



PUBLISHER: Sony Online Entertainment DEVELOPER: Sony Online Entertainment GENRE: MMORPG AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (store.station.sony.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, EverQuest II MULTIPLAYER: Massive-scale VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW



When *EverQuest* was the biggest kid in town, Sony Online Entertainment pumped out expansions like crazy. "Every six months" became the company mantra. Then, when *EverQuest II* faced a nearly simultaneous release against *World of Warcraft*, the stakes became higher—especially when the 800-pound gorilla nearly elbowed every other MMO right out of the playground. As EQ2's fourth official expansion, *Rise of Kunark* comes closer than any of its predecessors to realizing the product's initial intent: to raise the technological bar while appealing to a new, more casual player base. Although longtime, die-hard *EverQuest* fans still refer to EQ2 as "the dumbing down of Norrath," it remains a squishier—but still very intricate—game that works pretty well. Especially now.

After three expansions, three Adventure Packs, one collectible card game, and a bunch of free downloadable content, SOE devoted an unprecedented full year to polishing *Rise of Kunark*. Although midlevel content is completely absent (*Rise* offers little to do between levels 21 and 64), the added areas are expansive, with scads of new quests—many of which you can solo or duo. In fact, most of the overland areas are completely soloable, without the social mob groupings against which a single player stands no chance whatsoever. You can finally just go in and have fun for a while, something MMOs rarely offer.

SMOOTHLY INTEGRATED

New zones contain other zones, and the resulting audiovisual layering makes the world seem more grounded than ever, without that jarring "take two steps east—ooooh, scary; take two steps west—ooooh, tranquil" sort of feeling. It's also evident that the designers spent a lot of time making the high-end quest lines work in context instead of slapping them on at the last moment. Old fans will be thrilled

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to see revamped areas such as the former Iksar capital Sebilis, Karnor's Castle (one of the earliest dungeons in *EverQuest: Ruins of Kunark*), and Veeshan's Peak—a truly spectacular raid area where the Ring of Scale (which has held court there since the beginning of time) is undergoing a disturbing transition.

The Sarnak, the fabulous, tall, dragonlike humanoids who were nearly driven to extinction by the Iksar in EQ1, return as a new player race, but the story of their war with the Spiroc (whom old EQers will remember from the Plane of Sky) seems forced and fabricated. It's not clear how the game's overall Iksar threat affects these new-age Sarnak: "Why am I hitting that bird?" The high-level content, however, beautifully relates just what's up with those zany Iksar. Oh, and the Sarnak newbie area is as great looking as all the others, and the new city of Gorowyn is intuitively laid out and much easier to navigate than Boston, Rome, or Seattle.

The year of development shaped *Rise of Kunark* into an admirable expansion. Even though PVP content is largely ignored and mid-range characters will level elsewhere, it's apparent that SOE's finally hatched an add-on that puts a shine on the entire game. **—Cindy Yans**

VERDICT

Knockout visuals; good zone structure; solo-friendly; return of classic EQ locations.

No midlevel content; minimal customization for new race; no love for PVPers.

9/10

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