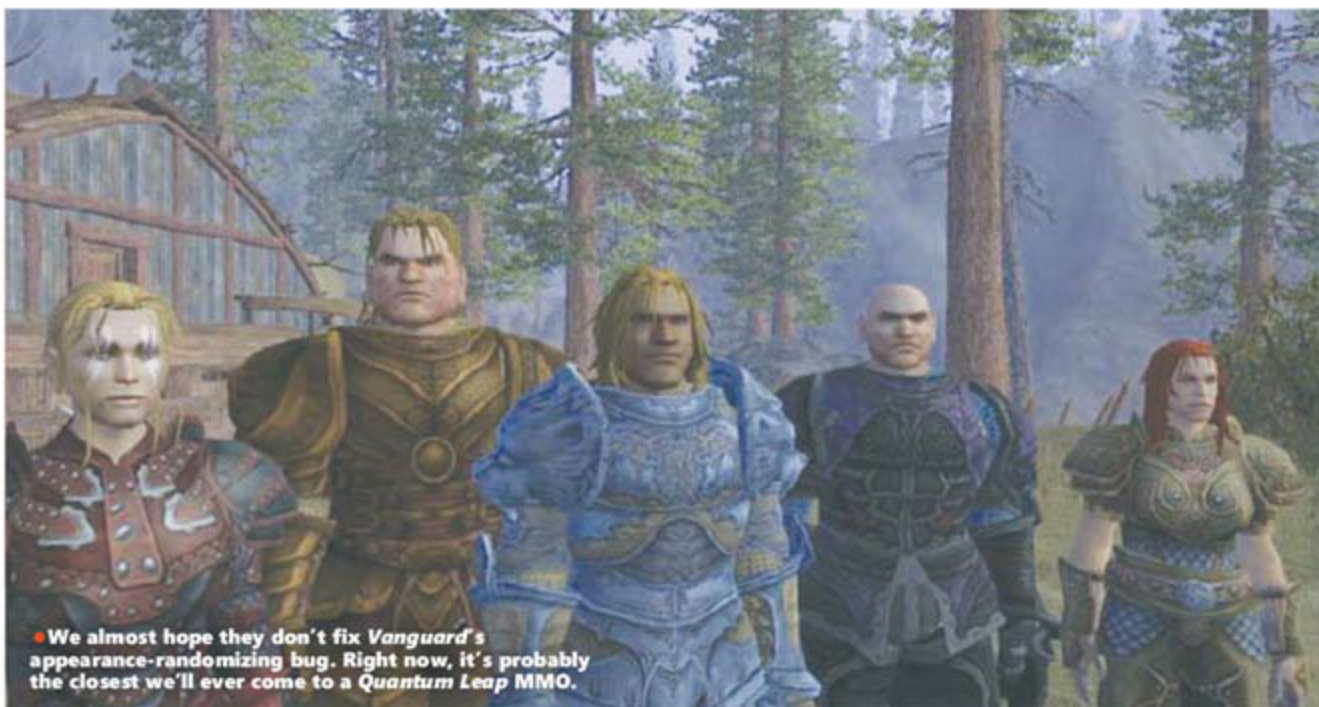


• Everything looks great from the air...but not quite as good for the 50 levels it takes for you to get there.



• We almost hope they don't fix Vanguard's appearance-randomizing bug. Right now, it's probably the closest we'll ever come to a Quantum Leap MMO.

VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning for corpse runs, travel time, and years of leveling!"

PUBLISHER: Sony Online Entertainment DEVELOPER: Sigil Games GENRE: MMORPG AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 20GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: Massive-scale VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

For those long-neglected *EverQuest* refugees out there, *Vanguard* is the new world. The prevailing opinion among its hardcore fans (and the game's garnered an awful damn lot of 'em) is that *World of Warcraft* is just too "kiddie," *EverQuest II* went too casual, and nothing else out there offers the same level of immersion, where major accomplishments are made more meaningful through long-term devotion...and failure carries serious penalties. *Vanguard*'s zone-free world, lack of instantaneous travel, absence of instanced content, and less-stylized character and environment design all work toward an uninterrupted sense of reality; frighteningly customizable in-game housing that's actually constructed from those crafted commodities—and assembled by specialized player character craftsmen—also contributes to the concrete realism the game tries so hard to foster.

From a more common point of view, it's a poor illusion: The things that make *Vanguard* so appealing to the cult can also be described as tedious, frustrating, dull, and just plain bloody-minded. The "average" MMO player won't enjoy the prospect of traveling for three hours every time he needs to train once his guild moves to a continent that doesn't have any priests. Immersion be damned—that's no fun.

EVERQUEST 1.5

It's easy to think of *Vanguard* as what *EQ* might've been were it made today. It's stuck in time, in a way that might be comfortable for some, but just plain aggravating for others. Its quests retain the same structure...and the game world, races, and mythology are almost indistinguishable from *EQ*'s paint-by-numbers high fantasy. Hell, even the names over characters' heads appear in the same font.

Likewise, most of *Vanguard*'s core gameplay only elaborates on what came before, though chained attacks, assists, and countermagic do make combat less rote. Extra options and occasional complications create an interesting crafting system, and—almost

incidentally—it's practically unbottable. This stuff's nice...but pretty minimal, considering the last few years of MMO evolution.

Vanguard's most unique feature is its diplomacy system, which takes the form of a card game played against NPCs. The simple rules provide great emergent complexity—and brandishing cards like "Blanket Accusation" and "Acid Tongue" to drive a conversation definitely beats the hell out of the usual kill-X-of-Y quests that make up most of the game. Unfortunately, the conversation that spools off as you successfully manipulate an NPC has nothing to do with the tone of the cards you use. Also, diplomacy exists completely separate from regular quest lines—you can't employ it as an alternate solution to nondiplomatic problems, which might have made it a more interesting long-term pursuit.

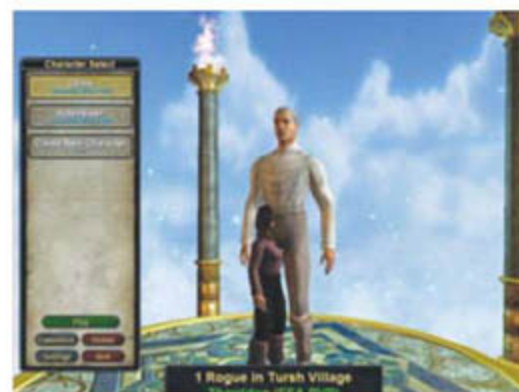
DOUBLE BAGGER

If all that didn't make the game exclusive enough, *Vanguard* requires a beast of a machine to run—and for its minimum specs, it really should look a lot better. Everything's attractive enough at a distance...but up close, many of the textures look plain embarrassing—especially in the Thestran continent, which (not coincidentally) was the first part of the game to be completed and is home to the greatest concentration of boring quests and high fantasy clichés. Oh, and character animations range from lacking to laughable. The worst offender: the skinning animation, wherein your character is apparently slitting his own wrists.

Imperfect as the gameplay and graphics are, what *should* erase any lingering temptation for any MMO player—serious or casual—is *Vanguard*'s mass of bugs and missing content. NPCs important to multiple quests vanish for days at a time, and character appearance (and sometimes even equipment) is prone to randomization each time you log in. The option to toggle the appearance of headgear doesn't do anything, because the headgear graphics were never actually finished. *Vanguard*'s most dedicated enthusiasts might be able to forgive all that, but they really shouldn't have to; it's a



• *Vanguard*'s interface—and we say this without rancor or exaggeration—is lifted pretty much wholesale right out of *World of Warcraft*.



• That hobbit-shaped growth is actually my character. I'm not sure about that other guy.

heaven or hell proposition, dependent entirely on just how badly you want to forget that you're playing a game and how hard you're willing to try to convince yourself that you're having a good time.

That the game got shoved out the door too early is an indisputable fact, explained by executive producer (and ex-*EQ1* mastermind) Brad McQuaid as due to "financial necessity." The result does an injustice to both the game and the players who anticipated it for so long. SOE's increasingly routine practice of buying troubled MMOs and hustling them out to turn some kind of profit ASAP may arguably have rescued *Vanguard* from oblivion—but it resulted in a game that desperately needed another six months of beta testing. •Scott Sharkey

IT'S A HEAVEN OR HELL PROPOSITION, DEPENDENT ENTIRELY ON JUST HOW BADLY YOU WANT TO FORGET THAT YOU'RE PLAYING A GAME AND HOW HARD YOU'RE WILLING TO TRY TO CONVINCE YOURSELF THAT YOU'RE HAVING A GOOD TIME.

VERDICT

• The diplomacy system's kind of OK.

• Embarrassing graphics and bugs; grind-heavy gameplay model brings tedium to the masses.

3/10

BAD

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