

It's Christmas, 1998. As an avid *Dungeons and Dragons* player, you've been looking forward to this day in hopes of getting the latest release from BioWare. As you are handed a present from under the tree you remark how light the box is and are encouraged to open it. To your utter surprise and satisfaction, your wish is granted and in your hands is the Windows release of *Baldur's Gate*. Scenarios like this would be the start of a long journey of enjoying computer role playing games for many people that grew up in the late 90s. As time went by, *Baldur's Gate* saw an expansion, a sequel, an expansion for said sequel, a spinoff, a sequel to that spinoff, remakes for the two core games, yet another expansion for the first, and finally a third core installment in the series. While looking at all this material, however, it would be wrong to ignore the twelve year gap in original content between *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance 2*, and *Baldur's Gate: Siege of Dragonspear* and the seven years between *Dragonspear* and *Baldur's Gate 3*. Despite this big gap, hopes remained high for the new release, and many people saw themselves attracted to a franchise they either only knew from their childhood, or to one they had never before been exposed to.

The *Baldur's Gate* franchise is not alone in a world of CRPGs; however, it is among the first ever released. The first two games' contemporaries of a similar genre were games such as *Fallout* and *Diablo*, each in their first iterations. *Baldur's Gate* needed a competitive advantage against both games, as well as any up-and-coming competitors. To accomplish this the game was relegated to real-time, contradicting the turn-based nature of tabletop D&D as well as *Fallout*, yet it also featured a "tactical pause" which allowed players to take infinite time to decide the actions of their party members before they are set in motion, as opposed to *Diablo* which favored having no breaks from real-time. The style of both of those games were very different from *Baldur's Gate* as well. *Fallout* set itself in a nuclear wasteland, in *Diablo* you fight demons and their spawn, but in *Baldur's Gate* you were given a very classical style of fantasy. In addition to these differentiating features, the original games also sported a rather large party size of six characters in total allowed in your travelling group. *Baldur's Gate* even allowed multiplayer, where one player may make a character outside of the game and bring it to their friend's game, allowing the two to play together with their own custom made characters on one saved version of the game. Although this multiplayer had many problems at first, it still was a desirable feature for people who may only want to play a game with their friends or family, even if that game is mainly made for single player. With all these features separating the first two *Baldur's Gate* games from its competition at the time, it's easy to recognize how it stood out, let alone its success through great story writing and game planning. Yet, *Baldur's Gate's* reign over the PC RPG world wouldn't last forever.

Whereas *Fallout* and *Diablo* veered towards becoming action role playing games, *Baldur's Gate*, in its quiet years between 2004 and 2012, became this niche little piece of RPG history. An initial success for the studio which would go on to create *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and *Mass Effect*. When the first two games were remade by Beamdog's Overhaul Games division, it would be unable to outshine the release of the brand new *Divinity: Original Sin* from Larian Studios in 2014. Larian Studios had been making their *Divinity* series since 2002, right around the time when *Baldur's Gate* had begun to be left behind for newer projects. The *Divinity* series began closer to *Diablo* in how it was played, but by the release of *Original Sin*, players were given real-time exploration with turn-based combat, which suited the sort of mechanics necessary to emulate what it feels like to play a tabletop RPG. This, combined with *Divinity's* up-to-date graphics, voice acting, sound design, and even console releases, made it clear that Larian Studios had become too strong of an opponent to compete against with legacy games. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," became the attitude of many *Baldur's Gate* fans when it was announced that

Larian Studios would create the newest, and most beloved installment in the franchise. Using the real-time exploration and turn-based combat idea, the third game would be rooted in more up to date game design concepts. This alone, however, wouldn't be enough to capture players who do not already enjoy this genre of games.

*Disco Elysium* showcased in 2019 how an excellent storyline told primarily through spoken/written dialogue could entice non-traditional players to engage in long lasting roleplaying games, which would be a major focus in the development of *Baldur's Gate 3*. While many players were expecting the third game to be a direct sequel to the first two, it does not have the same main character. It also has a brand new plot line and new NPCs, with some legacy characters thrown in almost as a reference to the original games, rather than a direct link (although it still serves as that link). *Baldur's Gate 3* also rides off the explosion of tabletop D&D players that occurred after D&D reached its fifth edition. The video game reflects this by using the fifth edition rules explicitly and offering players many of the same features written in the tabletop RPG. That isn't to say it follows these rules in their entirety, as many features were left out or altered to improve the video game's experience, but the core concepts are more than recognizable to any tabletop D&D player. *Baldur's Gate 3* would also attract many players of the LGBTQ+ community by including many character creation features. These features include being able to identify as non-binary, or separate from male and female, which makes NPCs use they/them pronouns instead of she/her or he/him. Larian Studios also added the ability to customize one's body type, allowing male genitalia on a stereotypical female body, and vice versa. In this game, you are also able to romance many of your companion NPCs, with no restrictions based on sexuality. These features helped many players form a deeper connection to their characters, encouraging more memorable gameplay, which in turn created massive amounts of positive feedback.

In the early days of computer role playing games, *Baldur's Gate* stood out due to its unique gameplay, its roots in fantasy and Dungeons and Dragons, and one's ability to play with friends. Over the course of nearly twenty years, RPGs saw themselves push away from the era of the original PC games, leaving *Baldur's Gate* behind. With the development of a third core game in the series by a beloved developer in the RPG space which features many new concepts to attract various players seeking an in-depth game with a familiar ruleset and progressive character creation options, the series saw a resurgence in popularity, currently reigning as the ultimate RPG of its kind.