



Publisher: **Interplay**
Developer: **Bioware**

It took a while, and it was made by a bunch of Medical Doctors, but great stuff comes from the unlikelyst of places

FORGOTTEN REALMS: BALDUR'S GATE



The game world is huge, with players moving from section to section on the vast world map, and incredible new sights to see around every corner

Role-playing games are the rock upon which the church of computer games was built. Games like *Wizardry*, *Ultima*, and *Bard's Tale* still make geriatric gamers cry tears of nostalgia for those halcyon days when the worth of a game was measured in how

many weekends (and friends) you lost playing it rather than how fast you could move your mouse.

Baldur's Gate manages to satisfy the old gamer's cravings while remaining distinctly contemporary. And it is the first RPG to really take advantage of today's technology rather than merely elaborating on games of the past.

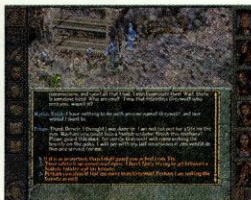
RPGs were at one time meticulously planned, with every detail of a world included on a stack of floppy disks. With the advent of faster processors and the CD-ROM, seemingly limitless worlds

appeared. The logic seemed simple enough: If earlier games with 200 NPCs were good, worlds with 10,000 NPCs (made using a random person generator) would be even better. If a nine-level dungeon seemed like fun, how about an infinitely deep dungeon—or a game that generated new dungeons every time you played?

Sadly, the artifice of these bulked-up RPGs was immediately apparent to the player. After talking to NPC number 20, which was outwardly similar to NPC numbers one through 19 but with a different name and a new hat, players knew at once they were wasting time in a world bursting with sound and fury, but signifying nothing. As a result, these gargantuan, stale promontories were invariably tossed, and gamers began to yearn for the days when the Woodheads and Garriots of the world actually planned out every part of a game. In short, RPG fans began to long for



There are countless shops that trade in goods and services that are both mundane and mystical





One of the magnificent temples in the game. Bioware has made the gods from TSR's *Forgotten Realms* integral to the story

actual game design.

Fallout set the stage, but *Baldur's Gate* finally delivers what RPG gamers have been looking for. However, as we've said, it doesn't stop there. The game uses five CDs to deliver what ends up being a huge amount of gameplay, all in a beautiful world. Every map has

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preplanned events, and every area has quests, items, tricks, and traps. In short, the game has been completely designed from head to toe. Stacked on top of that, though, is the ability to play the entire game with friends. We're not talking about a special deathmatch mode or a multiplayer dungeon either — every second of the single-player experience is available in the multiplayer mode, an innovation that is entirely new for RPGs.

Not only do new technologies allow the game to be the first real multiplayer RPG, but they also allow it to be one of the first that's deeply replayable. It's unlikely that players will see the entire game during their first playthrough. Add to that multiple ways to solve several of the problems in the game, varying from playing spy to using brute force, and you have a recipe for at least two completely different experiences.

The interface is a melange of old and new. Point-and-click is the name of the game, with a clock running in the lower left corner. When you enter combat, you have



the ability to stop the clock and meticulously plan your characters' moves. At the same time, the game possesses a fluid and intuitive realtime mode of action that is very satisfying. The game plays well both in realtime and in paused settings, though the harder battles are high impossible without pausing the game.

And while the good interface, the multiplayer functionality, and beautiful graphics all make *Baldur's Gate* stand out, it is the enormously satisfying role-playing elements that make it a real

winner. The primary quests are engrossing, many of the side quests are amusing, and the story of who your character is and why he or she is on this journey keeps you guessing. We're especially pleased to say that the ending of the game manages to avoid inane fantasy clichés and left us hungry for more.

The only problems are the few bugs that keep the game from running smoothly and the absolutely awful pathfinding. Commanded to move across the map, characters will find something inconvenient to get stuck on, even if they have to run to the neighbor's house to borrow it. In addition, the game's core multiplayer design is at first confusing (not to mention distracting). However, a dedicated team working together will master it. These flaws aside, the game never, ever becomes dull, and each chapter (there are seven) is more exciting than the last. We seriously can't imagine how Bioware is going to outdo themselves in future titles, but we can't wait to find out.

In fact, we're so looking forward to new adventures in the *Forgotten Realms* that we've found ourselves no longer pining for the good old days of *Wizardry*, *Ultima*, and *Bard's Tale*. The kings are dead. Long live the king.

RATING



When your main character dies, the game ends immediately — the CG movies and cut scenes are entertaining and well done



Putting together an effective party (then making sure they all stay alive long enough to grow more and more effective) is one of the game's many decision-filled challenges