stages of development. Henceforth, every received level up and skill points are related to character's Intelligence statistic and can be distributed among a wide range of mostly non combat skills. Available at a steady pace, features are class dependant and make up the primary difference between different classes. For instance, a warrior will be heavy on feats while a barbarian would barely get some of his own choosing. Pen&Paper games always had a strong numeric component, where players launched in furious character customization battles for the ultimate build, and this lived on to the PC. Although it is a complex system, Turbine implemented it in a rather natural way, similar to controlling and developing your avatar in any other MMORPG. This is the main reason why players are experiencing a rather lean learning curve and the game appears to be easy to understand. Being the top shelf title that it is, I would expect DDO: Stormreach to feature an up to date combat system, but unfortunately, there is no proper active agro management in the game. While tanking is still used to soak up the damage in a party setup, there are no skills to steal and hold agro once combat starts. This way, fighting is more a matter of crowd control and a lot of direct damage as the role of the hulkster in front is largely diminished. Needless to say, this is a D&D rules legacy, one I could very much live without. There are several difficulty

settings for each dungeon, ranging from solo play, to normal, hard and elite for groups. Experience points are received upon dungeon adventure completion, but only the first time a specific objective has been completed. Unfortunately, MMORPG and Pen&Paper play styles don't properly mix. Developers aim to create an environment capable of stimulating team play, where each dungeon is a unique experience and it was great since Pen&Paper games did just that. Issues arise when players choose to enter the same dungeon multiple times, for experience and specific rare loot. While a certain adventure feels great the first time around, the subsequent five instance runs will bore you out of your skull, doing the same thing over and over again. Dice rolling and statistic wielding pencils don't leave enough room for re-playability. Unfortunately, players love to treat DDO: Stormreach just like any other MMORPG and go hunting for fat loot at the same location with impunity, shamelessly using meta gaming.

Video Like most MMORPGs do, DDO: Stormreach too has to meet a quota of compatibility with all sorts of computer systems, so performance is always scaled to a great extent. The game works pretty much like any other limited multiplayer online game, in the sense that graphics will never blow you away like the latest shoot-'em-all extravaganza that almost left your video card in a bloody mess. However, the game engine does a good job of showing off just enough eye candy to keep people interested, although textures look rather washed up even on full graphical detail. The game is fully three-dimensional and uses DX9 lighting to cover up for the lack of detail, hence the world is always glowing, a cheap trick WoW also uses. It's a shame one can't use free camera look for better screenshot art. I really wanted to see the face of my character, but I only succeeded this by walking backwards. Emote lines are limited and you have to find out about them on your own. At least climbing is very interesting in DDO: Stormreach, a feature that game developers made sure to use in complicated dungeons scaled up vertically.

Sound It's a pity there are so few NPCs with full voice over. While it's true that deep within a dungeon, talking with that angry mob of goblins isn't exactly the main concern, over instancing is no excuse for a good old chat with the drunken bartender or that cheeky wench. At least, the music's greatness and compliments go to bards and the ever enchanting tavern setups. Truly a jaw dropping experience when you hear the local bard NPC starting to weave his song of woe and sorrow as it does help a lot with immersion into the medieval fantasy setting. The game also has a very neat voice over IP feature courtesy of Gamespy, relieving the stress of finding a free server and an empty Ventrilo or Team-Speak room. Thus, players that never met before can easily communicate with one another, to fully coordinate their actions in difficult areas.

Multiplayer The MMORPG world knows its share of over instancing problems and DDO: Stormreach does not rise above such documented concerns. The first thing to annoy the hell out of me was the fact that you can't enter a dungeon area, no matter how insignificant, unless you have at least one starter quest. I feel it is a greatly limiting factor, especially in an open ended online role playing game. While private instanced adventures minimize unwanted interference by party outsiders, it also cuts down on user interaction. One of the first drawbacks that come to mind is the lack of PvP action, where player characters can fight one against another for dominance. This also means cooperative play is downsized to small groups, while large raids remain a notion outside developers' grasp. Dungeons & Dragons are, by definition, anything but massive and one can go as far as to call Stormreach a limited multiplayer online role playing game. Players usually meet in small cities and don't see much of each other, therefore guild or clan unity does not have any role whatsoever in game mechanics. No solo play for you either, since the game is intended for group battles, thus characters rarely (if ever) are able to solo dungeons their level.

Conclusion Despite its shortcomings, Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach is, without a doubt, the best D&D implementation out there for a computer role playing game, thus worthy of recognition. Never before has dungeon crawling featured such a complete feeling of mystery and thrilling adventure, with DMs casual intervention at key points and extended hidden areas to provide puzzling riddles for even the most die-hard Pen&Paper fans. The title is a different breed of

MMORPG, recommended for both new adventurers and veteran players alike, as Eberron has something to offer each. With fresh content being streamed constantly, players are guaranteed to have enough dungeons to last them for a long time. Turbine announced the release of three freely downloadable content packs, Litani of the Dead Part One: The Necropolis going live onto the servers not two weeks ago. In an effort that first requires high level adventurers to battle out powerful lieutenants and their undead hordes, the ultimate goal is to unveil the evil machinations of an age old powerful Lich and put an end to his blasphemies once and for all.