

ULTIMA ASCENSION (Q4 '99) has generated more Internet discussion among RPG fanatics than any other game on this list, and for good reason. It's the latest, and reputedly the last, of Richard Garriott's single-player *ULTIMA* games—games that have defined and towered over the RPG genre for years. Featuring a gorgeous, fully interactive 3D environment and third-person perspective, the game generated early heat (from here and elsewhere) for veering towards a *TOMB RAIDER* style of gameplay, but those fears may have been premature, as the latest versions we've seen reveal a game that's still unmistakably *ULTIMA*. Decide for yourself this Christmas.

Like *DEUS EX*, Tom Hall's righteous-looking **ANACHRONOX** (Q4 '99) is showing strong promise as a title that may turn Ion Storm's luck around. This ambitious, console-style, fantasy/sci-fi RPG had a great showing at E3, based mainly on some truly inspired 3D artwork and animation. We know, we know—the gameplay's the thing, and we desperately need to see more of it, but for now we're putting our faith in Ion Storm's resident mad genius—who has a couple of games called *WOLFENSTEIN 3D* and *DOOM* on his resume.

WEREWOLF: THE HEART OF GAIA (Q4 '99) is the next game from Dreamforge and ASC Games, the team behind last year's award-winning *SANITARIUM*. Based on the pen-and-paper RPG from White Wolf, *WEREWOLF* promises to be a dark, horror-tinged, emotionally complex role-playing experience, as you take on the role of a shape-shifting werewolf. The state-of-the-art graphics, based on the *UNREAL* engine, may put this one over the top.

SEPTERRA CORE (Q3 '99) has been around a while, as it has bounced between publishers, but it looks to finally be on track for a release this fall from Monolith. This anime-influenced, console-style RPG has some nice, original touches, and may be a sleeper hit.

Speaking of console RPGs, SquareSoft EA is porting over their next uber-RPG, **FINAL FANTASY VIII**. They learned their lessons from *FINAL FANTASY VII*, and they're working on the 3D-card problems, making the art cleaner, and making the game look less like anime. They're also aiming for a ship date soon after the console release (Q4 '99), rather than the nearly-a-year-later release for FFVII.

Planescape: Torment

When most people think of AD&D, they think of dragons and wussy little elves, not of sarcastic talking skulls or a tower of living heads. These are typical elements in *PLANESCAPE: TORMENT* and illustrative of the radical departure that developer Black Isle is taking for its next AD&D game.

While you do wake up with amnesia, you also realize that you died. Here you don't really gain levels; you trigger memories, since your character has literally done it all. It's single-player only and uses a modified version of the *BALDUR'S GATE* engine. The interface has been streamlined, so you get more eye candy when you walk around, which is helpful because *TORMENT* has such an abstract and imaginative setting. Gameplay is similar to that of *BALDUR'S GATE*, with the significant addition of the faction system; all NPCs now belong to factions, so every action has consequences for how NPCs will relate with you. The surreal look on top of the unique *Planescape* universe makes *TORMENT* a serious contender this year.

Q3 '99, Interplay/Black Isle, www.interplay.com



System Shock 2

Ask anyone in this industry about his or her favorite games, and you're bound to hear the name *SYSTEM SHOCK* a few times. *SYSTEM SHOCK* was one of those "great games that not enough people played," and for years and years fans kept on asking for a sequel. Well, those wishes have finally been answered; the premier offering from Irrational Games (a team of ex-Looking Glass developers) will be *SYSTEM SHOCK 2*.

Irrational has made quite a bit of progress since the last build we tinkered with for our May issue preview. Psi Powers have been finalized, and there are a whopping 35 powers total, in addition to the 14 weapons, 11 implants, and dozens of random inventory items. Like *DEUS EX*, *SYSTEM SHOCK 2* will go for the "same puzzle, multiple solutions" approach, and for those of you who missed the puzzle-style mini-games while hacking, it's back. *SYSTEM SHOCK 2* looks very solid, and we think more people will play this title and give the series the recognition it deserves.

Q3 '99, Looking Glass/Irrational Games, www.lglass.com



Gabriel Knight III: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned

This is the adventure game genre's last great hope, or possibly last, dying gasp—not that there's any pressure on it or anything. But if any game could ever rescue the genre, *GABRIEL KNIGHT III* is it. Designed by Jane Jensen, the brilliant storyteller behind the first two games in the series, GKIII once again plunges headlong into the realm of supernatural mystery, as Gabriel and cohort Grace Nakamura investigate the disappearance of a dethroned royal's newborn son. The investigation takes them all the way to a mystery of biblical proportions—as anyone who's seen the controversial ads for the game knows.

GABRIEL KNIGHT III is exchanging the full-motion video approach of the previous game for a full-3D engine, an inevitability of the times. Sierra was less successful than hoped for with *KING'S QUEST VIII*, their last major adventure game to make the switch to 3D, but GKIII, grounded with stubborn determination in traditional adventure gaming and emotionally complex storytelling, has a much greater chance for success. As adventure game fans, we sure hope so.

Q3, '99, Sierra Studios, www.sierra.com

