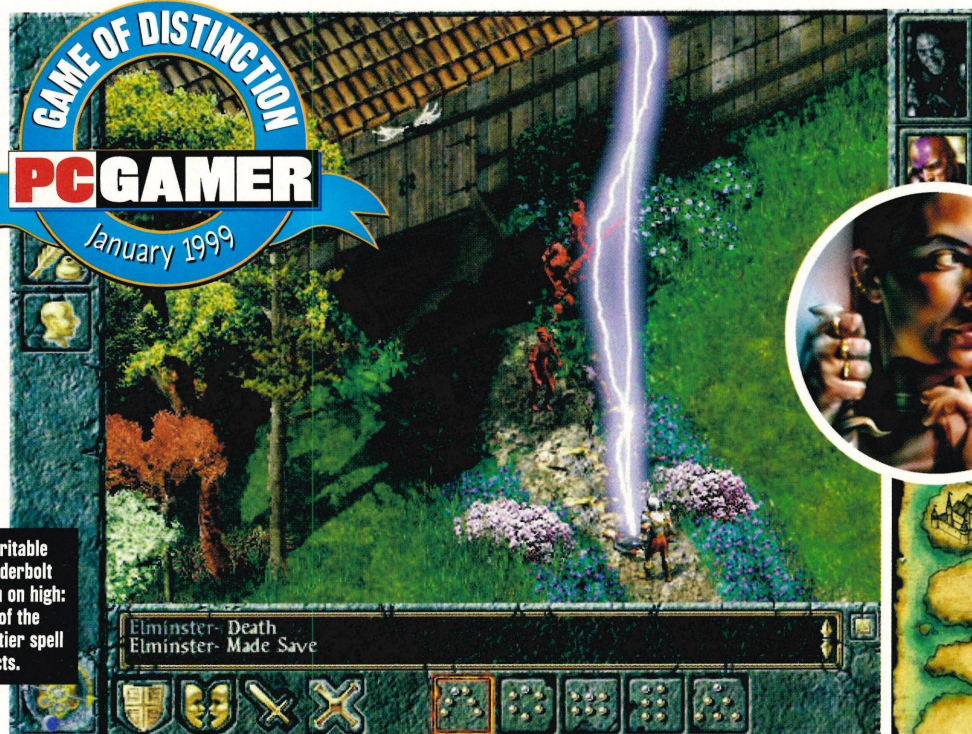
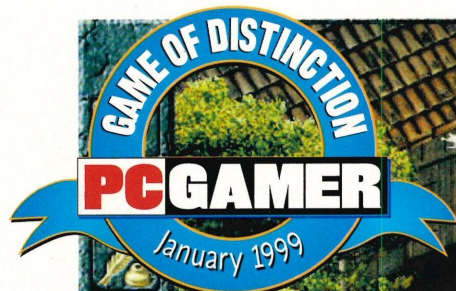


BALDUR'S GATE



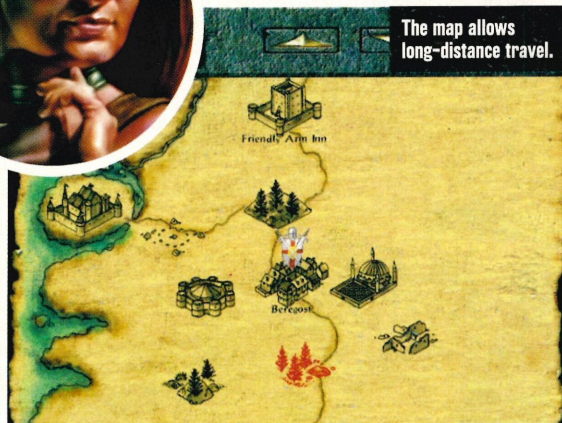
It's a trip back to the old-school, but things sure have changed a bit.



A veritable thunderbolt from on high: one of the prettier spell effects.



The map allows long-distance travel.



THE last time a game of many discs arrived in the office, it was greeted with sheer horror. When we managed to coax Mark out from under his desk, he declared the six art-packed discs of *Ring* to be "arse". With only one less disc, *Baldur's Gate's* arrival prompted flinches all round: what could warrant over 3Gb of disc space?

How big can this damn thing be?

I was also worried by the apparent beardiness of the whole thing. Based on the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons system, you say? Party-based goblin-bashing adventuring? At first glance, it's about as hirsute as role-playing gets. But don't let all that fool you; because behind the bristling chin-growth lurks a sleek, polished,

involving and enormous game. But no goblins, in fact – that's Tolkien, mate.

AD&D. A simple acronym that conjures up dark thoughts of a youth misspent as Derek The Destroyer. Hit points. Armour class. Such things are best confined to the table-top, a fact which Bioware have acknowledged. Most of the mechanics, therefore, are hidden behind the game's friendly exterior; which can only be a good thing, as *Baldur's Gate* is very complicated indeed.

Set in the Forgotten Realms world, which will be familiar to some as the setting of many TSR games and books, *Baldur's Gate* involves you in a plot of intrigue, politics, shady dealing and discovery. Oh, and good old combat, too. You create a main character, who is central to the plot – you lose if he/she dies. Hours can be spent here, as you can customise not only the alignment, class, gender and so on but also the appearance and even voice files of your character.

You can also recruit up to five other party members, from more than a dozen characters who are interspersed all over the game world. This aspect is central to your progression, rather than an amusing diversion (as with *Fallout*); as you won't get anywhere without a band of loyal comrades. They're fun, too, as they all have distinctive personalities. The class, experience, magic, weapons and abilities systems are all lifted straight from AD&D, and are therefore well-balanced and effective. Magic is not



It's a scary house... but you just can't resist breaking in.

LOSING THE PLOT

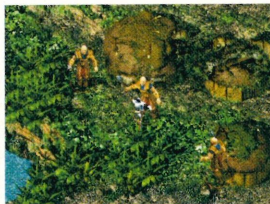
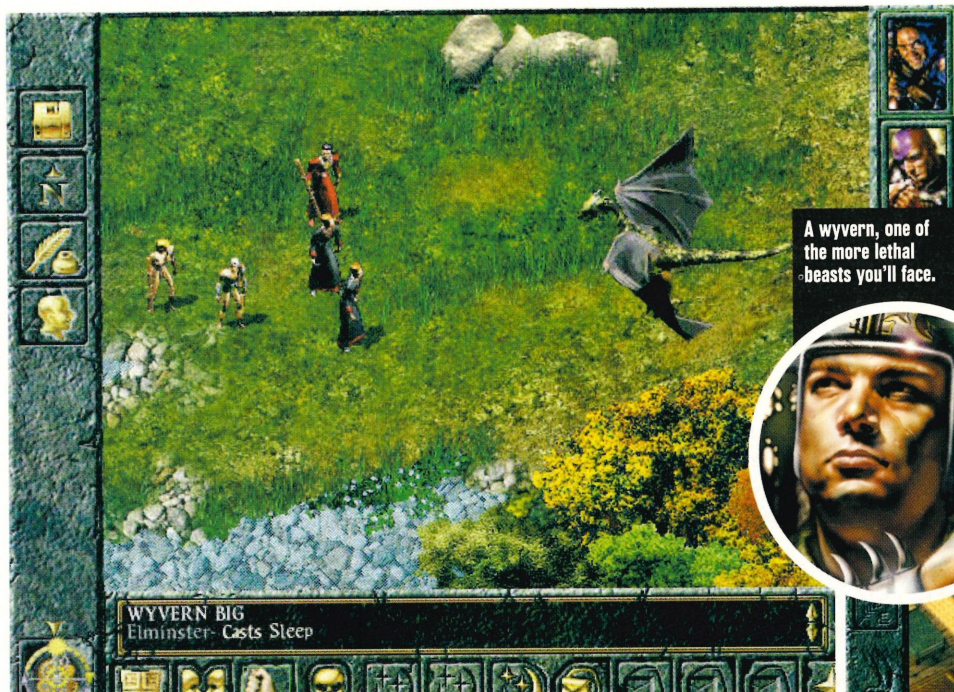
The plot involves your main character's quest to find an identity (hmm, sounds familiar) and also to solve a series of mysterious, interlinked problems. As you progress and talk to various people, you'll be given clues as to where to go next, who to talk to and what to do. It's not always obvious, though, as the world is so open-ended.

There are also around a hundred sub-quests of varying complexity and difficulty, which are a good way of racking up some cash and experience points – Interplay reckon there's well over 100 hours of fun to be had. The only problem is that it's hard to keep track: the journal doesn't record every important encounter for some reason, so you'll sometimes forget exactly what you were supposed to find, or where you were directed.

A wyvern, one of the more lethal beasts you'll face.

The interiors of the game's many buildings are richly coloured and intimately detailed.

A handy magical device to zap flies.



Hirsute

overly powerful, and magical weapons are suitably rare (and valuable); so utilising particularly powerful enchantments is a pleasing break from the norm.

Baldur's Gate takes all the traditional elements of CRPGs, from the *Ultimas*, the *Bard's Tale* series and even further back. Towns with working inns, taverns, temples and shops are bustling metropolises with scores of people to interact with. The city of Baldur's Gate itself is enormous – you can spend ages just wandering around, sneaking into people's houses, talking to random punters and getting the gossip. The main plot, and the scores of sub-quests, are advanced precisely in this way; and relevant bits of information are noted in your journal. Like *Fallout*, though, the consequences of your actions are not always noted by everyone, and so people will sometimes whine about problems you have already solved.

The control system is a formidable beast, with more keyboard short-cuts than most flight sims. These are all customisable, and allow quick access to the plethora of information available about your party, quest, map, etc. This system is particularly

useful during combat, as it allows the skilled player to dispatch orders quickly and efficiently, without over-using the very useful pause feature. During combat (or at any other time, for that matter) you can pause the game to issue orders. In this way, *Baldur's Gate* neatly side-steps the real-time versus turn-based issue. Time, on the whole, is managed

"A sleek, polished, involving and enormous game."

very well; with day and night cycling appropriately. Game time runs four times faster than real time – while this may seem strange, the accelerated onset of dawn or dusk is very atmospheric. Weather effects, particularly snow, are also excellent, and it is a tribute to the game's engine that these features sneak in unobtrusively.

Those five CDs, then. I am assured that they contain all the artwork necessary for the very large and unique landscapes that make up the game's reputed 10,000 screens full. DJ-ing is a thankfully irregular and painless occurrence; only usually necessary when moving between distinct areas. They also contain rather a lot of sound files, from individual NPC voices to the commoners' stock phrases. Sound in general is handled beautifully; with varying wildlife sounds, footsteps which change according to terrain and a variety of monster sound effects contributing to the immersive nature of the game.

So *Baldur's Gate* is good; very good, actually. It could challenge *Final Fantasy VII* to a scrap outside the inn, but lacks the Japanese epic's range and imagination. It's more akin to the venerable *Ultimas VII* and *VIII*, but the passage of time has rendered them incomparable. *Baldur's Gate* is a tremendous reworking of traditional CRPG themes, which for some may be horribly retrograde, but there's no denying that it's a hugely impressive piece of work.

ROSS ATHERTON

■ Publisher **Interplay** ■ Developer **Bioware** ■ Price **£40** ■ Minimum System **P120, 16Mb, x4 CD-ROM** ■ Recommended **P166, 32Mb RAM, x8 CD-ROM, 500Mb HD space, 4Mb graphics card** ■ Graphics Accelerator **None** ■ Multi-Player **Network, modem, serial** ■ Web Address <http://www.interplay.com> ■ Release Date **Out now**

PCGAMER

Beautiful, involving, old-school RPG for those with plenty of free time.

89%