

Baldur's Great?

BALDUR'S GATE Is a Very Ambitious Title That Gets Most Things Right

by Scorpia

A certain amount of hype precedes all games, the highly anticipated BALDUR'S GATE more than most. As is usually the case, there is a wide gap between fact and fancy. We'll start with what's right with the game.

Character creation allows for the full range of AD&D races and classes—your choice of male or female—and even multiclass characters for nonhumans. Rolling up character stats works well: The values for required professions will always be at least the minimum; you can roll the dice over and over; you can deduct points from one or more stats and add to others,



into a quasi-realtime system. By hitting the space bar, you can suspend the game at any time; you can also set an autopause to freeze action based on certain events, such as a character's target being killed, a character dying, his/her weapon becoming unusable, and so on. Without pausing, it's a real mess to try to direct the detailed actions of six characters in real-time combat. As it is, the pause method proves unsatisfactory, giving the action a

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD



APPEAL: Gamers looking to finally have multiplayer AD&D sessions on their PC.

PROS: Good for multi-player campaigning; plot starts out strongly; nice flexibility for character design; powerful game engine.

CONS: Combat system can be awkward, with questionable results; plotline and playability decline midway through; dialogue is spotty.

DIFFICULTY: Intermediate.

REQUIREMENTS: Pentium 166 (P200MMX recommended), Windows 95/98, 32MB RAM, 300MB hard-drive space, 2MB 16-bit SVGA graphics, 4x CD-ROM; supports DirectX-compatible sound cards.

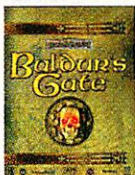
3D SUPPORT: None.

MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: Modem (2 players), IPX or TCP/IP LAN/Internet (2-6 players); all 1 CD per player.

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subject to race and class restrictions. You can even store a "pretty good set of numbers" to recall later if you can't come up with better.

Candlekeep Burning

After the creation process, you go into the tutorial at Candlekeep, where you can equip your character in fairly reasonable style. You won't be sent out to face ferocious hordes before you can even draw a breath. Little green-robed monks swarm over the area, ready to declaim helpful hints for those who only scanned the manual. In one section, you can even indulge in "virtual battle" against harmless monster illusions with a temporary party, to get at least some idea of how to handle a group during fights. Start-up is thus far better than that found in most games, where you are poorly equipped and shoved into a hostile world before you even learn the interface properly.

Whenever you travel from one location to another in the outdoors, the program automatically saves your current position in a

special slot before sending you off. Restoring can be done at any time, while saving is possible only if no hostile critters are in the immediate area.

No-go Solo

Nice touches notwithstanding, the game isn't a standout from the solo perspective. Part of this stems from the combat, which shoehorns AD&D mechanics designed for turn-based fighting

weird, jerky, stop-and-go feel—a bad thing, given the amount of fighting you do in BALDUR.

If you follow up directly on the main plot line, it's likely your party will soon find itself overmatched. So take time to explore all sorts of side areas to gain experience and gold, and find the occasional Neat Item. In time, this becomes inexpressibly tedious; you go from one boring combat to the next, while the game waits for you to get back to the plot.

One might think that with all of this wandering, it would be easier to find a decent mage for your party. Problem is, the evil mages available can cause fights to start within the group, and the other mages, all specialists, have serious shortcomings. Dyna,



CHARM ME Since we enjoy negotiation in BALDUR'S GATE more than Scorpia does, we usually pump up our character's Charisma points; she takes the opposite tack.

for instance, cannot use such spells as Sleep, Confusion, Flame Arrow, and Hold Person. That leaves Xan, who cannot cast such vital spells as Magic Missile, Web, Fireball, and Lightning Bolt. It is possible to finish the game without a mage, but it certainly increases the difficulty.

It could be that I missed someone with reasonable abilities, since I talked to people only when necessary. Not only because they forever wanted to send us on dreary little quests, but also because the dialogue is often awful, along the lines of "Well, if you were so stupid/weak as to be captured, you're not good enough for us, so get lost." Diplomacy, tact, and consideration obviously took low priority in the writer's mind.

When we turn to the multiplayer side, things improve. A LAN hookup affords the best experience, with everyone in the same room but on different machines.



HEAL EARLY AND OFTEN With the amount of combat in **BALDUR'S GATE**, you'll need more than faith and a few potions on your side.

This is the closest you can get to live gaming experience, with lots of chatter and jokes in between tactical discussions.

Those discussions are important, and they relieve much of the burdensome parts of combat. You work out general strategies beforehand, having to then worry about maneuvering only your own character, instead of six. There is also greater flexibility in responding to different threats, backing off if severely injured (NPCs have no sense of self-preservation), and moving quickly to help someone in dire circumstances.

There is no question that **BALDUR** was designed from the first with multiplayer in mind. While solo adventuring is not exactly an afterthought, its true function seems to be for you to become familiar with the game, then export a character (of about 2nd–4th level) for the multiplayer side, so that you and your friends can indulge in a communal critter crunch.

Save the World Again?

The familiar plot at least offers a different focal point: Your

character is the "orphan with mysterious past" marked for death by a sinister armored figure. Bounty hunters and assassins show up throughout the game, eager to collect the reward offered by Mr. Sinister.

Unfortunately, what starts as rather interesting later fizzles out. In fact, the game becomes progressively more mechanical the closer you get to the finale. By the time you're in the city of **Baldur's Gate**, the whole thing is more like connect-the-dots than anything else, leading you practically by the nose to the inevitable (and exceptionally nasty) Fozzie fight at the finale. On the technical side, the game had a distressing tendency to crash every so often, usually when crossing a boundary line from one area to another, but also a few times during a save.

As a single-player product, **BALDUR'S GATE** aspires to greatness—a good engine, nice graphics, a real *D&D* feel—but has its share of flaws, particularly with *AD&D*-style combat. As a multiplayer product, it sports some interesting features and is more enjoyable by virtue of having other real people participating in the adventure. Anyone considering **BALDUR** should do so with an eye



Swords Clash... and Clash...

Fighting takes longer than necessary in **BALDUR'S GATE**. As a veteran of many live *AD&D* sessions, I know how the dice should roll. *Never* have I seen such low numbers—10 and under, before adjustments for armor—come up consistently in combat after combat. That translates into a lot of misses (on both sides, to be fair) and some very *lo-o-o-ng* battles. Worse, it means your party members will be failing too many saving throws versus spells, especially early on, when they're low-level characters. Either the random number generator is programmed incorrectly or the designers have diddled the dice.

to the multiplayer aspect to get the most for their money. **CGW**

*Scorpio is looking forward to **DIABLO II**—she's confident it will be compelling for solo- and multiplayer.*

Move Me...Please!

The movement AI needs a lot of work (so make sure you get the patch). No matter what formations are used, characters sooner or later get stuck somewhere, go in the wrong directions, or try to walk through walls. They also have a tendency to straggle when the party walks for more than a short distance, so that often one or more back-rank (usually the weaker) characters ends up well ahead of everyone else.

You can change the actual order of characters in the group, even though this info



is not mentioned anywhere in either the manual or the read.me file. Simply place the cursor over the right-hand portrait, hold down the left mouse button, and

slide the mouse up or down to exchange positions.

Another amazing "feature" is the inability of the party to camp out on long journeys. Whether it's a day, two days, or more, the merry band just troops along like mindless zombies, never stopping to rest. So the first thing you have to do on arrival is rest, because everyone's fatigued. In outdoor areas, that can be dangerous. In all the RPGs I've ever played, going back to the eight-bit machines, designers have made allowances for this; was that so hard to program in here?