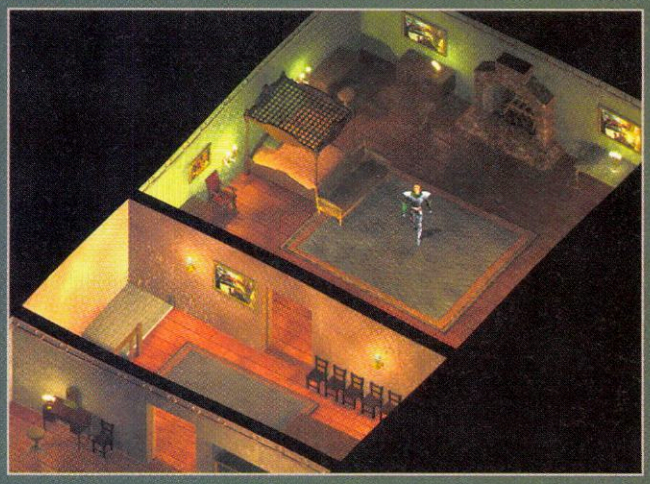
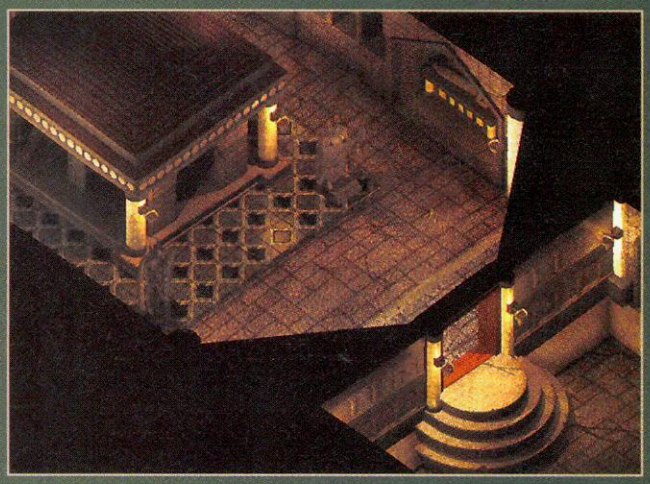
The top-down isometric view is very reminiscent of Diablo



Scrolling views of more than one location allow a broader perspective



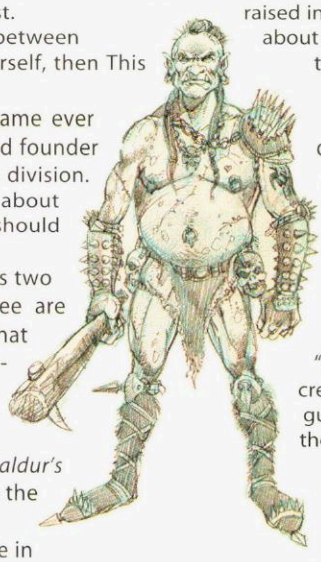
BALDUR'S GATE

FINDING A REMEDY FOR IRON-POOR BLOOD

Pool of Radiance, Curse of the Azure Bonds, Secret of the Silver Blades and *Pools of Darkness* - if you go back that far in the history of TSR-licensed *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* products, you probably have a pair of dice and a Dungeon Master or two under your belt. Perhaps you whip them out on occasion and still undertake *AD&D* as a table game. You are a purist. You know your *AD&D*. You know the difference between a gibberling and a kobald. If you recognize yourself, then This Bud's For You.

"This game is going to be the best *AD&D* game ever made for the PC," says Ray Muzyka, designer and founder of Bioware and head of their *Forgotten Realms* division. Muzyka has what may prove to be a lot to crow about in *Baldur's Gate*, a wildly anticipated RPG that should whoosh onto shelves by second quarter 1998.

Bioware was founded 1995 by Muzyka and his two partners, Greg Zeschuk and Aug Yip. All three are licensed physicians, but so addicted to games that they choose to lay down their stethoscopes during a good deal of their time and devote it to making games the way *they* would like to see them done. The rest of the time they perform organ transplants on Druids and Clerics. With *Baldur's Gate* on the way, it's only a matter of time before the good doctors stop making house calls.



Shipping on five CDs, *Baldur's Gate* takes place in the (not so) *Forgotten Realms*, where many of TSR's *AD&D* scenarios are set. The Sword Coast stretches from north to south along the main continent, and along it lie Amn, the Wood of Sharp Teeth, and Baldur's Gate, the largest city in the region. One of the area's greatest resources, its iron, begins to dwindle. Roving bands of renegades are stealing and hoarding it, and existing supplies of ore are tainted. Weapon supplies are threatened. Farming and crafting are suffering. Hence, the very existence of the denizens of Baldur's Gate is in danger. This iron crisis may be precursor to a greater evil, and instead of relying on Geritol, the Realms are relying on *you* to settle the unrest.

WHAT A CHARACTER

You begin with one character who can be generated using any of the races, classes, and alignments *AD&D* has to offer. Be a dwarf, elf, human, or halfing and choose among fighter, bard, thief, cleric, druid, mage, ranger, paladin, plus a number of multi-class others (keeping in mind that not all races may become all classes). You are an orphan; raised in the monk fortress of CandleKeep, you have a lot to learn about your heritage and destiny. Twenty-four possible additions to your party exist throughout the land, and you may invite them to join you when you meet them.

These NPCs will have their own AI scripting, which determines their general behavior in basic situations. Scripts will be modifiable to some extent, so that the player can customize personalities and behaviors. You may shout, "No way!" (being burned out from micromanaging real-time strategy resource collectors), and that's OK, because the built-in scripts should be perfectly acceptable. Or you can choose broad attributes with which to customize, such as "aggressive," "cautious," "agoraphobic." Finally, you may choose to go the gamut, creating specific reactions: "If enemy is Kissing Bandit, strum guitar three times the level of your charisma, hit him over the head and shout, 'El Kabong!'"

IT'S REAL-TIME? STOP THE CLOCK!

In addition to the versatility inherent in character customization, the entire storyline is being approached dynamically. Says Muzyka, "Unlike a lot of other RPGs, we think that the solutions here should be variable depending on your approach to the world – you can be aggressive and attack anything you see (it won't work too well considering you're only a first level character to start with!) or try and learn more through subtlety and stealth, or through charisma and personality. We're working hard to ensure that the story is the best it can be (my head programmer has read every one of the *Forgotten Realms* novels) and that the gameplay is both easy and fun to use, plus true to the spirit and ruleset of TSR's *AD&D* system (my head designer is an ex-RPG store owner and full-time Dungeon Master who has the source books for *AD&D* memorized pretty much cold...)."

What *AD&D* purists may have a difficult time coming to grips with is the game's real-time engine. Certainly classic tabletop role-playing has always been turn-based. In order to compensate, they are using a "modified round" system in which each character is always on his or her own singular round, so that the rule set will still apply. There will be a pause command for those traumatic urges for planning time, and, of course, if you slow the game down to a snail's pace, you might be able to fool yourself into believing it to actually be turn-based.

HOW MANY STARS FOR AMBIANCE?

The view is reminiscent of *Diablo*'s isometric perspective with some pretty impressive 3D graphics. There are over 10,000 scrolling 640X480 game screens, complete with real-time lighting and dynamic weather. All maps will be 3D as well, giving the game a realistic topography. A medieval style will dominate the interiors and cities, while epoch-less forests and caverns are in harmony with nature. As in *Diablo*, your characters' appearance will change as they upgrade their armor and weapons.

The story will span seven chapters, but within each chapter gameplay will be as non-linear as possible. Choices of where you go, or who you want to interact with will be open-ended most of the time. Of course there will be specific goals to achieve in order to progress to the next chapter, but there will also be many subquests to add to the immersive ambiance, and paths toward the intermittent goals will be varied and branching in different directions. Most of the subquests are said to present a moral or ethical dilemma... hmmm... "Kill the sacred cow or let the population starve?" How you handle each situation will effect your reputation, and people in the land will react to you accordingly (unless they've starved).

Baldur's Gate is the first of a trilogy. It will allow your character to progress from levels one through six, the next installment will take you from levels seven through twelve and the last from levels thirteen through eighteen, so only in the last episode will you be able to use the spells and weapons of the truly elite. Add-on packs will be available as well.

MULTIPLAYER GAME VERSUS MULTIPLAYER WORLD

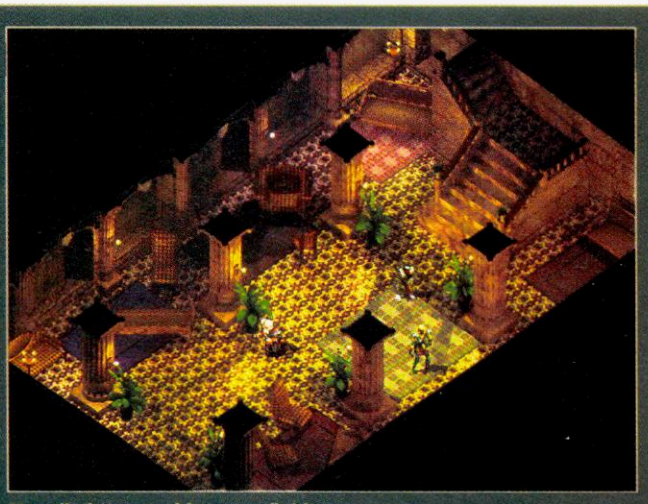
Although the developers wish to someday create a "*Baldur's Gate Online*" type of game, the current plan is to allow up to six players join hands in completing the same quests as in single player mode. (Perhaps stories of *Ultima Online*'s experiences have scared them off.)

Each player must have a full copy of the game, and may connect via LAN or the Internet. Direct connect issues are still in question at this writing. Players will be able to control more than one character and may trade (or sell or gamble away) control to others at any time. Characters that have not been taken into control will be handled by the AI. Will people end up turning all of this carefully crafted interactive story business into a deathmatch? Since they *can*, we can probably bet on it.

...IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THE GOOD DOCTORS STOP MAKING HOUSE CALLS.

All role-playing gamers who were dissatisfied with *Diablo*'s RPG elements will want to take a very close look at this title. It pushes pizzazz, but seems to remain dead-on true to classic RPG. The doctors would have it no other way. –*Cindy Yans*

Magical effects surround the stained glass crystal-holder



Non-tiled map enables more fluid movement

Some of these sofas appear post-modern

Twin statues adorn the rear wall