



PUBLISHER: NCsoft DEVELOPER: ArenaNet GENRE: Action-MMORPG AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.guildwars.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space, any previous Guild Wars game MULTIPLAYER: Massive-scale VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

● ArenaNet's *Guild Wars* series of free-to-play fantasy MMORPGs always marches to its own drumbeat—but these days, it sounds a little too much like something out of *Donkey Konga*. The tin-eared *Eye of the North* expansion marks the series' first entry that doesn't stand alone, instead sequelizing the original *Guild Wars: Prophecies* for veteran players. In other words, *GWEN* ain't for first-timers.

The acronym's a mildly clever reference to *Prophecies*' presumed-dead youngster (and mysterious plot device), Gwen, who's now all grown up...and still traumatized from the cataclysm that set the *Guild Wars* series in motion. She and nine other customizable hero NPCs join in your solemn mission to traipse across a handful of newly unlocked areas on the old *Prophecies* map, saving the world from yet another clichéd demonic incursion.

In a somewhat refreshing move, *GWEN* shuns *Guild Wars*' tiered reward structure in story-driven missions. Instead, multilevel dungeon instances populate the map, each yielding fixed experience point rewards—and move the plot forward with the speed of a runaway train. The fiction's initially divided into three separate paths (each exploring a particular plot thread), which eventually converge for a final string of high-end dungeon crawls. The problem: It's over before you know it. *GWEN*'s easily finishable in a week-end of dedicated play; I'd (liberally) estimate the total campaign content at about 25 percent of the typical *Guild Wars* game. Suddenly, that \$40 price tag (just \$10 cheaper than usual) doesn't look like such a bargain, does it?

HE WHO HAS NO LIFE, WINS

Then again, if you dig repetition, *GWEN*'s extracurricular activities are perfect for you. While the game mercifully includes only 10 new (and easily bought) skills per class (for a total of 100 new

class-specific skills), every side quest and minigame exists to encourage mindless grind, dangling faction-specific reputation rewards before you as a constant carrot. Want those cool class-neutral faction skills to work well? Want to buy new armor (in all its retextured-model glory)? Prepare to kill a whole lotta monsters to "earn" those privileges.

The Hall of Monuments—ostensibly a bridge between this game and the impending *Guild Wars 2*, where future characters can claim the titles and treasures preserved here—is the most egregious offender. It's an ill-conceptualized monument to inefficiency, allowing you to put only the most menial of your "accomplishments" on display: your elite armor (only if you grind for the platinum to buy it), favorite heroes (only if you repeatedly run challenge missions for their armor upgrades), weapons (only *GWEN* weapons, ensuring plenty of repetitive endgame "raiding"), and so on. Talk about fun!

This ties into one of the weirdest things about *GWEN*: It comes off as a hasty advertisement for *Guild Wars 2*. Some of the racial retcons (the obviously *Conan*-inspired Norn; friendly factions of *Guild Wars*' Minotaur-like Charr) fit comfortably into the existing fiction...while the impish Asura look (and sound) as if *Harry Potter*'s Dobby, *Sam & Max*'s Max, and a stereotypical Martian got into some sort of freak lab accident. Yes, we know the sequel's en route, *without* these incongruous elements shoehorned in. But hey—ArenaNet's making doubly sure we're aware of that, as *GWEN*'s halfhearted presentation is an unmistakable plea for players to forget about this old game and focus on the future. ● Ryan Scott

VERDICT

● New hero NPCs; interesting deviation from the usual *Guild Wars* structure.

■ Disarmingly insubstantial; lots of recycled art; Hall of Monuments is a sick joke.

6/10

AVERAGE



● Like all tribal fantasy races, the Asura speak flawless English—except for that one native word that essentially means "outsider."

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NOVEMBER 2007 ISSUE 12



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