

THE DARK AGE OF WARHAMMER

THE MAKER OF DARK AGE OF CAMELOT PREPARES TO LEAD THE WORLD'S DEADLIEST TABLETOP GAME INTO ONLINE BATTLE WITH WARHAMMER ONLINE: AGE OF RECKONING, AND NOW MYTHIC UNVEILS ALL — EXCLUSIVELY — TO PC GAMER

COVER STORY BY CHUCK OSBORN

W

ar is everywhere. You can see it in the eyes of the combatants — nervous excitement, balanced by a mixture of hope and dread. You can see it in the honored dead that litter the landscape. Their discarded remains serve as a warning to all that no one is safe. And maybe most of all, you can feel it in the tone of the press releases.

Yep, launching an online RPG these days is like walking onto a battlefield that's already pockmarked by artillery fire. (Don't believe us? Flip to page 66 for a roll call of the challengers.) Any company that dares enter it needs a secret weapon to survive, especially if it hopes to go up against the 5.5-million-subscriber-base gorilla, Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*. These days, it takes a lot more than thousands of miles of virtual land and a few nice spell effects to draw in an audience.

Enter the *Warhammer* universe. The brand, launched almost 25 years ago by UK-based Games Workshop, currently boasts a half-million tabletop players in the United States alone — and several million former players, according to the company. It also encompasses collectible miniatures, a line of novels, a cardgame, a magazine (*White Wolf*), and a worldwide chain of more than 250 Games Workshop hobby stores. Factor in *Warhammer's*

futuristic off-shoot, *Warhammer 40,000* — and the growing number of videogames based on both properties — and it becomes apparent that this gameworld brings with it some major flak and firepower.

Mythic Entertainment (*Dark Age of Camelot*) is certainly convinced of the brand's potential, having suited up for active *Warhammer* duty in a high-profile signing ceremony at E3 2005. Now, it's time to convince you.

This is *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning*.





■ The world map of *Warhammer* is very roughly based on Earth's land mass.

VITAL STATS

WARHAMMER ONLINE: AGE OF RECKONING

➤ **DEVELOPER** | Mythic Entertainment

➤ **PUBLISHER** | Mythic Entertainment

➤ **URL** | www.warhammeronline.com

➤ **RELEASE DATE** | Q2 2007

➤ DEVELOPER TRACK RECORD |

Founded in 1995, Virginia-based Mythic is best known for *Dark Age of Camelot* (PCG rating: 90%), the fantasy MMO that originated the concept of Realm-vs.-Realm combat. *DAoC* will celebrate its fifth anniversary this fall.



■ A Dwarf Thunderer gets the drop on an Orc Shaman. Never bring a thighbone to a gunfight.



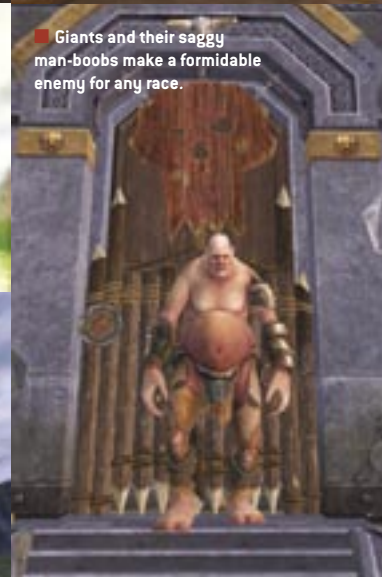
■ Goblins are the puny, mean-spirited relatives of the Orcs. They tend to be sneakier than their musclebound cousins.



■ A Dwarf's long beard is a sign of experience and should be respected.



■ Giants and their saggy man-boobs make a formidable enemy for any race.



■ Newbie Orcs and Goblins will start the game protecting a village much like this one.



■ Spotting a high-level Orc will be a snap. They're freakin' huge!

I've known the guys at Games Workshop for a long time," says Mythic President and CEO Mark Jacobs, detailing how the developer became involved with the *Warhammer* brand. He and Paul Barnett, formerly of Games Workshop, who now serves as Mythic's consulting license producer (his enthusiasm is so palpable that he's a whirling dervish of *Warhammer* lore), met back in their MUD-designing days.

Having played the tabletop wargame for years, Jacobs is in tune with *Warhammer's* philosophy of "war is everywhere." So when a different *Warhammer Online* was in development at Climax Development (see boxout, "The First *Warhammer Online*"), Games Workshop called on Jacobs to check out the game's progress — not in an official capacity, but as a fellow *Warhammer* fiend who also knows a thing or two about MMOs.

Flash forward to June 2004: Games Workshop and Climax regrettably announced the cancellation of *Warhammer Online*. But GW hadn't given up on the idea of a *Warhammer* MMO — just on that particular version. The company approached Mythic about starting from scratch, which meant coming up with an all-new vision for the game.

"I spent considerable time with Rick Priestley [*Warhammer's* creator]," remembers Jacobs, to nail down the essence of the tabletop game and how best to translate that experience to the PC. "One of the problems [with licenses] is that the licensees don't always understand the

medium," he says, which wasn't an issue with Games Workshop.

"We knew these guys would be really great to work with," Jacobs recalls. And even now, closing in on a year into development, he's sticking to that assessment — in spite of the fact that every aspect of the game's story, art, and gameworld must be approved by Games Workshop before it can go in. The process might have been agonizingly tedious — other licensees (we won't name names) have been known to respond with the speed of a glacier to approval requests — but a mere eight months after acquiring the global rights to *Warhammer Online*, Mythic has the gameworld up and running strong.

THE HAMMER OF WAR

Mythic's design team decided to focus on what it knew best, treating *Warhammer Online* as if it were the unofficial sequel to *Dark Age of Camelot*. *Warhammer* is all about war and chaos; *DAoC's* heart is PvP and Realm-vs.-Realm combat. Sounds like a match made in heav...er, hell, right?

So, with all-out war as its alpha and omega ("there are no happy endings in *Warhammer*," laughs Barnett), *Warhammer Online* is a game that will ostensibly be about racial animosity, but is *really* about that age-old conflict between good and evil...or in the case of *Warhammer*, the slightly less evil and the chaotically wicked.

Subtitled *Age of Reckoning*, the game will exist outside of present *Warhammer* continuity, although it'll draw upon the game's fiction, which includes a long history of monsters, cities, and well-known characters.

In the online game's backstory, a Chaos Plague grips the land, transforming victims into savage mutants that attack anything living. As paranoia spreads, Dark Elf psychics foresee a Chaos attack on the Empire of Humans, which leads Malekith, Lord of the Dark Elves, to orchestrate a Machiavellian plan: He compels the Greenskins (Orcs and Goblins) to attack the race of Dwarfs. Allied as it is with the Dwarfs, the Empire is honor-bound to send reinforcements, leaving it vulnerable to attack. In turn, the Empire calls upon the High Elves for help — which is exactly what Malekith intended. As news spreads that the High Elves' most skilled warriors have left their homeland to take up arms for the Empire, Malekith orders an invasion of their domain by the Dark Elves.

This vista of all-out global war marks the Age of Reckoning. *Warhammer Online's* PvP front line is split into three primary battles: the Greenskins vs. the Dwarfs, the Dark Elves vs. the High Elves, and the Chaos Humans vs. the Empire Humans. You will select your character from among these six races.

You'll also get to choose from two different archetypes: the Warrior and the Adept. Warriors, not surprisingly, rely heavily on brute force; Adepts are better at skilled professions. Each puts you on a unique career path in which you'll be able to make selections that further



■ Greenskins are all male because they bud from mushrooms. Really!

COVER STORY

THE DARK AGE OF WARHAMMER



■ "Urgh. Me make wrong turn at Albuquerque. Where am World of Warcraft?"

detail your profession. (A Human Warrior, for example, may rise through the ranks of being a soldier, rifleman, mercenary, knight, and ranger — sometimes mixing and matching facets of each if desired.)

For the first several hours of gameplay, your character's concentration (and the missions assigned to you) will be devoted to the fight between your race and its direct enemy. The game's tutorial will take place inside your race's home city or village, teaching you the basics of how to survive in the gritty world of *Warhammer*. (Within the first 30 seconds of gameplay, for example, a newbie Dwarf will be handed a weapon and asked to defend his encampment from Greenskins!) As you gain more experience, you'll move out into the surrounding zone, where you'll hunt indigenous creatures, undertake quests, and participate in designated PvP areas where battles rage.

One of the differences between *DAoC* and *Warhammer Online* will be

THE FIRST WARHAMMER ONLINE

No, your memory isn't playing tricks on you — another *Warhammer Online* was in development long before Mythic picked up the license.

The original *Warhammer Online* began development in 2001 as a result of a joint partnership between Games Workshop and UK-based developer Climax. The game was intended to be a grim and gritty realization of the classic wargame — the gameworld had a bleak, depressing air to it that verged on the horrific. At the core of the gameplay would be a skill and careers system that encouraged you to develop your characters in a uniquely *Warhammer* fashion, carving out niches such as a "cut-throat," an "anarchist," a "flagellant," and so on. PvP would be an off-shoot



of the career system, so if you chose to become a Bounty Hunter, for example, you would hunt Outlaw players.

The project was officially cancelled in June 2004 when Games Workshop pulled its funding. In an odd twist, however, Climax continued to self-fund the game's development for months afterward, claiming that it still had the online rights to the *Warhammer* license.

But Games Workshop had other ideas and made Mythic its franchise-bearer in May 2005 — effectively crushing any hope of Climax's vision seeing the light of day.

that you can participate in Realm-vs.-Realm combat from the beginning. Everyone can join a guild designated for newbies until they're enlisted in an established guild or have formed one of their own. Mythic expects that the farther into the game you get, the less time you'll spend in PvE (Player versus Environment) gameplay and the more you'll fight other players.

Eschewing character levels altogether, *Warhammer Online* will be a what-you-see-is-what-you-get world. If an opposing character has a big menacing sword that looks like it might lop your head off, it probably will. And the mark of your personal progress in the game will be shown physically: Orcs, for example, will grow in size and become more musclebound, while Dwarfs' beards will gradually become longer to indicate their venerated status. In addition, you'll be able to outfit your character with personal trophies, such as adorning your Orc's spiked armor with Dwarf skulls, just like you would in real life.

And character death will drive you crazy — literally. "Death" isn't permanent in *Warhammer Online*, but each death-ish mishap will bring you closer to the brink of insanity. Die too often and the accumulated insanity points will begin to drain the amount of experience you earn, although special quests can be

completed to repair the damage and make you sane again. At least, as sane as it gets in this bloodthirsty world.

I NEVER META-GAME I DIDN'T LIKE

Stat-based combat and unique quests are fun and all, but *Warhammer Online*'s overarching meta-game promises to bring a whole new level of strategy to online RPGs. As the agents of Order (Dwarfs, High Elves, Empire Humans) battle against the agents of Chaos (Greenskins, Dark Elves, Chaos Humans), each side will be fighting for control of zones in the gameworld. Though all combat and missions (even PvE) will count toward this goal, PvP will influence a decisive win the most.

PvP will be broken into four types: Skirmishes, Battlefields, Scenarios, and Campaigns. Skirmishes are the simplest — two or more enemies clashing in unstructured combat. Battlefields will have you fight for control of in-game resources, such as lumber mills and temples. Scenarios are similar to Battlefields, except that these large-scale battles will be instanced and evenly matched by the server (adding bots to balance the sides), and their outcomes will factor the most into which side takes a zone. And finally, Campaigns will be the PvP end-games — a final, humiliating invasion of the losing race's capital city.

Once (or if) the capital city is taken — which includes the wanton killing of NPC shopkeepers and outright pillaging — the server's meta-game will spawn in AI reinforcements, drive out the invasion force, and then reset the server. But all the loot you grabbed? You get to keep *that*. (The developers also noted that the losing side would experience negative ramifications that would carry over into the next Campaign, but the exact details haven't been finalized.)

Races of the same alignment (Order or Chaotic) can aid one another, and the game will accommodate solo play, so if a lone Dwarf wants to help his High Elf buddies, *Warhammer Online* will allow it. At launch, there will be approximately 33 zones at stake and over 1,800 quests.

WORLD OF WARHAMMER?

For all of Mythic's talk of *Warhammer Online*'s pervasive stench of war, its whimsical visuals make it difficult not to compare the game to another MMO that happens to have "war" in the title, *World of Warcraft*. Whether by coincidence or design, the gameworld — which is powered by an evolved version of *Dark Age of Camelot*'s graphics engine — looks strikingly similar to Blizzard's best-seller.

Mythic is keeping its other plans for the game, such as its crafting and teleportation systems, under wraps for now. In the meantime, though, the company's biggest hurdle may be in convincing the MMO community that *Warhammer Online* isn't a *Warcraft* wannabe — at least graphicswise. But, hey, if your upcoming game is going to be favorably compared to another, you could do a lot worse. ☒