

RavenLoft Strahd's Possession

It's a tough business being scary these days. What used to be frightening twenty or thirty years ago seems plain laughable now. I mean, take a look at the films Hammer used to make; they were the 'video nasties' of their time, yet what are they today? Nothing more than handy fillers in BBC 2's late-night scheduling.

Classic 'gothic horror' creations, like the Werewolf, the Mummy and Frankenstein's monster, have lost nearly all their power to chill the blood, with modern fright fans preferring to get their kicks from the more grisly likes of Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees.

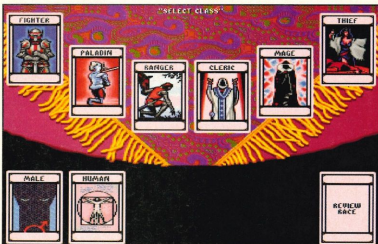
But what of the poor old Vampire?

It's probably the monster that's suffered most from changing tastes in what's scary and what's not. After all, what's so heart-stoppingly terrifying about a creature with several dental problems that can be easily repelled by a whiff of garlic?

If you ever see a Vampire in a movie these days, you can bet it'll be in some dire 'tongue-in-cheek horror spoof' like *Fright Night* or *Vamp*. Even Francis Ford Coppola seems to have acknowledged the problem that Vampires just ain't frightening any more, as his recent reworking of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was more of a macabre love story than a horror flick.

All this, however, hasn't stopped SSI from making a Vampire the central baddy of its latest *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* RPG. According to the blurb

(Below) Everything in *RavenLoft* has been made easy-to-use. Even generating a character is simple — you just click on the cards dealt out to you by the sexy gypsy to select race, class and so on and the computer handles the rest.



(Above top) We couldn't let a review of an RPG go by without having a shot of the really interesting inventory screen. From here you can check out what each character is carrying and check their stats. Great, eh...?

(Above) Generally speaking, if someone doesn't try to kill you then it's probably worth talking to them. During conversations a list of chat-up lines will appear and it's up to you to pick the appropriate one. You know the sort of thing.

writers at SSI, *RavenLoft* is, and I quote, "gothic horror role-playing at its very best." Hmm, well cheers for telling me guys, but I think I'll be the judge of that, thank you very much.

The game starts off traditionally enough, with two brave adventurers paying a friendly visit to the good Lord Dhelt. They reach his castle about just in time to witness a vicious attack on Dhelt by a mysterious thief, who makes off with the Lord's precious amulet. Angered by this barbaric act, the adventurers give chase...

It doesn't take long for the heroes to catch up with the scarpering miscreant, and it doesn't take them much longer to put him to the sword (justice is swift and brutal in Lord Dhelt's realm). However, as they pick up the stolen amulet, a weird fog swirls in around them and the next thing they know they've been magically transported to a mysterious foreign land.

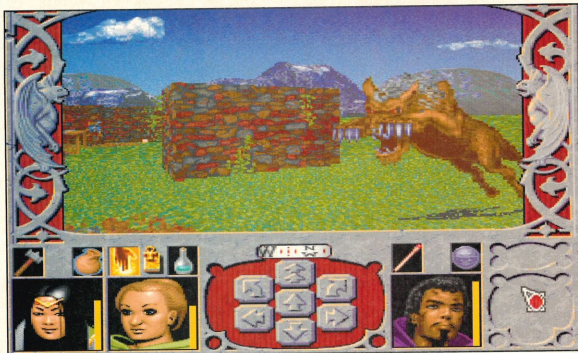
Our brave adventurers soon realise that there's something very badly wrong with their strange new home. Why is the countryside bounded by a dense, poisonous fog, making it impossible for them to leave? And why are all the people they meet petrified of leaving their houses after sunset? And who — or what — is the mysterious Strahd that everyone talks about in such hushed tones? They'll have to find the answers to all these questions and more if they're ever to see Lord Dhelt's fair land again...

The plot of *RavenLoft* is definitely one of the game's strong points. You're plunked in the middle of the countryside with literally no clue as to what's going on, and it's only by talking to people along the way that you begin to piece together clues as to what's going on and how to get home.

Heelll-looww! My name's Alex, pretty maiden — what's yours? There are loads of exquisitely-drawn interlude screens to enjoy, all of which pop up at key points during the adventure.

CD TOO!

A CD version of RavenLoft is being released simultaneously with the disk version. It's fundamentally the same game, but with a few tweaks here and there. The main differences are that the intro is animated and accompanied by a heavily-accented voiceover (I wouldn't get too excited though, as frankly it's a bit boring) and during the game there are some new monsters to fight.



(Above) Fight! Fight! Fight! Should a nasty appear, you can launch into combat by just clicking on your opponent with the mouse pointer. Your party will then set to work with whatever weapons they're currently holding.
(Right) Here he is — that man of mystery, Strahd. He seems like the perfect gent the first time you meet him, but later on you discover that he's completely batty. Hur-hur, 'batty' — geddit?

The urge to get to the bottom of the mystery provides the player with a strong reason to complete the game.

Although RavenLoft could've got very complicated very quickly because of this rather 'open' start, the design is such that you've always got a pretty good idea of where to head to and who you've got to talk to next.

In fact, it's maybe a little too tightly designed, and hard-core RPGers who prefer to wander around and discover things for themselves may find the 'linear' nature of the plot annoyingly constricting. Anyone else, though, who doesn't enjoy spending hours trekking from NPC to NPC in the hope of finding some minor clue on how to make progress, won't grumble, that's for sure.

Graphically RavenLoft is quite nice too. While the Wolfenstein-style 3D isn't

the smoothest you've ever seen, it's a lot more detailed than most, with objects and people still looking vaguely recognisable even when you're up close to them and not distorting into a mass of Lego bricks.

If I've got a major complaint about the graphics at all it's the way there's a sudden change in graphic style as you say, walk through a gate on the road and enter a town. Everything, even the colour of the sky, changes, giving you the impression that the gameworld is made up of separate, self-contained 'lumps'. It's jarring and damages the carefully-constructed atmosphere a bit, but you get used to it and it doesn't spoil your overall enjoyment too much.

Admittedly, there are other things that annoy, like the fact that the buildings in the towns don't have roofs and

that there's very little sensation of depth in the dungeon corridors, but these are relatively minor and not really worth making a big deal about.

Of course, being an official AD&D game there are loads of stats and other complicated stuff to contend with, but these take a back-seat to the action thanks to the well-designed and very friendly user interface. Certainly I never found my monster slaying and puzzle solving being held up by having to work out composite Armour Classes or anything like that.

Any major complaints about RavenLoft are the same as those that afflict all too many RPGs; silly little things like the way that when fighting a monster and it's going badly, you can nip around the corner, rest to recoup your hit points and then wake up ten hours later and continue the battle. RPG fans will probably forgive RavenLoft that, though.

The big question, then, given that this is supposedly 'gothic horror role-playing at its very best' and that Vampires aren't scary, is 'Is RavenLoft spooky? Well, while you won't wet yourself or have nightmares, there's definitely an eerie atmosphere about the game, and the excellent use of sound effects provides some good shock moments from time to time.

All in all, I was more than pleasantly surprised by RavenLoft: Strahd's Possession. I'm not what you'd call a real RPG nut, but RavenLoft managed to pull me in and keep me playing above and beyond the call of reviewing duty. Although it's not the best RPG you'll ever play, it's certainly one of the better ones, and as such, deserves your attention.

RAVENLOFT

US GOLD/SSI

(021) 625 3388

£45.99 Out Now

RECOMMENDED SPEC

33MHz 386, VGA, 640K, 4Mb RAM and 21Mb of hard disk space.

ALSO SUPPORTS

Aria, Soundscape, Soundman Wave and Sound Blaster soundcards, amongst many others.

THE GOOD...

- An atmospheric scenario free of the usual sword-'n'-sorcery clichés.
- Excellent player interface that's both easy to use yet very flexible.
- A lot easier to get into than previous SSI adventures.

...AND THE BAD

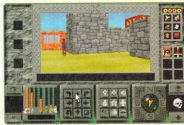
- The occasional graphic 'scene changes' can be jarring and ruin the sense of exploring a 'real' world.
- The plot is too linear in places.
- It's tough — very tough.

OVERALL

81%



RAVENLOFT OUTSPOOKS...



...LEGENDS OF VALOUR.