

Game Gods
Publisher Renegade
Price £25.53
Programmer(s) Bitmap Bros
Release Date Out now

There has been a lot written about *Gods*. A lot of very complimentary stuff. As complimentary in fact as the reviews of *Speedball 2*, and *Cadaver*, and, indeed, just about everything the Bitmaps have ever done. It's easy to see why everyone goes such a bundle on them too – exceptionally slick presentation, some neat ideas, the strongest image of any team, and a knack of updating old ideas in the cleverest ways. They're the nearest thing to a sure thing this industry's got – always producing games that're good to look at, interesting to play, but never too unusual, and never taking too much of a commercial risk.

There's a downside to this as well though – for a team that spends so much time talking about the importance of the creative process, the evils of licensing and so on, they're conspicuous in that they've never actually produced anything all that well, original. Where's their *Populous*? Where's their *Dungeon Master*? Where's their *Lemmings*? It's not here, that's for sure. Maybe it'll come with time.

So, then. *Gods*. And yes, there's no denying it – it's a very good game indeed. Well up to the standards we've come to



Entering the almost obligatory shop in *Gods*. Here a range of extra weaponry, energy and magical power-ups can be purchased. (Don't worry if you can't afford what you want – you'll find much of the same stuff just lying around later on). And yes, it does feel much like the same scene in *Xenon 2*.

expect in fact, and I'm sure improving on their old stuff in a lot of tiny but significant ways. It certainly looks gorgeous – packed with incredibly detailed backdrops and lots of (usually) well animated little sprites. It's perhaps a little too detailed at times (your character often gets a bit camouflaged against the wealth of background detail) and it would be nice to see a move away from this trademarked metallic look, but visually it is a bit of a stunner. It would be carping outrageously to try and claim anything different.

It sounds nice too – the soundtrack this time is by Nation 12, a more obscure Rhythm King act perhaps,

but they do the job very nicely indeed. John Foxx (ex-Ultravox) is one of the names behind them, and since they did the *Speedball 2* music you'll know more or less what to expect. Richard Joseph, who does much of the Bitmaps sound, contributed the in-game noises, and very clattery and realistic they are too.

And then there's the game style. Visually it's an arcade-style platform hack-'em-up, sort of like *Black Tiger* (which it's been compared to a number of times) but like plenty of other games too. That's not the full story though – there's enough puzzle solving, door opening, switch throwing and object collecting here to push it firmly into arcade adventure territory. It's an intelligent sort of an action game, then – particularly when you realise that the whole thing revolves around some very clever artificial intelligence routines that make the baddies act in some decidedly

peculiar ways. Interesting stuff, but we'll get onto all that in a minute. There are a few other things to discuss first, like, for instance...

A TRULY ANCIENT PLOT

The plot. Ah, yes. This seems to be based on ancient Greek myth (hardly an untapped area in computer games, it's true) though the specifics seem to have been played rather fast and loose with. Our hero may or may not be Hercules – at one point it was suggested that the game was built around his famous series of labours, though this isn't particularly clear from playing it. He may or may not be Hercules for another reason too – he permanently wears a helmet that obscures his face. A bit of a mistake this, I feel – creating a totally characterless central sprite is surely not a Good Thing.

But anyway. The game progresses through four levels, all with different background graphics, and each one divided into three sub-worlds. There are a series of tasks you have to achieve on each one (on the first, for instance, you merely have to collect a green pot and restore it to a store room in the second sub-world) before it lets you go on, though

since *Speedball 2*, has had a lot of publicity

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

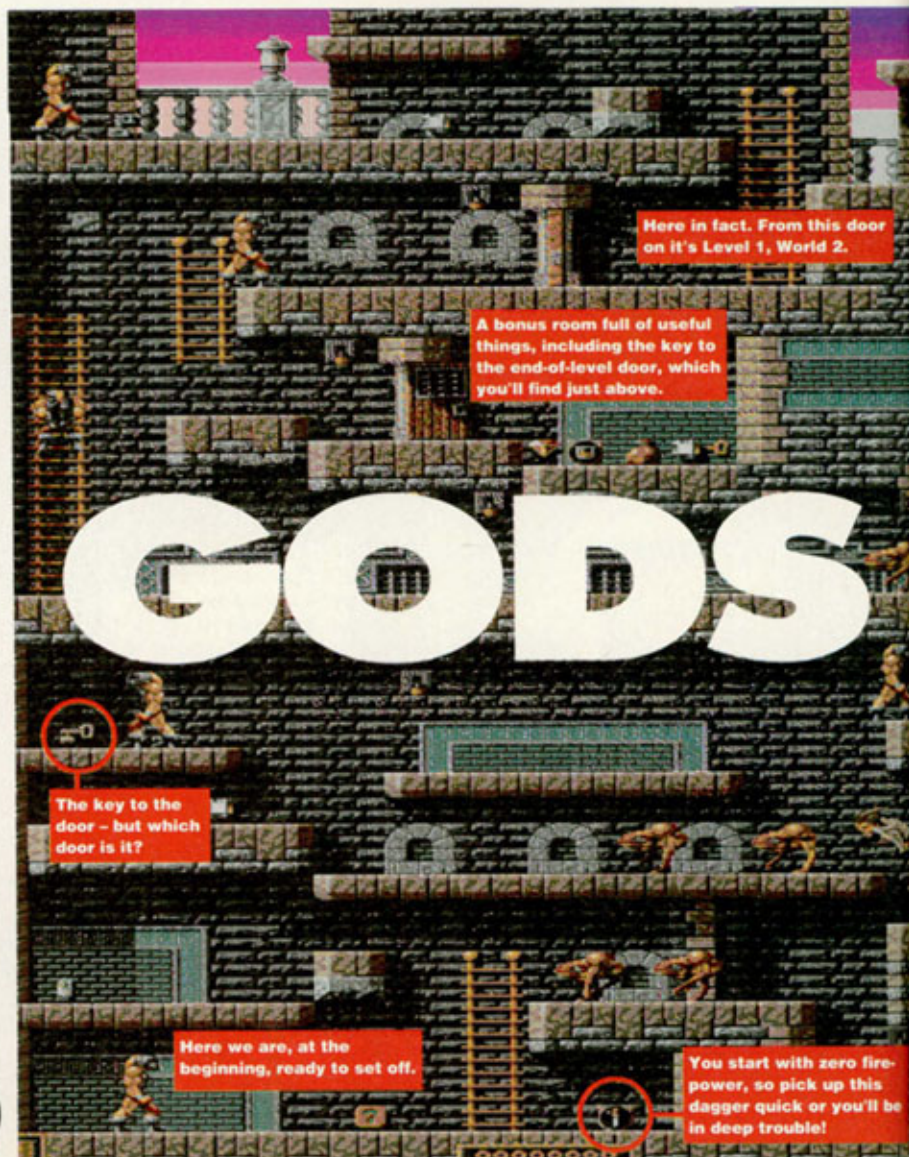
(AND WHY YOU MIGHT NOT RECOGNISE IT)

Much has been made of the clever way in which the baddie sprites have a degree of artificial intelligence, and the way the game re-adjusts itself to how well you're playing, making things easier or harder as you go on. It's a good job that much has been made of it too, as you'd never know from actually playing the thing – or at least you wouldn't straight away. The game is so subtle you'd probably only realise something funny was going on when you'd been living with it for a couple of days.

The artificial intelligence first, then. Baddies come in a few sorts – your normal stupid ones, that hang around on platforms or wherever they're put until killed (as you get in most games) – and your super special clever ones. The smartest of these actually know where you are and are perfectly capable of finding the quickest route to you, avoiding your fire (so they have a degree of self preservation built-in) and so on. One variety of clever monster are thieves, which try and steal treasure for themselves, while a lot of the others are more aggressive.

Then there's the player monitoring system. This is even more subtle, in that it judges how well a player's doing and tailors the game to suit. Thus first time round you'll probably find oodles of energy top-ups and bonuses lying around – it'll realise you need them. As you get better though, scoring more points, it'll all get that much tougher.

Renegade's first release, and the Bitmaps' first



Here in fact. From this door on it's Level 1, World 2.

A bonus room full of useful things, including the key to the end-of-level door, which you'll find just above.

The key to the door – but which door is it?

Here we are, at the beginning, ready to set off.

You start with zero fire-power, so pick up this dagger quick or you'll be in deep trouble!





Ooh, bloody hell, how did I get in here? And more importantly, how do I get back out again? Well, the solution involves keys, jugs, and switches (but that's all the help you're getting).

you aren't left totally on your own trying to work out what to do - a window at the bottom of the screen opens and closes throughout, suggesting ways you can earn more points, giving clues on how to get past certain traps and so on.

A GAME OF NICE TOUCHES

Having taken on board the ho-hum plot and unremarkable structure, it's quite hard to define (graphics aside) just what it is that makes the game so nice. Mostly it's things that fall into the 'neat touch' category, and

since we're rapidly running out of space here, it might be time to detail some of what I mean.

Neat touch No1 - The end of level baddies are all particularly impressive, even if they don't always seem to do very much. The first one you come across is a sort of giant Centurion type - impressively large (as they all are),

though all he really seems to do is walk back and forth a bit. My favourite has to be the massive Minotaur that crops up later on though. Nicely animated, he leaps about the screen and actually makes the entire image shake each time he crashes to earth!

Nice touch No2 - What is apparently background detail - gargoyles and suchlike - actually come to life and attack you as you walk past!

Nice touch No3 - The shop sequences (quite how these became obligatory in action games is beyond me) which work not unlike the ones in *Xenon 2*. Shields,

lives, energy and an abundance of weapons - they're all here.

Nice touch No4 - The thieves who run about the place, totally oblivious to your good self, collecting treasure and suchlike. Being rather smaller than you are (not to mention invulnerable to the traps) they can often collect keys and so on that you couldn't otherwise reach. If you see one keep an eye on him, wait 'til he collects whatever he's after, then shoot him and pick up what he drops - it's a lot easier than getting it yourself.

Nice touch No5 - Your bird familiar - one of the best add on weapons - who flies around your head and usefully helps out with extra firepower.

Nice touch No6 - The artificial intelligence-cum-player monitoring system - check out the box for details.

So there we have it. Once again, a very professional and well thought out product from the Bitmap Brothers, and destined to become a minor (but only minor, I think) classic. I'd recommend anyone to buy it.

So what's the problem? Well, there is a slight one. It's simply that The Bitmaps have upped the ante with their games enough that 'a very professional looking product' is

really the very least we've come to expect. It is a clever game, and one of the very best of its type, but it makes you wish for the day when they come up with one that'll make everybody step back three paces and say 'Bloody hell! I wish I'd thought of that!' Eric Bitmap argues that *Speedball* was pretty original, and perhaps he's right, though you could equally argue that it's just American football with metallic graphics. Then again you certainly can't deny they've changed genres with startling regularity - they may have broken little new ground, but equally they haven't been standing still. No, they've proved themselves great at the small innovations, and re-jigging old concepts - what they haven't had is the earth-shattering Original Idea. I wish the Bitmaps and Renegade great success with their first release, but I await the day when they do something a little more unusual. ■ Matt Bielby

and come backed by some big claims. It's got a

lot to live up to - so does it?

UPPERS Lovely graphics, lots of action, nicely-judged puzzles, cleverly intelligent baddies, lots of small innovations and the normal gorgeous Bitmap presentation.

DOWNERS Average subject matter, not as visually/aurally stunning as *Xenon 2*, not as playable as *Speedball 2*.

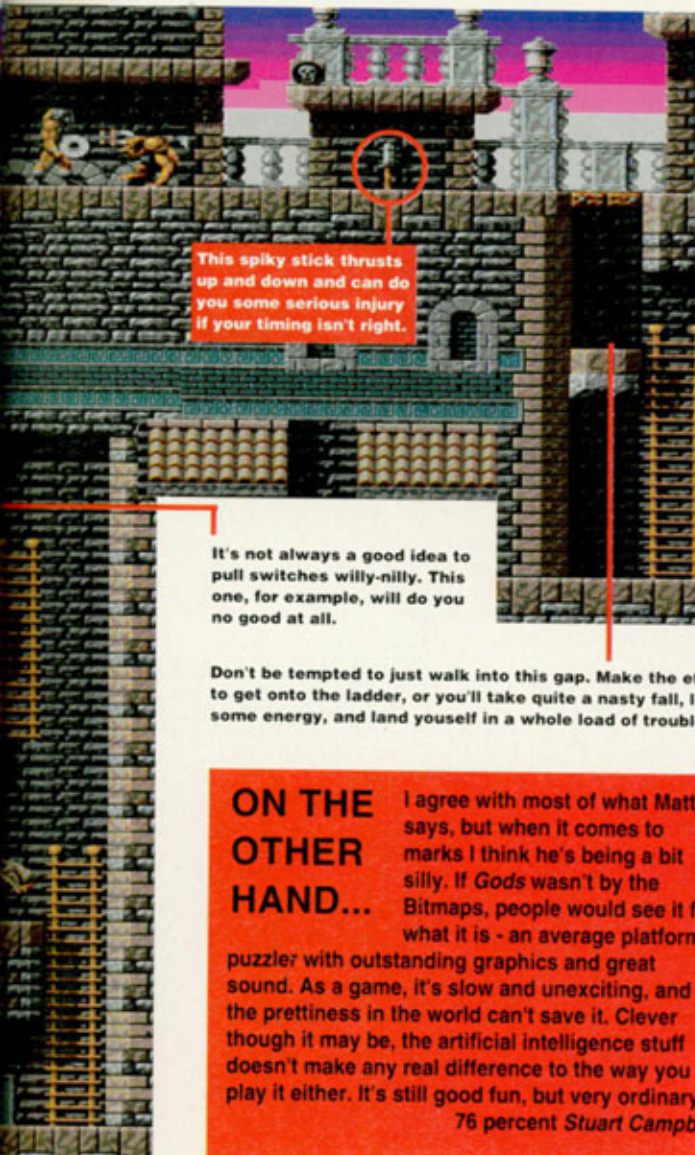
THE BOTTOM LINE

Another excellent Bitmaps product - faultless for what it does, but wouldn't it be nice if they really seemed to be pushing themselves?

87 PERCENT

LEVEL 1 WORLDS 1 AND 2

Here we are in the two sub-worlds that make up the start of the game. If you're wondering where all the baddies are - well, we killed them all, didn't we? (How d'you think we got this far?)



This spiky stick thrusts up and down and can do you some serious injury if your timing isn't right.

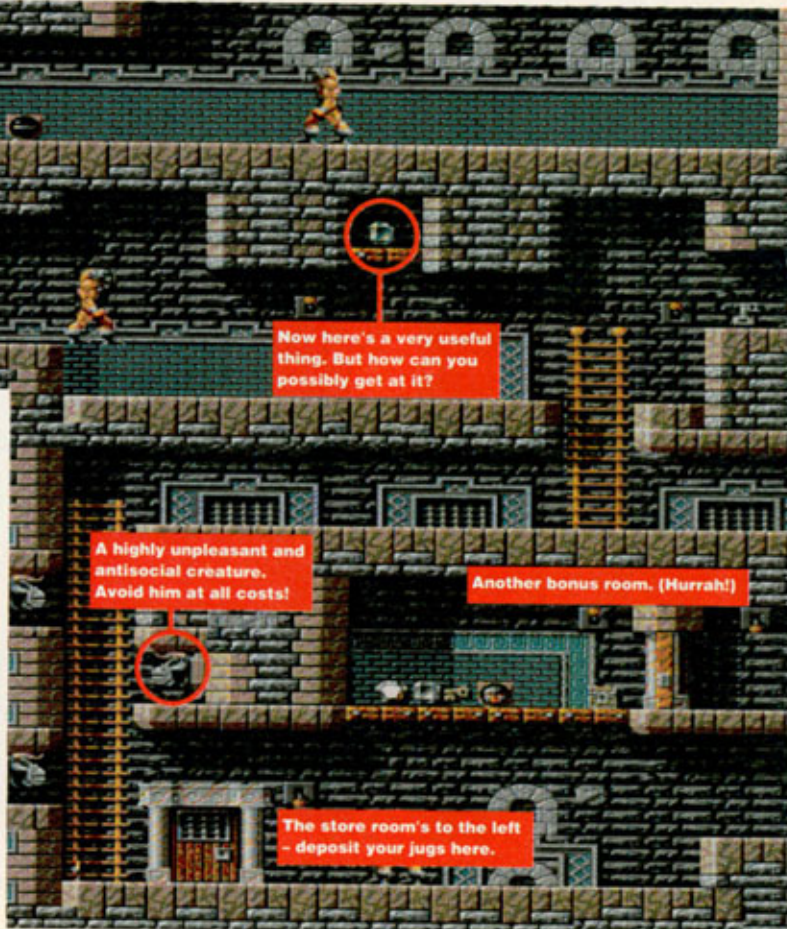
It's not always a good idea to pull switches willy-nilly. This one, for example, will do you no good at all.

Don't be tempted to just walk into this gap. Make the effort to get onto the ladder, or you'll take quite a nasty fall, lose some energy, and land yourself in a whole load of trouble.

ON THE OTHER HAND...

I agree with most of what Matt says, but when it comes to marks I think he's being a bit silly. If *Gods* wasn't by the Bitmaps, people would see it for what it is - an average platform puzzle; with outstanding graphics and great sound. As a game, it's slow and unexciting, and all the prettiness in the world can't save it. Clever though it may be, the artificial intelligence stuff doesn't make any real difference to the way you play it either. It's still good fun, but very ordinary.

76 percent Stuart Campbell



Now here's a very useful thing. But how can you possibly get at it?

A highly unpleasant and antisocial creature. Avoid him at all costs!

Another bonus room. (Murrhah!)

The store room's to the left - deposit your jugs here.

