

# Baldur's Gate

*AD&D as good as it gets without pencils*

**M**ore than a year or so ago, hard-core traditionalist role-players were weeping over the dearth and seeming decline of RPGs, and *Diablo* was the word of the day. Interplay stormed our offices with enthusiasm over a "revolutionary" (of course) role-playing game they were calling *Iron Throne*. It looked a bit like *Diablo*, but they were promising much more. In this game, they said, we would be enjoying the definitive translation of classic *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* rules in an experience unparalleled in previous CRPGs. In the "we'll believe it when we see it" tradition of jaded gamers, we nodded, sighed and said, "Uh-huh."

Throughout the many months and a title-change that followed, role-players everywhere rode the wave of hype that surrounded this claim of wonderfulness. Interplay fueled the fire, developer BioWare fueled the fire—heck, even we fueled the fire. Even so, we were not prepared for the ultimate payoff that is *Baldur's Gate*. While not perfect in every way, this game captures the spirit of *AD&D* better than any of its predecessors and is as good as it gets in the RPG genre. Welcome to the next generation of role-playing.

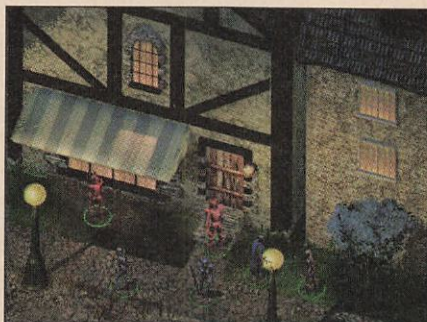
With an epic storyline as compelling as *Betrayal at Krondor* without the interactive-novel approach, *Baldur's Gate* grabs you firmly by the nape and won't let go until the final page is turned, er, rather, until the final mouse button is clicked. You begin the game in Candlekeep, a storehouse of learning and scholarly tomes, and your home for as long as you can remember. You soon discover that things are amiss, however, when your foster father Gorion (your true father remains a mystery) insists that it is time for you and he to take leave of this place. Almost immediately thereafter, assassins make short work of Gorion, but you manage to escape. Thus begins your journey, and your missions of revenge and discovery. Although it sounds rather pat, BioWare's writers have skillfully managed to ensure your rapt attention throughout, with carefully timed exposition and ever-mounting tension.

Episodic in structure, the story unfolds in seven chapters that must be completed in order. One of the game's biggest strengths is that, even though the story is necessarily linear, the gameplay is free-form enough to never make you feel you are being led by the nose. Clues as to your ultimate goal in each chapter occur as usual via letters, conversations with NPCs, and the like, but most of the time they seem to appear naturally.

Probably the ultimate highlight of *Baldur's Gate* is its stalwart adherence to the *AD&D* ruleset. Although the truest of true Pen and Paper enthusiasts will find places in which the game strays from the Gygax Codex, it is still the most faithful rendition we've seen that does not sport a human GM and dice. From character creation rolls to spellcasting restric-



The Temple east of Beregost



Watching for guards around every corner, right Boo?



Xan raises his flaming sword to smite the white bear

tions, it's all there. Novices should not be concerned, though. While most hard-core *AD&D* players will be satisfied with the ruleset details, the uninitiated adventurer—one who has never set butt at a Pen and Paper game—will be likewise fulfilled.

During character creation, you may choose among six races and 16 classes and class-combinations, and the creation screen does an excellent job of informing you about the special abilities, strengths and weaknesses of each one. Multiclassed (demihuman) and dual-classed (human) characters are also available. There are also the traditional nine alignment choices (Lawful Good, Chaotic Neutral, etc.) and wonderfully enough, the choice will make a difference in gameplay.

The game is a playground of customization possibilities, and perhaps the best example of this is the ability to create behavior scripts for your characters. While each of the characters

may operate with no script at all or with a predetermined script—aggressive, defensive, and neutral scripts exist—you may choose to use the included scripting tool to exercise even more control over your characters' behavior. Megalomaniacs, rejoice!

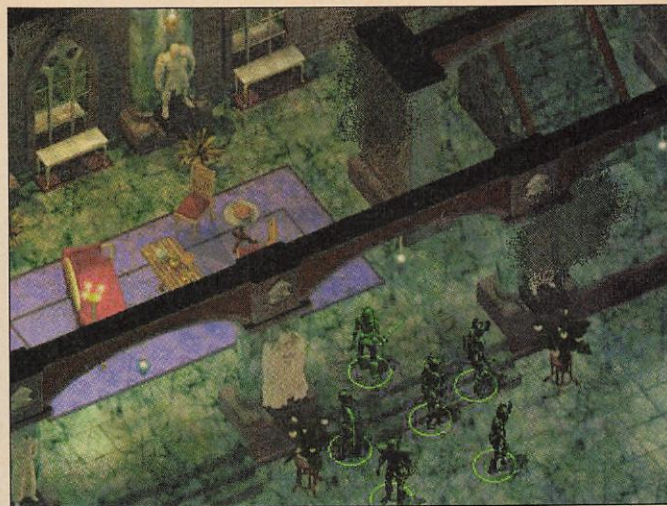
This behavioral discussion leads us to the central activity of gameplay—combat. Although some might wish for more puzzle-oriented gameplay, the combat system is unrivaled. When the game was announced and BioWare revealed it would not include pure turn-based combat, many were up in arms—especially *AD&D* precisionists. However, the resulting continuous-time system works extraordinarily well, and indeed with a bit of practice, you may make it act as turn-based as you like. In fact, "behind the scenes," the game does act in its properly *AD&D*-esque turn-based mode. Probably no one will be able to survive the game in its apparent real-time state, so the



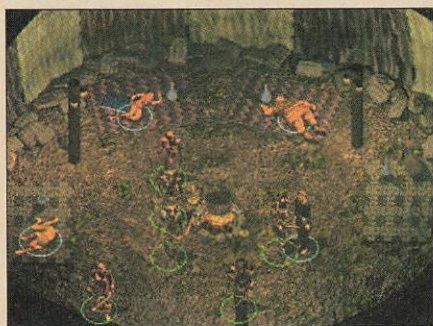




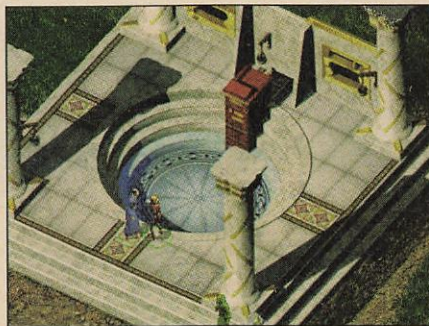
Paper doll inventory system is beautifully accessible



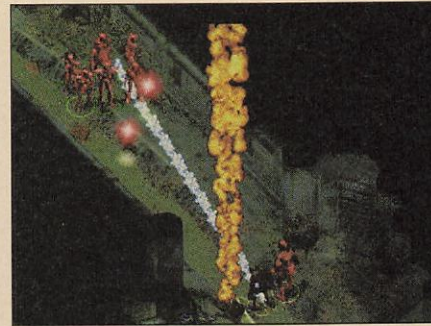
The halls of the Iron Throne



Sleeping peasants on hallucinogens



The outdoor temple at Candlekeep



Fights in the sewers below Baldur's Gate

handy space bar may be used at any time to pause the game. There are also seven levels of auto-pause, including after each character hit, end of round, injury and death. During each pause, you may choose to reposition your character, choose a new weapon, spell or attack, or check your statistics or journal.

The versatility available during combat is nothing short of phenomenal. You may drag the party into a group and attack, à la *Command & Conquer*, but you'll find that it is almost never the best solution. There is a myriad of possible solutions to every combat situation, and hundreds and hundreds of spells, items, weapons, magical items and potions to help you out.

With the advent of the amazing 3D engines we've seen of late, the graphical style in *Baldur's Gate* may seem outdated in theory, but the gorgeously rendered backgrounds, available in up to 32-bit color, give a wonderful sense of time and place. You explore indoors, outdoors and underground, with beautifully represented day and night scenes, shadows, thunderstorms and ambient creatures scampering about.

The many monsters are fabulously convincing and either deliciously crumple or magnificently explode where appropriate. (Your party members crumble and explode as well—crumple and they may be resurrected, explode, and well, they're history. Gone. Finished. Eradicated. Restore-your-game-fodder.) If your main character dies, the game is over and you must restore. Spell effects are stunning and often spectacular, and range from flaming weapons,

to swirls of deadly light, to columns of devastation pouring down from the heavens.

Realistic interaction with others is yet another standout feature. The NPCs who will join you will have their own alignments, and choosing a party with alignments that are too varied may cause civil war. Party members will often have their own agendas and you would do best to heed their wishes or they, too, will leave and attack you and your remaining companions. The beauty of this in early gameplay is that the agenda of others tends to force you in the right direction. This is extremely important early on because the game starts out very slowly with small rewards and slow character development. Immediate gratification types should hang in there, however, as the story soon takes over and often its development is all the reward you'll need.

The land is very large (not *Daggerfall*-large, but sizable nonetheless). The main map, your current location, is shrouded in fog of war, which you roll back by exploration or, rarely, with a spell of Clairvoyance. When leaving an area, a world map allows you to choose any other available region, travel to which will take hours or days of game time. The system is simple, but navigation does become a bit of a problem at times. Tactically, the AI pathing has improved tenfold since the early beta releases of the game, and has been patched since the release. Still, you'll find the pathing no worse than plenty of other games out there, and any irritation you may feel will be well outweighed by the strength of the gaming experience.

One of the most controversial aspects of the

game is its multiplayer component. The single-player and multiplayer game have the same plot, and after completing the game in single-player mode, going through the story again may seem too redundant for many. Although LAN play has been stable, TCP/IP connections are problematic. Certainly for those who have friends with time on their hands, there may be an allure to the multiplayer game. Here the game creator acts as the party leader and a GM of sorts, assigning control of character slots and setting player permissions and allowable items.

Yet another highlight of *Baldur's Gate* is its replayability. The side quests are so numerous, and the race-class-alignment combinations so varied that if you do decide to play again (and most of you will), it is almost guaranteed that you will be able to build yourself an entirely new experience.

So attention AD&D lovers, role-players of all kinds, and even new adventurers on the fringe—your rapt attention, please! (That's like "Here ye, hear ye!") Go out today and buy this game. If you take advantage of the immense amount of replay-value, you may not need another game this year, except perhaps the expansion pack. Don't desert us now, BioWare. —Cindy Yans



#### **Baldur's Gate**

Interplay Productions • [www.interplay.com](http://www.interplay.com) •

Requirements: Windows 95/98, 166MHz

Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM •

Multiplayer: 2-6 players, Internet, LAN, modem