



Baldur's Gate

Dungeons, dragons, and delight

By Daniel Morris



Skeletons armed to the teeth and hungry for your blood—good thing this is just an illusionist's training exercise.

Interplay's Black Isle role-playing studio has its heart in the right place, and that heart is showing up in some fine RPGs these days. Hot on the heels of the fantastic *Fallout 2*, *Baldur's Gate* delivers an epic fantasy set in the Forgotten Realms of the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons universe. It's a tribute to the devotion and creativity of the game's designers that *Baldur's Gate* works beautifully as both a treat for AD&D devotees and as a broadly appealing RPG for everyone else.

The sweeping, five-CD saga unfolds in the richly imagined Forgotten Realms, and its exotic and treacherous locales are rendered in exquisite detail. The maps are huge, intricate, and laid out in a glorious feast of color and precision. Every inn, temple, and garden is a fully realized location with a lived-in feel to it. Wandering around the Sword Coast, where much of the game's action takes place, is a remarkably lifelike bit of journeying. Every screen seems to hold new visual riches, and never does the game grow tiresome.

The story quickly becomes as convoluted as any pencil-and-paper campaign, but the springboard is a crisis facing the Realms' mining industry. It seems that the metals used for weapons and armor are suffering from an inexplicable weakening, and the

iron throughout the land is fast becoming useless. You are sent from your childhood home at Candlekeep, where you've been raised in the seclusion of an order of benevolent priests, and out you go one nerve-jangling day to meet the crisis head on.

Who are you?

The possibilities

are endless. That's because the game design incorporates almost all of the range and flexibility of the AD&D character-creation system. You can choose from six races and nine major classes (subdivided by dual-class characters like fighter-thieves or cleric-rangers)—from among the nine alignments in the spectrum of lawful good to chaotic evil (dependent on race and class).

The venerable skills and weapons systems also make a smooth transfer into *Baldur's Gate* straight from the pages of the AD&D 2nd Edition rulebooks. (The man chiefly

responsible for those rules, David "Zeb" Cook, works for Black Isle now.) The result is a computer game that will slip around AD&D vets as snugly as an old coat. In your adventures, you'll even encounter some Forgotten Realms notables like the dark elf Drizzt Do'Urden, whose appearance is like a gift for fans of Drizzt's TSR novels.

But an AD&D background is by no means necessary to enjoy *Baldur's Gate*. The system is taught in the introductory Candlekeep segment, courtesy of the friendly priest-tutors who serve as living, breathing tutorials. Friendly illusionists will create combat simulations to teach you the vagaries of combat and spell-casting.



Gorion's magic attacks will buy you time to escape with your life.

Once you've gotten the hang of the system (which is complex; I suggest you spend a few hours fine-tuning before even leaving

Candlekeep), it's time to venture out into the big bad world. You quickly find yourself alone and penniless, without your mentor Gorion to guide you, and it's up to you to hook up with allies and assemble a party of adventurers.

Baldur's Gate presents a nifty little NPC package that makes forming parties a full-time occupation. Members will come and go, depending on the twists the story takes;



Take refuge in holy places to get cured and receive shelter from clerics.

many are only with you to help with a specific quest and depart once it's finished. Others die, obviously. But new ones can always be picked up from new locales. Balancing alignments becomes important—you'll have no use for an evil rogue if your party already includes a lawful good paladin. The possibilities are many, and replay will allow you to make different picks that will result in wildly different parties and, thus, wildly different plot twists.

With your party in place, the Realms are yours to explore. You will discover dozens of towns, hundreds of people to talk to, and several quests to fulfill. Your paths will get tangled with secret societies like the wily Shadow Thieves, masters of assassination, and money-hungry Mages of Halruaa. You'll bribe the powerful Thalantyr the Conjurer for help with a 17th-level spell and pay your respects to the Most Radiant of Lathander, the high priest of Beregost (unless you want to get on his bad side).

In short, you'll spend a good 60 to 80 hours poking into every nook and cranny of the sumptuous world laid out for you by developer BioWare's brilliant designers and artists. The combat is tense and hectic, requiring sound tactical thought, and the comprehensive magic system (over 100 spells in all) will obsess gamers playing as magic-users.

Up to six people can play via IPX, TCP/IP and modem. You will play as a party, but one

character (the one who started the game) is the Leader, and if he dies, the game's over for everybody. Gameplay is exactly the same as in single-player mode, but the party's movement is



Be the constant beneficiary of a mage's cure-wounds spell.

But Baldur's Gate is well worth the money—on a dollar-value basis, it may be the best buy of the year. It's a huge, sprawling, wonderfully involved game that makes you feel as though you've read a fantasy trilogy by game's end.



Will you accept Gorion's challenge to solve the mystery of Baldur's Gate? Of course you will.

limited to the Leader's screen (meaning you have to stick close together all the time).

The game's flaws are few but worth examining as they keep doing just enough harm to knock Baldur's Gate down a peg from classic status. First and foremost among them is a system strain that borders on the biblical. A 300MB medium hard-disk install is the first harbinger of trouble to come. Running the game on a P200 and 32MB RAM will still leave you with long lagging hiccups in play, five-second lockups in screen scrolling, and other aggravating slowdowns throughout. Many of my battles were interrupted by these—a true pain, given the real-time frenzy of the fighting.

The other serious misstep is a too-frequent drop in the intelligence of the dialogue. The writers keep resorting to dumb ploys like annoying French accents and "golly-gosh" townsfolk. The NPC system, which follows a standard response-tree dialogue branch, could've used some more variety.



Assemble a party from the wandering adventurers of the Realms. They'll provide useful backup when the going gets rough.

BALDUR'S GATE

GAMEPLAY: B+
GETTING STARTED: B
GRAPHICS: A-
MULTIPLAYER: B
SOUND CHECK: B

A-
OVERALL

Great RPG fun on a grand scale.

DEVELOPER: BioWare
PUBLISHER: Interplay
800-468-3775
www.blackisle.com
WEB:
REQUIRES: P166, 16MB RAM, 300MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED: P200, 32MB RAM, 8x CD-ROM drive
STREET PRICE: \$50

TIPS ▼ Reputation counts. The donations you occasionally have to make to priests grow much bigger if it declines. ▼ If you want to read anything in the keep's library, you'll need to donate a new tome worth 10,000 gold or more. ▼ Don't write ogres off as all brawn and no brain. Advanced ogres know magic and can surprise you with some nasty spells. ▼ The undead are big trouble. Come up with the power to turn them, and quickly. Some reanimated beasts, like vampire wolves, are impervious to non-magical attacks. ▼ Don't just cast Charm spells on everyone. Some potentially useful information may be "forgotten" by a charmed NPC who gets smitten by you. ▼ Fireballs don't discriminate! Be sure fire-lies are out of the line of fire before hurling one.