

Baldur's Gate

Adam Duncan is pleased to find Baldur's Gate is the game that brings the TSR RPGs out of the gutter.



After reading eons ago about the early production of Interplay's next RPG, Baldurs Gate, tears of sadness caused by the disappointing release of Descent to Undermountain were wiped away, and new hope filled my heart in anticipation. Today, as I write this, tears of joy drop onto the keyboard, for I can safely say that this game really is amazing.

Baldurs Gate, created by Bioware, is the latest installment of the AD&D (Advanced Dungeons & Dragons) license based on the popular setting, the Forgotten Realms. By all accounts this title is the most faithful to the pen and paper game, far more so than any previous attempts.

The story begins with you having been raised by Gorion, a man of great influence in the small town of Candlekeep. He abruptly sends you off on



DISCUSSING NET SURFING HABITS WITH YOUR PARTY MEMBERS



DON BURKE HAD NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT

a dire and foreboding quest.. without giving word of what you were meant to do other than go and meet some friends of his who'll aid you in your quest. As Gorion leads you out of your home town to say his goodbyes you are ambushed by evil forces who for some reason, are really only after you! Gorion fights to the death to see that you escape... and now, all alone, you head out into the wilderness wondering what role you play in all this. You, and the adventurers you'll pick up along the way, will learn more as the story unfolds through seven chapters, over some one hundred and fifty hours of gameplay!

STRAIGHT FORWARD

The team at Bioware did a sterling effort at making the game simple and quick to get into. Character creation is smartly done, and ensures you can have your character up and ready in a couple of minutes (unless of course you spend hours re-rolling the dice to get good statistics). The choice between 6 races and 26 classes/sub-classes provides possibilities for an interesting and unique character.

Baldurs Gate's plays from an isometric viewpoint like Diablo or Ultima Online, yet character control resembles

MULTIPLAYER - MAGNIFICENT OR MESSY?

Whilst single player is more than enough to satisfy RPG fans, Bioware have generously added the option for you and a group of friends to play cooperatively in multiplayer. This is great for those out there who have a couple of months to spare. Unfortunately, playing over the Internet proved a stressful experience. Constant disconnects and crashes made the game unplayable. Though over LAN everything is peachy. Apart from in multiplayer, I had no troubles with the game whatsoever, but there have been reports of instability problems occurring on other peoples machines.



JUST SET ASIDE ABOUT 6 MONTHS OF YOUR LIFE

a Warcraft 2/Myth hybrid. You can drag the mouse over your party and select a formation for them to travel in. And the different formations really do affect the way you'll perform in combat. BG's powerful interface not only gives quick access to each character's statistics, equipment and the like, but also wields a scripting tool that lets you set the party members AI. This basically allows you to set a character's aggressiveness and fighting style.

The first hour or so into the game is spent at Candlekeep, where the designers have cleverly set the place up to give you a good idea of what is to come throughout the rest of the game. Monks are spread throughout town who give tips on gameplay, other characters will teach you to fight, and some will give you errands to run (like the sub-quests you'll come across later), so when the real adventure begins you don't have to pull out the manual. Though it's still a very good idea to keep the manual close by because it contains 'Volo's Guide to Baldur's Gate' which is like a tourist guide. It's just adds that bit more atmosphere to quickly read about the town you are about to visit just before you decide to head there. The journal that automatically updates whenever something of interest is said or done, is a bit better than in other RPGs that have also offered this feature.

REAL TIME - TURN BASED HYBRID

The pen and paper game of AD&D is, of course, turn based. But Baldur's Gate's infinity engine cleverly allows you to play in real time whilst still holding true to the AD&D rules. This gives the game its brilliant Diablo feel, yet playing the game turn based is still an option and, in my opinion, a necessary one at that. This is because fighting can get rather hectic at the best of times and will require you to play very strategically to get anywhere. For example you'll most always want to send your armoured up fighters into the front ranks to stop the enemy getting through to attack your physically weaker party members like magi and thieves, who can lob magic and arrows from a safe distance. During the heat of battle though there is always the extremely handy option to hit the spacebar to pause the game. Allowing you stop that cleric from fighting and send them off to heal at a whim.

Character interaction is what you'd expect from a good RPG. You get to talk to NPC's (Non-Player Characters) in a manner that best suits the character you play. The more polite and sensible your conversation the more chance of receiving a sub-quest to fulfill, or raising the party's reputation, and thus being greeted with more respect as time goes on. On the other hand you have the opportunity to be an utter bastard to anyone you meet, even steal



from them. Of course there are always repercussions to ones actions. A party that commits acts of evil may soon be looked down upon in towns and the guards may even try take you out. Something that's rather amusing is the way good and bad characters in your party argue with each other from time to time. They complain and may end up leaving you when your actions are too good or evil for them.

DEAR GOD! IT'S HUGE.

Saying that this game is big would be an understatement, which is quite obvious once you pull the 5 CDs out of the box. One can go straight to the locations that the party is meant to head to get further into the story, but most will find themselves tempted to wander elsewhere. In fact, I'm sure I spent most of my time exploring the myriad of areas that held little relevance to the main story whatsoever. Adding to this are the dozens of very cool sub-quests that NPCs often give to you on your travels. These usually involve collecting an item from someone and giving it to another, though some are much more interesting. One particular quest involved saving a woman from a Gnoll fortress which took the best part of a day to complete.

Characters and monsters are well drawn and animated, and the world really is visually stunning. All of the close to 10,000 screens of game world have been painstakingly rendered. An overwhelming task, but one that really paid off. The environments look so lush and the detail is all there, from bats in caverns to butterflies in the gardens. It really is a joy just to walk around in this world.

Watching your party do battle is fun to just sit and watch (although risky if you're too relaxed about it). Seeing your mage let loose a volley of magic missiles that light up the area as they slam into an ogre, or watching your fighters slash their way through a horde of Kobolds is a great feeling. And the weather effects in the game do a nice job at adding yet more atmosphere. Wandering around a forest at night in a thunderstorm looks sensational. The towns you visit in Baldurs Gate also deserve a mention, they make the ones in Ultima Online look so drab and dull it's not funny. All the lighting effects are put to good. Though for people with meaty PCs, an option to throw the game up a res would have been nice.

AWESOME AUDIO

The music in Baldurs Gate really fits the bill. There's plenty of variety, and it doesn't fail to add atmosphere to every situation. As you explore the countryside you'll be bouncing along to some carefree tune, then suddenly you're charged by a pack of wolves and the music changes to dramatic war beat that reverts back to normal when the fight is over. Certainly not an original idea, but it's there, and it's done well. Sound effects are also quite good, and like the graphics, they have paid attention to detail. For instance, terrain affects the party's walk sound to good effect, music emanates from taverns as you walk through towns, crickets chirp at night... the whole shebang. But what impressed me most were the different sounds you make as you move depending on what armour you wear... nice attention to detail. One gripe though, is that you may tend to get sick of hearing your characters repeat their acknowledgment to orders as you click on them. Those sounds can conveniently be turned off.

To be honest it's difficult to point out anything that qualifies as a real fault in Baldurs Gate. Every aspect is very polished and melds together to form a truly immersive role playing experience. For those of us who enjoy playing AD&D but find getting together with friends to play isn't very convenient, then this is the title you've been waiting for. All in all, Baldurs Gate is a classic RPG, and by setting the AD&D RPG standard to such a new height it has ensured a bright future for fans of the genre.



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| AVAILABLE: | Now |
| CATEGORY: | Role-Playing Game |
| PLAYERS: | 1-6 |
| PUBLISHER: | Interplay |
| PRICE: | \$89.95 |
| RATING: | M |
| REQUIRED: | P166, 16MB RAM |
| DESIRED: | P200, 32MB RAM, 8xCD-ROM, 4MB SVGA |

PLUS

Best part of the pen and paper game yet. All aspects shine..

MINUS

Stability issues on some machines.

| VISUALS | SOUND | GAMEPLAY |
|---------|-------|----------|
| 91 | 93 | 95 |

OVERALL

94

Finally an AD&D RPG that does the game some justice.