

BALDUR'S GATE

Years late, and one of the most anticipated old-school RPG's ever, Baldur's Gate still satisfies like a good hearty meal

When heavily anticipated games finally emerge from the vaporous hype, boxed and cling-wrapped and ready to play, it's inevitable that your initial experience with it will be tinged with disappointment. Baldur's Gate is one such game, although the degree of your disappointment will depend upon exactly what you were expecting it to be. Those after an epic, detailed story, full of minute interaction and lovingly crafted sub-quests - in other words, a game to rival Ultima VII - will be disappointed. Those after a huge, sprawling world with immense player freedom and a host of skills and stats to fiddle with and master - another Daggerfall, perhaps - will likewise be disappointed. So why is Baldur's Gate, if it offers neither of the above, such a bloody great game, then?

Teased ya!

But first the plot. You play an orphan, raised within the sheltered, academic walls of Candlekeep on the western edge of the Sword Coast, where the

sage, Gorion, has tutored you for the twenty years of your life. Now, however, Gorion has become distracted, fearful that some great danger is imminent.

Clearly, as he requests that the two of you flee Candlekeep at nightfall, Gorion knows more about your past than he has admitted. And on that intriguing note, your quest begins. A journey that will eventually lead you to Baldur's Gate itself, the vast city that dominates the Sword Coast region of the Forgotten Realms. You see, you are forbidden access to BG for much of the game and, rather than lessening the atmosphere, it serves instead to create a degree of suspense. So when you are finally permitted to enter those monolithic gates, it is tremendously exciting.

Getting to know you

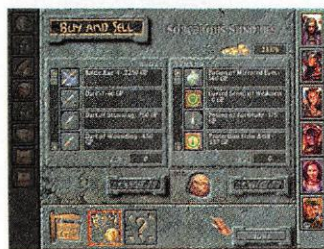
During the initial stages of your quest, then, you'll be engaged in several varied activities. One of which will be acquainting yourself with the interface, including character management and the combat system. Here we have a typical bird's eye view featuring both a fog and shroud of war with a line of sight that extends marginally further than the edge of the screen. Although a fog of war is

Interplay's hugely anticipated RPG isn't going to satisfy every fan of the genre.

never ideal, I presume this was done because developers, Bioware, have opted for a point-and-click movement system, as opposed to an Ultima VII-style point-and-hold method. (And, of course, this begs the question of why they chose that movement system in the first place).

D6 + D8 (+3 for strength)

Nonetheless, the combat - an exceedingly clever mix of turn-based tactics and real-time thrills - is perhaps the finest I've ever used. As the action unfolds, you can pause the game at any time to issue orders to all your characters, the game only restarting when you say so or when you delve into your inventory. AI scripts can be selected for each character - to instruct your ranger to use a ranged attack on any enemy or for your cleric to heal any wounded companion, for example - and will be carried out immaculately (with, I admit, the occasional exception). All the AD&D rules concerning initia-

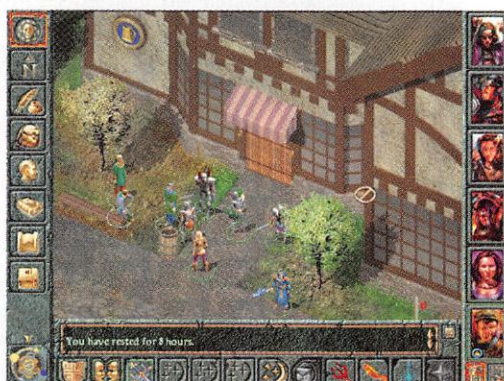




tive, speed, distance and the length of combat rounds and turns are calculated (and displayed, if you wish), meaning that the dexterity of your mouse hand never enters the equation. Diablo this most definitely is not.

Extra bits

Another activity will be to simply soak up the atmosphere of the gameworld. The landscape looks beautiful, the hand-drawn scenery in each location is unique and features a vivid palette of autumnal trees, trampled pathways, gentle streams, rocky cliffs and gullies, and meadows of bright flowers. Each town is comprised of individualised houses, stores and taverns, and populated by a diverse cast of characters. Ambient sounds



accompany your progress, along with some appropriately medieval and portentous music and plenty of speech from both the characters in your party and the people you meet in your travels. Bioware deserve much praise for creating the most attractively presented RPG to date.

Real Role Playing

Before too long you will also have a good idea as to the nature and structure of the gameplay. While the main quest follows a fairly linear route, there is a countless number of non-essential tasks to get you well and truly



Happily enough, this is not just your average simple hack and slash the bad ole monsters affair. Many situations can be resolved through intelligent speech choices (though there's always the sword as a backup...)

side-tracked. At heart, many of these are variations on the "deliver-this-so-and-so" or "kill-such-and-such", but they're mostly portrayed in a more interesting fashion than is usual. NPC dialogue is limited

in that, if you are properly role-playing your alignment, the conversation choice you should make is obvious. Though I should mention that many situations can be resolved with the tongue and not the sword. You

also need to monitor the characters in your party, ensuring that a balance is maintained between their desires and your own. Reign in that Chaotic Evil Thief once too often and they might just crack and do something both of you will regret. In this regard, BG is a real role-player's RPG.

It's a winner!

One of the game's great strengths is that there is always something for you to do, always some pressing matter at hand that requires your attention. It's also just a hell of a lot of fun just wandering the countryside, meeting new people, scalping some bandits, and exploring this wonderful land. A potentially problematic area is the AD&D system itself - that is, while it's accessible and uncomplicated in many ways, it's also idiosyncratic and unrealistic. Personally,



although I like the low-level stats of AD&D (and BG promotes this with an experience point cap of 89,000), I feel there are superior RPG systems that have produced deeper and ultimately more satisfying CRPGs - Fallout being the most recent example - but the familiarity of the AD&D rules is a significant factor. Everyone has at least some passing knowledge of them, and even those who don't can pick up the basics pretty quickly. Overall, I think it makes for a decent system for a CRPG, especially when the end result is a game as approachable, playable and just damn entertaining as Baldur's Gate.

David Wildgoose

87%

Category RPG
Players 1-6 (Modem, TCP/IP, IPX)
Publisher Interplay
Price \$TBA
Rating M
Available Now

For Thoroughly enjoyable from start to finish. Supremely well designed and realised combat system. Lush visuals, music and effects. Nice interplay between characters.

Against Sometimes feels a little too combat-heavy (but the combat is brilliant anyway). Lacks the in-depth interaction of the classic Ultimas. AD&D itself lacks an in-depth and flexible skills system.

Need P166, 16MB RAM, 4xCD, 300MB HD

Want P200 MMX, 32MB RAM, 8xCD, 600MB HD

PLUS+

What's New: 20th Anniversary Special: Dungeons & Dragons: The Complete Campaign Setting (2000) by David Noon, Bruce Cordell, Greg Bilszky, and John Niles. This is the most comprehensive guide to the game of Dungeons & Dragons ever published. It includes everything you need to know to play the game, from the basics of the rules to the advanced techniques of the experts. It's the ultimate reference for anyone who loves the game.

Most recent updates (2000):
- A new campaign setting: The Forgotten Realms: The Complete Campaign Setting (2000) by David Noon, Bruce Cordell, Greg Bilszky, and John Niles.
- A new campaign setting: The Forgotten Realms: The Complete Campaign Setting (2000) by David Noon, Bruce Cordell, Greg Bilszky, and John Niles.
- A new campaign setting: The Forgotten Realms: The Complete Campaign Setting (2000) by David Noon, Bruce Cordell, Greg Bilszky, and John Niles.

What's Hot: 25th Anniversary Special: Dungeons & Dragons: The Complete Campaign Setting (2000) by David Noon, Bruce Cordell, Greg Bilszky, and John Niles. This is the most comprehensive guide to the game of Dungeons & Dragons ever published. It includes everything you need to know to play the game, from the basics of the rules to the advanced techniques of the experts. It's the ultimate reference for anyone who loves the game.

http://www TSR.com/ADND/Welcome.html

Learn all about Orcs and Ogres at the official Advanced Dungeons & Dragons site