Baldur's Gate

Studio: **BioWare**

Designer(s): **James Ohlen**

Part of series: **Baldur's Gate**

Release: December 21, 1998

Main credits: Programming: **Scott Greig**, **Daniel Morris**
Art: **John Gallagher**
Music: **Michael Hoenig**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough, parts 1-25](#) (25 *hours* 50 *mins.*)

Basic Overview

In my distant youth, I somehow completely avoided catching the infectious RPG bug. I liked adventure games with their non-generic storylines, and pending that, strategy games like *Civilization* which looked like fairly serious, if obviously simplified, models of real-life situations. Next to them, RPGs looked weird, if not downright stupid — fantasy worlds that played out like endless reshufflings of the same corny tropes, in which taking good care of your stats and wondering whether the offensive properties of a copper axe were preferable to those of an iron mace was far more important than a good story and a

touching atmosphere. So I never got around to hooking myself on *Ultima* or *Wizardry*, let alone JRPGs; I seem to remember that the only CRPG that briefly held my attention was a poorly remembered title from Event Horizon Software called *Dusk Of The Gods*, mainly because it did a pretty good job immersing the player into the intricacies and complexities of Norse mythology. But I don't think I ever finished it, so I don't even know if I saved the world from Ragnarök or not.

The weird thing about this is that, *in theory*, the RPG should have always been my favorite game genre — as somebody who plays games mainly for their world-building, atmospheric, immersive aspects, you'd think I should have been attracted first
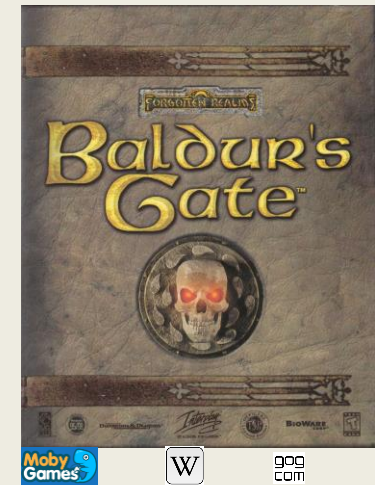
and foremost to a genre that is *all* about world-building, atmosphere, and immersion. In actuality, it took the world of RPGs quite a long time to get there, and I think the main reason is that, for much too long, the typical Western RPG was way too narrowly targeted at a highly specific niche of customers — you know, the ones that are typically made fun of in sitcoms and teenage comedies for an unhealthy attraction to D&D. The absolute majority of modern players for whom the idea of a Western RPG these days is associated with the likes of *Skyrim*, *Mass Effect*, or *The Witcher*, would have probably run away in horror from ye olde school RPGs at the first sign of having to learn what a THAC0 actually stands for. When an adventure game such as *Quest For Glory* would opt to include some RPG elements, such as Character Class and grinding for stats, I was ecstatic — this provided for a great opportunity to «bond» even more with your character and extend your playing time inside an awesome universe. But «pure» RPGs would have to wait until they got less technical and more substantial, to the point where, if you so desired, you could basically play them as an adventure and pay only minimal attention to the allocation of your stats or the quality of your loot.

That kind of transition arguably began in the mid-to-late 1990s, with Blizzard's *Diablo* and Interplay's *Fallout* leading the way, but of all the innovative RPGs appearing in that era, no other game (or, more accurately, no other game franchise) did as much for transforming the RPG from a cult-like entertainment into a mainstream form of art than BioWare's *Baldur's Gate* (also published by Interplay, for that matter). At the very least, even if we prefer to downplay that importance, few could contend with the status of BioWare as the leading supplier of popular Western RPGs in the 21st century (*Star Wars*, *Mass Effect*, and *Dragon Age* all testify to that), and who gave them that power? *Baldur's Gate*, that's who.

My own experience with the game has been strictly retrospective: I never played the original version back in 1998, and only picked up the *Enhanced Edition* when it was released by Beamdog in 2012, combining the original game with its expansion pack *Tales Of The Sword Coast* and introducing several new playable characters and other elements to the story. For any of the young players, spoiled by the rich graphic interfaces and relatively simplistic mechanics of modern RPGs, immersion into the stats-heavy, isometric perspective of *Baldur's Gate* must be a tough thing, and even I had a bit of a struggle at first, despite putting on my well-preserved Nineties' glasses for the game's duration. Yet linger on it a while, evoke a bit of context, and slowly, gradually, you might begin to understand what was so special about *Baldur's Gate* back in its day, and why it had amassed such a loyal fan base, including many people who had never played a true RPG before — or, for that matter, had never ever played a single game of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (like myself).

The very emergence of *Baldur's Gate* is somewhat clouded in mystery. BioWare, at the time, was a small, absolutely unknown company run by a couple of medical school graduates (Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk) who, one day, suddenly realized that

they really wanted to be video game designers because... because why not. They did not even have a clear understanding of what it was they really wanted to produce — BioWare's very first game, apparently, was a mech simulator called *Shattered Steel* (ironically, watching its gameplay today kind of gives you an idea of where some of the inspiration for *Mass Effect*'s Mako-driving sequences may have come from). Then it was like, «hey, all those nerds from our medical school love playing AD&D, so let's dump the simulators and make an AD&D-based RPG instead!» Actually, what they did was make an RPG demo called *Battleground: Infinity*, which they showed to Interplay, and since Interplay was all hot about testing out the D&D license which they had only just acquired, Muzyka and Zeschuk agreed to rework their game to take place in the Forgotten Realms universe. Hence, *Baldur's Gate*, whose birth was thus determined by a fairly accidental alignment of the stars.

Another area of vagueness concerns the issue of who was actually responsible for the core content of *Baldur's Gate*: pretty much from its very inception, BioWare has always functioned as a team, and you have to be a pretty serious fan of the studio's production to actually memorize the names of its leading geniuses. However, at the time of *Baldur's Gate* the team was still relatively small, and I guess that most of the conceptual work was the responsibility of James Ohlen, a long-time D&D player with so much expertise that Muzyka and Zeschuk hired him specifically to create the world they needed. But even then, basic design, gameplay, script, character personalities, etc., already tended to be shared between many people — a common practice in RPG design these days, though I must admit that I still feel funny every time I stumble upon lines like «writer X was responsible for character so-and-so, writer Y produced the dialogue for character so-and-so» (who knows, maybe that's just one of the reasons why video game writing still has not properly caught up to classic literature standards).

Anyway, you probably do not need to do a lot of research in order to guess that the genesis process for *Baldur's Gate* must have been pretty messy — and, consequently, commercial expectations for the game were relatively low, given the «niche» status of everything D&D-based and the team's total lack of previous experience in the matter. Interplay had just published *Fallout* a year earlier, which had earned rave reviews and a fairly modest profit, and it must have seemed that *Baldur's Gate* would probably follow in its footsteps, if not worse. Instead, the game became a totally unexpected hit — selling literally hundreds of thousands of copies in record terms all over the world and initiating BioWare's lucky sales streak that continues unabated pretty much to this day (even the disastrous *Anthem* from 2019, despite not living up to EA's expectations, still sold like crazy on the sheer strength of BioWare's past reputation — but that's an entirely different story already).

How exactly did that happen? After all, *Baldur's Gate* wasn't exactly the easiest or the most superficially attractive game to play in 1998. Its rules were complex, its plot was devilishly twisted, its graphics were anything but dazzling, and its difficulty curve was brutal — and that's putting it mildly. Were anything of the sort to come out in 2020, I dare say that most players

would set it aside, frustrated and confused, in about 20 minutes, and then quickly return to the safe havens of their *Fallout 4*'s and *Witcher 3*'s. But to simply say something trite, in the vein of the game capturing the Zeitgeist of its time or being a perfect product specifically for its day and age, would be selling *Baldur's Gate* rather short. There was indeed something special about 1998 in terms of games that transcended genres and conventions (*Half-Life* alone should suffice), and *Baldur's Gate* fit that trend — for all its difficulty and formal adherence to the core rules of D&D, it managed to do things above and beyond the stuff that was typically expected of RPGs at the time — so, in a way, the relative lack of experience on the part of its creators must have been a good thing. Let us, then, take a strictly amateurish look at the game (as I already stated, I in no way claim to be an expert on the RPG genre, and am far better acquainted with the 21st century «sissy» successors of *Baldur's Gate* than any of its 20th century «hardcore» predecessors) and try to judge its different aspects largely on their own, with but a bit of context involved, to see what it is that makes *Baldur's Gate* such a special experience, no matter how many *other* aspects of it tend to drive you up the wall at one time or another.

Content evaluation

Plotline

First things first: I am hardly qualified to make a judgement on how well the plot of *Baldur's Gate* fits into the general setting of Ed Greenwood's Forgotten Realms (allegedly it fits in pretty good, but don't take my word on it), or on how it compares to the other D&D games and writings set in the same environment. I usually proceed from the assumption that anything D&D-related has to be treated *a priori* as a bunch of harmless nonsense, though some of that nonsense may be wittier and more entertaining than other nonsense — and at least in pure theory, there are no obstacles that would prevent somebody from crafting a Forgotten Realms plot worthy of a Frank Herbert and writing it up in a language worthy of a J. R. R. Tolkien. All I know is, *Baldur's Gate* for sure ain't *that* kind of a game.

I played the entire campaign through at least twice — which is no mean feat, given the game's enormous roster of side quests and stuff — and I am still not altogether sure I got it all right. Here is what I remember off the top of my head, without running

off to recheck Wikipedia. You play — after selecting your class, race, gender, and general alignment, none of which matter as far as the main storyline is concerned — as an orphaned ward of an old wise guy named Gorion, who raises you and your sister Imoen in the fortified town of Candlekeep. One day, Gorion, for no obvious reason, flees from Candlekeep in the deep of night and takes you along with him, but both of you are ambushed by an unknown party and Gorion is killed. You escape and begin to wander all along the Sword Coast, meeting some of Gorion's friends and entangling what amounts to a very, very complex and multi-layered plot that some sinister agent has concocted both against you, as he keeps setting you up, and the current leaders of the great city of Baldur's Gate. As you investigate the situation, you eventually uncover the true nature of the major villain and his relationship to you, chase him all the way to Bhaal's Temple, and defeat him in a climactic battle. And, uh, that about sums it up, I'd say.

Of course, it does take you quite a bit of time to go through all the intermediate minions leading up to the big baddie, so it's not quite as simple as is retold in this concise and, I think, mostly accurate summary. But as twisted and complex as the main plot might be, it is no better or worse, I suppose, than hundreds of similar D&D plots — diligently built up from the usual building blocks of the typical cloak-and-sword fantasies. Power strife, betrayals, alliances, prophecies, murders, magic-based economics, transfigurations, imprisonments, escapes, you name it. You never even get to spend enough time with Gorion so as to feel any empathy when he is gone, and if there is ever a priority to any of my actions in the game, then getting revenge on Sarevok's ass hardly ever qualifies. He is just a stupid annoying pest who literally takes *forever* to kill in the final battle, unless you lower the difficulty, and that's pretty much the only thing I'd want to take revenge upon him for, except that he's already dead by that time, so I can't.

The *real* plot of *Baldur's Gate*, the one that has an actual chance of gluing you to the screen for a while, has nothing to do with the main story. It consists of two major parts. The first one are the multiple side quests scattered throughout the entire map — yes, the universe of *Baldur's Gate* is true to the classic RPG ideology which states that the virtual universe is there for you to *live* in it, rather than treat it as a setting in which you have to make a specific journey from point A to point B. Unlike many of the modern RPGs, including BioWare's own (*Mass Effect*, first and foremost), which tend to move closer to traditional adventure games in spirit, *Baldur's Gate* very explicitly places exploration and random wandering at the heart of the game. However — and this is important — unlike in, say, the early *Elder Scrolls* games, all of the side quests are idiosyncratically scripted, with a ton of original writing activity. Of course, when your typical side quest is not thought of as a «Character A from race B offers you *n* gold pieces to retrieve stolen object C from a randomly generated dungeon run by hostile race D» kind of fetch-quest, this may seem to lower the game's replay value; but the team compensated for that by introducing a tricky

and somewhat innovative system of choices, so that almost each side quest could be played out differently, depending on your morality, luck, and strategic thinking — nothing new to the D&D system as such, but extremely smoothly integrated into the game mechanics.

The side quests have a staggering variety to them, ranging from complex and challenging to quirky and trifling, from super serious to hilarious and absurd — one very important thing that characterizes *Baldur's Gate* is its innate sense of humor and general tongue-in-cheekiness, as the game frequently pokes fun at D&D's own clichés. You can help a little boy get back his loving doggie — but if you so desire, you can kill the doggie instead and have a good cruel laugh at the boy's expense (maybe in exchange for some serious loss of reputation, I didn't exactly try this out). You can help a little girl get back her cat — or you could go along with her grumpy uncle and kill the cat for him instead. You can barter with a dryad about protecting her tree from a bunch of thugs and suffer a penalty if you go over your limits (or, if she pisses you off, just get rid of her and her tree altogether). You can help out a clumsy mage turned into a chicken if you can locate somebody with an Antichickenator spell (and have enough luck to not kill the poor chicken in the process). You can juggle the outcomes depending on what sort of rewards you are most interested in — XP, money, reputation — or simply on the kind of mood you're in: *Baldur's Gate* allows you to be fairly free in your morality choices, so if you want to be an absolute son of bitch, be my guest.

The second and even more important type of activity is the one that concerns your travel companions. More importantly than anything else, *Baldur's Gate* is a true «buddy-oriented» experience. Companion-stuffed parties were nothing new in RPGs, of course, but few, if any, games up to that point really went to the same extent as BioWare did to bring these companions close to your heart. Your party could contain up to six members (out of a potential 25 or so), and each one was provided with a distinct personality — not only through his or her race, class, and alignment characteristics, but also through individual dialog, which came in many varieties: introductory speeches, random lines uttered during the journey, combat and rest replicas, special lines of farewell that might have you want to reconsider your decision to let them go. They could even banter and quarrel in between themselves when you least expected it (though, for some reason, it very rarely happened in my playthrough of the *Enhanced Edition*). And some of them had their own mini-quests, completing or refusing which would respectively either make them happy or incite them to leave your party in anger.

I mean, let's face it — it's probably not just me, but more or less everybody playing the game: what memories of it are we left with upon completion? Meeting this or that minion of Sarevok's somewhere in the Mines of Nashkel or in Cloakwood Forest? Of course not. Most likely, we shall remember the unlikely pairing of the bumbling, stuttering, but morally steadfast warrior Khaleed ("If none are b-b-better...") and his spouse, the wise and slightly eccentric fighter-druid Jaheira ("Ye-e-e-e-s, oh

omnipresent authority figure?"); or the even more outstanding pairing of the berserk ranger Minsc, never parting ways with his miniature giant space hamster Boo ("GO FOR THE EYES, BOO! GO FOR THE EYES!") and his personal muse, the weird witch Dynaheir with her horrendous syntactic violations of archaic pronouns ("Thy wish my ear?"). Then there's Imoen, the cuddly, cat-like, friendly, but sharp-clawed younger sister we'd all love to have; the permanently bored-out-of-his-skull dwarf Kagain, who never wants to be anywhere but can still be relied upon in a good melee fight; the sexy-seductive thief Safana; the nasty halfling thief Montaron with his potty mouth — and many, many others whom I do not remember all that well because, alas, you can never take more than six companions, and you tend to get used to them so much that permanently rotating the party becomes a tedious chore.

Funniest thing of all is that in theory, these guys' chief function is to protect you from enemies during your travels; pretty soon, however — unless you are playing on ridiculously easy difficulty levels — you shall realize that in reality, it shall be *your* chief function to protect *them*, and, in fact, in the initial parts of the game most of your combat shall be spent trying to get your friends out of the fight, or, pending that, spending time and resources dragging their asses around to some temple in order to revive them (that is, provided you have disabled the option which allows them to die *permanently*). God knows how many extra times I had to restore my game just because some stupid fragile-as-glass battlemage friend of mine rushed into battle with his / her staff at the ready, instead of staying away like a good lad / lass and pelting the enemy with spells from far behind the front line. But I persisted, and ended the game loud and proud with not *one* of my companions having kicked the bucket — which, I believe, should have been explicitly stated as being *the* primary objective of the game, rather than defeating some burly guy in a ridiculous horned helmet who nobody gives a shit about.

Maybe it's not that much of a «plot», but then again, neither is our everyday life, I guess, which is usually much more about basic interaction, socialization, and protection than about uncovering plots orchestrated by our hitherto unknown half-brothers. And certainly this assessment of the game's worth is in agreement with Beamdog's *Enhanced Edition* of the game, because when they decided that they should add some new content to attract the old fans, what they did was not deepen and broaden the main questline, but rather introduce a small bunch of completely new potential companions — some of which, like the pompous drow sorcerer Baeloth, the bloodthirsty half-orc blackguard Dorn Il-Khan, and the teenage-minded wild mage Neera, had their own individual quests and managed to be just as fun, if not more so, than the original characters. (Neera ended up as my romantic interest throughout the series, because that corny mix of power, innocence, and valley-girl dialog just could not be resisted). Had any previous Western RPG inspired so much love for its companions? I seriously doubt that — and seriously believe that this fact alone is responsible for most of the game's popularity.

One must, of course, not forget the overall quality of the dialog as such. Although it does suffer quite a bit from the usual clichés of the dungeon-and-dragonitis variety, the writers were clearly very keen on bringing conversation into the modern era. NPCs address you in all sorts of manners — courteous, sarcastic, insulting, colloquial — and you usually have choices of polite / sarcastic / insulting responses as well. There was still a long way to go to the famous BioWare dialog click wheel and its rigid *Mass Effect* system of Paragon / Renegade morality, but you already have the option to go through the entire game as Sir Lancelot or as Hannibal Lecter (or combine elements of both) — although, frankly speaking, I do not think *Baldur's Gate* lends itself all that easily to an «evil» campaign: you are way too explicitly set up as the good guy at the beginning of the game, meaning that indiscriminately behaving like an asshole all the way through will not only be detrimental to you from a purely pragmatic point of view, but it shall simply look weird and incompatible with your background story. Maybe I'd *like* to burn, pillage, and rape my way all through the Sword Coast, but then at the end of the game I would expect to shake hands with Sarevok, not choke him to death with waves of wolves and ogres from my trusty Wand of Monster Summoning.

Anyway, there are usually plenty of choices in between the goody-two-shoes and the evil genocidal maniac attitudes; I generally prefer the snarky one, which lets you establish intellectual superiority over all the dumb peasant NPCs but still go for merciful and generous action, because, after all, even a world chockful of dumb peasants needs peace and stability. Best of all, this alignment helps me always remember that *Baldur's Gate* never takes itself too seriously — unlike quite a few JRPGs one could name, *Baldur's Gate* is not here to teach you juvenile morality lessons, it assumes that you are probably already a grown-up and can handle your own morality well enough to make the right choices. Or the wrong ones — for a laugh. In the end, the world of *Baldur's Gate* is sufficiently complicated, down and dirty, to be taken seriously and tongue-in-cheekishly at the exact same time.

Special mention should probably be made of the expansion pack *Tales Of The Sword Coast*, which was added to the game in 1999 and featured several new locations — with the small village of Ulgoth's Beard as the starting point, from where the party can venture out on several complex quests, most notably to defeat a village of werewolves on the Island of Ice and to brave the many dangers of Durlag's Tower. The main focus of the expansion is on challenge — combat situations both on the Island and in the Tower are much tougher than the ones in the regular game — but I would say that they actually did a slightly better job on the story as well: the werewolf experience has a coherent and even emotional narrative, and the adventure in Durlag's Tower is basically a horror tale, much darker and more suspenseful in tone than anything in the main game. In this way, *Tales Of The Sword Coast* opened up a long and fruitful tradition of BioWare expansions that could be not only more challenging, but also different in tone and complexity from the base pack.

Challenges

Like most RPGs, *Baldur's Gate* is not particularly difficult when it comes to advancing the main story or any of the side quests: as a rule, you get very precise instructions on what to do (which you can always re-read in the ongoing, automatically updated journal if you have forgotten), and most of the things that you do have to do fall into one of two categories: (a) meet someone in some particular place and talk to him / her for information, advice, or a gift; (b) meet someone else in some particular place and exterminate him / her for the sake of information or loot. The most «complicated» aspect of this part is to make the right choice, or, more precisely, the choice that will lead to the most suitable outcome for you. Oftentimes, the choice is easy enough as you take the disreputable option for more money and the honorable option for more XP and extra reputation points (which is recommended unless you are specifically rooting for evil — easy money can always be made by looting enemies, but XP and reputation are treasurable). Sometimes, however, the choices are far from obvious — for instance, there are some fairly complex dialog trees where only a very specific pathway can lead to your opponent settling the affair in a peaceful manner, while most will result in a fight.

The most difficult — in fact, downright infuriating for any beginning player — aspect of the game is its combat system. No, you do *not* have to master every intricacy of the AD&D rules in order to be able to rule the battlefield (at least not unless you play on extreme difficulty levels; «core rules» were always good enough for me); as long as you understand what Armor Class is and that it should be as *low*, not as *high* as possible, and aim for appropriate offensive and defensive power, you are pretty much okay. But the faithful implementation of AD&D rules, with their absolute dependance on luck — the proverbial 20-sided die — means that you will be suffering many, many setbacks even if you are a skilled player, particularly on the early levels of your character... and leveling up takes a *long* time in *Baldur's Gate*. Basically, you have to be very careful about who to fight at the start of the game — and while most of the enemies in your immediate surrounding areas will be relatively weak, some of the assassins and ogres you encounter early on will be quite a challenge.

The mechanics of combat seems to be designed to help you with that, but it is not always intuitively helpful. For instance, you have the option to have your party members rush into combat automatically upon spotting the enemy, or stand around until prompted to do so. For some reason, the *default* mode in the game is the first one — which meant that, when I first played the game, I was spending most of my combat time manually directing my poor mages and archers away from the enemy, and then, at the very first possible moment, Neera or Jaheira would rush back, brandishing their staffs like berserks, and get immediately annihilated by some smarmy random Gnoll or Kobold. It took me awhile to realize that I could actually disable the auto-rush-into-combat mode, which made life easier — even so, you still had to keep a wary eye on your «glass cannon» party members.

The single most innovative strategy that the BioWare guys designed for *Baldur's Gate* was a mode of action in between the «turn-based» combat mode, reflecting tabletop D&D ethics, and the «realtime» mode, in which you could prompt your heroes to take action (cast spells, drink healing and other potions, move forward or retreat, etc.) right in the middle of a fight. The former way was easier and more traditional, but not particularly realistic in the setting of a videogame; the latter gave you far more immersion, but was difficult to handle — if you actually try doing stuff completely in realtime in *Baldur's Gate*, it is likely that half of your party will be slaughtered while you are busy giving orders to the other half. Compromise was found in the simple option of *pausing* the game at will — you could freeze the action at any time, click on all your party members to issue them the necessary instructions, then lift the pause. This gave you relative freedom of action depending on the circumstances. For instance, if your strong and levelled up party encountered a weak group of enemies, you could just set things to auto-combat, sit back, relax, and watch your guys go for a bit of a bloodbath. If the enemies were strong and dangerous, you would smash that pause button and control every piece of action — get your weaker members out of the way, put your «tanks» in front to protect the «glass cannons», leisurely choose the right spells and weapons to use, etc.

Fairly often, though, the enemies were so strong that a straightforward and simple battle would be unwinnable — and *that* was when the strategic fun started. With the game's huge arsenal of spells, abilities, potions, weapons, etc., the number of options with which to solve a situation was practically unlimited. Want to soften up a party of overpowered ogres? Equip your mage with a Wand of Fire, have him / her drink an invisibility potion, carefully approach the enemy, blast a huge fireball in the middle of the group, then skedaddle out of the way as quickly as possible — and if you have another potion, rinse and repeat. There's a ton of infected, disease-spreading ghouls blocking the way? Cast an Entangle spell on them to prevent them from moving, then throw in Cloudkill and stand out of the way, watching them die a slow and painful death. Equip your archers with Arrows of Fire +2 to inflict horrendous damage on the strongest enemy. Oh, the strongest enemy is actually an archer

that shoots Arrows of Fire himself? Get everybody out of the way and send in your most buffed swordsman, but make sure he drinks a Protection from Fire potion beforehand, that should do the trick, etc. etc.

My only gripe with this system is that, since the game is so much about strategic thinking and logic rather than reflexes and agility (which would eventually become the norm for action-based RPGs), there should have been more ways to avoid combat altogether — in quite a few situations, peaceful resolving of conflicts is possible through careful analysis of the dialog tree, but in *way* too many cases, no matter what you do, you will still be obliged to fight, even when you *really* don't want to. There are certain areas when it gets really nasty, e.g. Durlag's Tower in the *Tales* expansion, which has arguably the most overpowered enemies in the entire game and where the designers should have probably cared about putting in more means to trick the bad guys instead of just pummeling them down with everything you got. On the other hand, I guess there is only so much you can do when going against a particular genre's established conventions, and *Baldur's Gate* already does a pretty good job of combining the core rules of AD&D with the inventive and innovative.

Atmosphere

The obvious single question, the answer to which determines if an RPG was ultimately successful or not is — «Would you want to actually live in this kind of world?» Prior to the technological advances of the 21st century which brought about their great visuals, great sounds, and great freedom of movement, answering this question in the positive was... not easy. Possible, but not easy. Way too often, the layouts and mechanics of RPGs were only one step ahead of general strategy games — as if you were making the jump from a history textbook to one of those «animated» historical documentaries, instead of a true work of fiction that makes historical characters come alive. Things looked too calculated, too mechanical; dialog was too sterile and clichéd; characters were too interchangeable, other than their battle stats.

The difference that *Baldur's Gate* makes is in how incredibly *alive* it feels in comparison. Although, unlike later BioWare games, it only offers you a traditional isometric perspective, where you look at the small figurines of your party members as some God from above (or, rather, "omnipresent authority figure", in Jaheira's fourth-wall-breaking words), the feeling of

immersion in a living, breathing world is near-total. This has to do with the graphics (rejection of the traditional «paneling» approach, which gives you a more realistic environment), the sound (amazingly realistic sound effects), the liveliness of your animated surroundings — but most importantly, perhaps, it has to do with the quality of the game's writing.

The world of *Baldur's Gate* feels real because the characters in it, both the ones you play for and the various NPCs, behave like actual human beings. They do not converse with you in pre-generated constructed formulae («greetings traveler, my name is Eoderth Luthwinien, I am a swordsmaster and I have a job offer for you») and they are not completely interchangeable — there are the haughty nobles, speaking to you condescendingly in a higher speech register ("away with you, beggar!"), the lowly commoners, switching to all sorts of jargons, the different races, sexes, ages, housewives busy with their chores, little kids envious of your weapons, greedy con men, merry circus actors, workers, soldiers, peasants, traveling salesmen, each with their own scripted lines and, often, different reactions.

In other words, *Baldur's Gate* cares just as much, if not more, about the world-building aspect as it does about the actual gaming. Herein may lie a big portion of the reason why it was so successful — I seriously doubt that the majority of buyers were even able to complete the game, but I have no doubt that most of them enjoyed simply roaming the Sword Coast, talking, trading, drinking, sleeping, taking on small fetch quests and other missions, testing out different companions, all the while forgetting (like I did) why they were here in the first place. *My stepdad was a Harper down in Candlekeep, he wound up on the wrong end of a magic wand, and I'm on my way to Baldur's Gate this morning, leaving out of Nashkel, Beregost*, that sort of a thing. You don't necessarily have to have the Allman Brothers accompany you on the way, but *Baldur's Gate* most definitely takes you on a very Southern-style odyssey of sorts.

When necessary, the game knows how to be scary and creepy — the sewers and dungeons in the big city, the dark mines infested with spiders and ghosts, the constant Undead presence in Durlag's Tower — but, honestly, the game far more often runs on humour and a certain amount of reverent irreverence; there is so much humour, in fact, that it could be easy to define *Baldur's Gate* as a whole-hearted parody on / spoof of Dungeons & Dragons. But it is not! It is simply an honest attempt to imagine what a true Forgotten Realms kingdom would look like if it actually existed — and its inhabitants were creatures of flesh, blood, and instincts, to whom casting spells and rooting for magic artifacts would be something as natural as dialing cell phones and hunting for Pokemons is for our world.

Of course, there is always ground for improvement, and «living the life» in the cities and villages of the Sword Coast is not nearly as exciting a procedure as it could have been in theory — for one thing, there is absolutely no entertainment: whichever

inn you enter, all you can do is briefly chat up the customers (who will soon begin repeating themselves), loot the bedrooms, take on one or two mini-quests if they are available, buy some supplies from the bartender, chat him up for some generic rumors, or spend the night. No dice games, no cards, no dancing, no fist fighting, no entertainment of any sorts — *The Witcher* it certainly ain't. But this is hardly a crucial distinction: it simply means that you shall probably be spending less of your time lazing around in inns, but it does not mean that the inns shall feel any less lively or realistic than they do in *The Witcher*. All of that entertainment, after all, is also quite generic in a way, and begins to feel routinely predictable after a while (not to mention that there are people who hate playing dice or cards, and particularly hate it when they are all but railroaded into doing so). The important thing is not to create a «dead» environment and then try to make it come alive by adding all sorts of bells and whistles — the important thing is to create the illusion of a hustle-and-bustle and place you right in the middle. This is what *Baldur's Gate* does all the time.

Technical features

Graphics

Although I have only played the *Enhanced Edition* of the game, visual comparison with the original shows that Beamdog did not do much with the old graphics other than upscaling them for higher resolutions. They did, for some reason, completely remake the opening cinematics (a rather cheesy mini-movie of the bad guy murdering one of his adversaries), giving it a more comic-book character — maybe they thought they were doing the world some good, getting the game rid of the only thing that could still remind us that it was designed in the early and ugly days of 3D animation. Some of the veteran fans were not happy about this, and I can sort of understand them. Enhancing a classic is one thing, *messing* with it is quite another.

Anyway, the original game did produce a bit of a revolution in the RPG industry when it came to graphics. Following the standard conventions of isometric RPGs, the surface was still formally divided into tiles, so that each character and each object you come across have their precise screen coordinates. But you did not exactly *see* these tiles! Each of the maps was pre-

rendered individually from a large, well-varied number of components, producing a seamless, realistic visual experience — far more pretty and poetic than anything from, say, the earliest era of *The Elder Scrolls* — and your heroes would walk these large pseudo-3D spaces with surprising ease (though occasionally some would have trouble navigating a set path, but this has more to do with game mechanics than graphics). The backdrops have most definitely held up: even today, it is a pleasure to explore each and every map, gradually filling up the empty space with roads, meadows, forests, streams, mountains, villages, and bustling city streets. The forests are probably my favourite — *Baldur's Gate* captures a splendiferous autumnal mood, with a dazzling palette of greens, browns, and yellows to depict the different types of trees (if only some of these forests weren't so infected with those goddamn spiders!); and some of the gardens, with rows and rows of scintillating flowers coming in all shades of all colors, look like they were directly influenced by French impressionists.

Similarly impressive are the interiors, also constructed out of interchangeable components but always integrated in the most natural and smooth manner possible. Earlier RPGs, in relation to that, used to be on the functional side — as in, as long as you recognize that this thingamajig is a table and that one is a bed, should be enough for you to know where to sit and where to lie. The artists at BioWare knew that only truly hardcore veterans could get their fix of immersion from those kinds of arbitrary conventions; to properly tempt the casual player into the bewildering world of an RPG, you needed to make him feel at home right from the start, and this they did with gusto — the first time you wander out of the wilderness inside a cozy inn, with people sitting on nice wooden chairs around cozy wooden tables, enjoying their meals to the flicker of tiny little candles, fires merrily crackling in their fireplaces and pleasant music floating all around, what you get is not just a feeling of safety, but a sense of homeliness and coziness. Basically, you don't want to leave this place — not just because there are spiders and assassins outside the door, but because the bartender is probably a nice fellow and you'd like to chat him up. I distinctly remember that every time I had to swap out a companion, I would first bring the discarded party member around to the Friendly Arms inn and leave him or her there — because it's safe, cozy, and warm, and I'd be a heartless brute to leave a friend outside in the wilderness.

Speaking of friends, one area which, unfortunately, has forever remained underdeveloped are the character sprites. Although facial portraits of all the party members, the way they show up on your menu, have been rendered quite beautifully, the same cannot be said about their walking, talking models — all of which look very schematic and get even uglier and more pixelated as you zoom in on the heroes (which is probably one of the reasons why most players do not like to use the zoom function — another one is, of course, pragmatic, since zooming in reduces your field of view during combat). This is probably one feature of the game everybody expected Beamdog to improve on in 2012, but nothing was done: the sprites remain just as pixelated in

the *Enhanced Edition* as they used to. On the positive side, given the age of the original game, I would rather have these small figures running around than enlarged 3D models with their polygonal jaws and Pinocchio-style wooden fingers; on the negative, it means that you probably won't feel *nearly* as close to all those guys as you would, for instance, to your *Mass Effect* companions. Oh well, at least the animations were taken good care of — it looks pretty fantastic when a well-placed spell explodes your enemy into 15 bloody lumps of meat, or into 15 little blocks of ice if you take care to freeze him first. (Yes, the game has quite a bit of combat brutality going on, but since it was not a 1st person shooter like *Half-Life* and no moralist critic of videogames could even decipher what R-P-G stands for, nobody noticed).

Sound

If, after loading up *Baldur's Gate* and playing it for about a week or so, you suddenly wake up one day with a bright and clear understanding that the musical soundtrack to this game is (a) perfect and (b) one of the best soundtracks ever made for a videogame — you may be onto something here. The composer for both the first and the second game in the series was Michael Hoenig, a name that will not be familiar to just everyone, but will definitely say a lot to connoisseurs of the German electronic scene of the 1970s, in which he was an active participant, having worked with Tangerine Dream, Klaus Schulze, Ash Ra Tempel and other giants; his own solo career is not too renowned next to these guys, but he did release a solo electronic album in 1978 called *Departure From The Northern Wasteland* — which, you must agree, already makes him the perfect candidate to create music for something like *Baldur's Gate*.

How exactly BioWare managed to find him and get him to score their product is a bit of a mystery, but he must have been somewhere around, having scored plenty of Hollywood movies in the 1980s and 1990s, though mostly second- and third-rate ones. Anyway, he embraced the project with gusto, producing a monumental, heavily orchestrated body of work influenced by just about everything from medieval folk melodies to Wagner. As early as the opening titles, with that percussive onslaught and «funky Valkyrie» mood, you know that the music here is going to be special — and I must say that at least in its use of symphonic brass, I have never heard anything in videogames that would even come close to the inventiveness, epicness, and catchiness of Hoenig's themes.

The pieces themselves are generally short, about 2–3 minutes in length, and always accompany your arrival upon a new scene, be it another piece of open air, an inn, or a temple; then they go away, leaving you to the relative quiet of dialog and sound effects, only to reappear out of thin air after a while. If you stumble upon an enemy, they are smoothly replaced by one out of several battle themes, which itself fades away once the enemy has been defeated (and it is such a psychological joy when the agitated Wagnerian theme of 'The Gibberling Horde' fizzles out, to be replaced by the calming 'Exploring The Plains' once again!) — actually, it is even more complex than that: the battle theme does not fade away, it merely keeps on looping on itself until the enemy is well and truly done with, *then* it concludes with the final, resolving chord. And if that is not enough, well, some themes are cleverly suited to specific types of enemies — for instance, 'Giant Spiders' (ugh!) is actually introduced with a percussive rhythm that imitates the pitter-patter of little hairy legs, while the 'Hobgoblins & Wargs' theme gives a clear vision of two-legged monsters riding to battle on four-legged ones. (Okay, so they don't actually do that in the game, but perhaps nobody told Hoenig that hobgoblins and wargs would be fighting separately).

One thing that is completely lacking in the soundtrack is any answer to the game's sense of humor — most of the music ranges from evoking feelings of the Beautiful and the Serene (peaceful outdoor themes for daylight and nighttime periods) to getting your blood pumped up for Righteous Battle to, well, creeping you out when you find yourself in dungeons, mines, sewers, or any other places where the sun don't shine. But maybe that is actually for the better — working for a terrific contrast between the serious feel of the music and the tongue-in-cheek tone of the dialogue. There's something cheesily satisfying in hearing Neera go all "eat FLAMING — or, possibly, frosty — DEATH!" against her enemies with a monumental win-or-die brass theme roaring in the background. And speaking of monumental themes, I think the only thing that clearly gives the soundtrack away as a collection of synthesized MIDI pieces are the rather cold and generic (though suitably moody) choir vocals — in all other respects, the «live» feel of the music is astonishing for 1998. (Trivia bit: BioWare's long-term composer Sam Hulick added in a few musical pieces of his own for the extra storylines in the *Enhanced Edition* — good luck finding them, sorting them out, and deciding if they are on the same level as Hoenig's pieces or not).

The musical soundtrack is only part of the story, though. There is also the amazing work on the game's SFX — running water, whistling wind, chirping birds, howling wolves, clanking swords and whistling arrows, worried mothers calling for their children in village outskirts, the general hustle and bustle on the busy streets of Baldur's Gate, all of it sounds fresh, natural, and creates an aural panorama that is quite comparable to the great, technically advanced RPGs of the 21st century.

And then, of course, there is the voice cast. *Baldur's Gate* features such an enormous mass of dialogue that voicing all of it was financially and logistically impossible — in fact, it is a good thing that they opted for partial rather than complete voicing,

because the latter option would have inevitably led to cutting out a large part of the dialogue, or maybe even a large part of the different mini-quests (compare the fully voiced *Mass Effect*, which is so technically advanced for its time but actually has a lot less content than *Baldur's Gate*). The most glaring omission, of course, is *you* — the title character, who is pitifully awarded but a small bunch of stock reactions to commands out of a number of male and female voices (I chose a particularly polite voice tone for my Cavalier and eventually almost went mad at the incessant "How may I be of assistance?" and "I shall do you as you wish" replies whenever I clicked on the character — too bad there doesn't seem to be an option to turn it off). But since the game still allows you to choose your own race (you could even be a half-orc if you wish), this would have required different voices for all of them — an issue that BioWare would have troubles with even in the case of *Dragon Age*, a whole decade later. So you just be a good lad and voice your lines *yourself* when you play.

But the overall voice cast for the game was pretty much impeccable — most importantly, perhaps, it introduced BioWare to a variety of expert and talented artists which would go on to have a lasting and fruitful relationship with the studio. Thus, the imposing Jim Cummings, who would go on to impersonate many a deep-voiced Krogan in *Mass Effect*, takes on the role of Minsc, portraying him as a gruff, ragged, psychologically unstable, but ultimately kind-hearted berserker ("BUTT-KICKING FOR GOODNESS!" is an immortal slogan we all could use). Jennifer Hale, the future Commander Shepard in a space skirt, is Minsc's girlfriend Dynaheir, stuck somewhere half-way in between cold-mystical femme fatale and sexy vixen ("watch thee where thy place that pointer!") as if atmospherically recreating her very first performance in a video game (the love-stricken vampire Katrina in *Quest For Glory IV*). My personal favorite, however, is Melissa Disney as Imoen — she is responsible for the cat-like image of the little sister, purry and cuddly in regular conversation, sharp and vicious whenever it comes to action or moral judgement (her grumbly bomb of "mutton-mongerin' riff-raff!" gets my goat every time).

What is actually amazing is how they all manage to add such a lot of personality to each character with but a handful of stock phrases — some of which get repetitive, it is true, but the best-worded and best-voiced ones take a *really* long time before they begin to get truly annoying. (Actually, the single most infuriating voiced phrase in the game, as I am sure everybody who has played it will agree, is the narrator's "You must gather your party before venturing forth"; by the way, isn't it a bit disturbing that the Narrator and Sarevok, your arch-enemy, are voiced by the exact same person?). The new characters in the *Enhanced Edition* would be lucky by having much larger chunks of dialogue all to themselves — particular standouts are Mark Meer (*the* Commander Shepard) as the stupidly arrogant drow sorcerer Baeloth and the charming, but virtually unknown Nicola Elbro as the teenage-minded wild mage Neera — yet in this case, «more» absolutely does not translate to «better», because, somehow, those few lines delivered by the voice actors are perfectly sufficient to capture and convey every important aspect of

the characters' personalities. And pretty much every party member in the game has a distinct personality — making it a real chore to have to choose who you take with you. Why can't we just take everybody? Oh, that's right, that would create a serious combat disadvantage for our enemies…

To sum it up, whatever deficiencies *Baldur's Gate* could have had in the visual department (lack of cutscenes or closeups; ugly sprite models; repetitive, if beautiful, scenery) it more than compensates for with some of the best sound engineering in 20th century videogaming — which, might I add, would remain sort of a fixed thing with BioWare: their graphic engines *would* get better with time, but perfect sound would always take precedence over perfect visuals, and this is a philosophy which I could actually see myself getting behind, at least in certain situations.

Interface

Well, this section should naturally be devoted to answering the basic question of how *comfortable* it is to play *Baldur's Gate*, and this is where I get a bit stumped because, in my opinion, playing a hardcore or even a semi-hardcore RPG is never all that comfortable. Any self-respecting RPG has to have its player juggle a large and convoluted system of classes, abilities, armors, weapons, scrolls, spells, potions — the larger and more convoluted, the better — and I have never been a fan of messy and cluttered inventory screens, where you can spend literally *hours* to ponder the best constitution for your character and his

or her party of choice. And given that *Baldur's Gate* does indeed try to respect the standard AD&D rules as much as possible, this means that I probably still have not figured out all the right ways to navigate the system even after two full playthroughs.

In the game's public defense, the *Enhanced Edition* does have a very extensive tutorial for beginning players (which can get a little confusing because there is actually a *separate* tutorial in the original game — as you begin walking around Candlekeep, you bump into a whole set of «tutors» providing you with the same hints that you now receive separately in the early tutorial in the *Enhanced Edition*). This helps — especially if you need a reminder, for instance, on what separates clerical spells from regular mage spells, etc. — but there will still be occasional rules and restrictions that you shall have to figure out by yourself, e.g. just how many magic spells can your mage memorize per level, that sort of thing. And while you certainly do not need to

figure out every single secret and lifehack in order to beat the game, the more you *do* figure out, the easier your life will be; as I already said, the game is quite brutal in the early stages, before you level up quite a bit (after which it is only the boss fights that will cause any substantial difficulty).

Visually, the interface in both the original and the enhanced edition does not look too bewildering. Most of the screen is given over to the standard isometric perspective, with a couple of status bars to the right and to the left. Character portraits bear a pragmatic load, showing you the state of each of your heroes' health; icons on the left allow you to manipulate the inventory of your spells and abilities, change graphic and other options, and, most importantly, check your Journal for completed and ongoing quests (an absolute necessity for any RPG, since there is typically so much going on at the same time that you either have to keep your own journal — or, more conveniently, have the game keep and update it for you). Combat options are adjustable at the bottom of the screen, right below the dialogue window; this is probably the least intuitive of all the menu bars, especially when it comes to filling your «quick options» bar with useful stuff — I always keep forgetting how to do it, even if it can really save you a lot of time when you are in the middle of combat (e.g. if you love to abuse the shit out of your magic wands, which I am guilty of, you *have* to keep them in the quick slots for your mages — nothing like a well-placed frost bite, fireball, or pack of friendly monsters to bring down your pesky opponent).

You can certainly make the screen look much more cluttered if you permanently turn on all the markers — including, for instance, numeric health indicators for all of your group members and enemies — but I never do that, because, in my opinion, this gives the game a very mechanical flavor and breaks the immersion (and you do have green and red health indicator bars for your friends and enemies turned on automatically during combat anyway). Do remember, however, that one of *the* most important buttons is «Party AI On» / «Party AI Off» — clicking that switch determines whether your silly party members are allowed to take decisions on their own, especially in combat, or have to wait until you make one for them. Always, *always* keep it turned off in combat! or suffer the consequences as your idiot friends rush to battle and get killed before you can say Boo. I don't think they actually explain that in the tutorial, which is why I suffered like an idiot for a long, long time playing the game before I realised I did not actually have to waste 70% of my combat time sending my weak companions off to the opposite end of the screen and hoping they wouldn't get back before my strong companions dealt with the enemy. (Of course they always would, because how can one resist running with all possible speed into the face of certain death?).

Moving around in the game, by the way, has its ups and downs as well. Traveling around the map can be confusing, because while you can see the entire Sword Coast upon opening the map, you can only travel directly to a certain area if (a) you have already reached it previously or, pending that, (b) if it is immediately adjacent to wherever you are right now. There is also a

chance to be waylaid by a random bunch of enemies along the way, which increases depending on the distance and time you have to travel — which can be quite disastrous if your party is low on health and you were just on your way to some tavern for a good night's rest, so do not forget to save regularly (in fact, do not forget to do it either way; in *Baldur's Gate*, sudden and unavoidable death may expect you around every corner). The open world nature of the game also puts you in a typically difficult RPG situation where you can easily wander off into a corner populated by overpowered enemies — ones you should really not tackle without leveling up and serious protection — with nary a hint that *maybe* you should be avoiding this one particular area for now. My advice would be to use a sort of radial approach, slowly expanding your zone of reach from the Friendly Arms Inn in all directions, but specifically in the direction where you are pointed at by the current stage of your Main Quest (i.e. start by exploring the areas around Beregost and Nashkel, then advance to the Cloakwood Forest, etc.; and do not even think of breaching expansion-pack areas like Durlag's Tower before you are close to completing the base game!) In other words, do not take this «open world» thing too literally — most of these «open» parts are really out of your reach before you complete a certain trek of linear development.

Moving around a particular map is a completely different matter — again, do not forget to save as frequently as possible, but the very process of starting the game on a small bright patch and then opening up more and more of the colorful location you are in is quite delightful... that is, until you run into a pack of spiders or wyverns or bandits with poisoned arrows. «Mopping up» any particular place for good is impossible, because random enemies will respawn in troubled territory after awhile, though all the serious (named) ones, of course, will not; this sort of pisses me off as a completionist who likes to keep things neat and tidy, but it also provides you with the opportunity to rack up extra XP without too much trouble (if you already dealt with this enemy, you can probably do it again).

On the whole, I find myself a bit torn when making a judgement on the game's mechanics — for a title that was supposed to introduce more people to the pleasures of a CRPG, it can be seriously hostile to newcomers; certainly BioWare's later RPG franchises are much more easy-going when it comes to welcoming the average Joe into the world of XP farming. But on the other hand, those later franchises, with each new game, lost more and more of the original strategic RPG flavor and moved closer and closer to regular shooter action titles: *Baldur's Gate* proudly refuses to compromise in that matter — all it does is humanize and diversify your experience without sacrificing any of the rules. You may not have to like it — I saw many a frustrated confession from people who tried to love the game but were simply overwhelmed with its bells and whistles — but you cannot help but respect it. I do recommend you give it a try, though; the fruit of victory over *Baldur's Gate* convoluted controls may be deliciously sweet indeed.

Verdict: *The first RPG chessboard with a genuinely human face.*

While I am sure that the world of Dungeons & Dragons *per se* is practically guaranteed immortality — its potential is objectively inexhaustible, and its fans will exist in each new generation — I am not so sure of its specific computerized incarnations. True fans of this world might rather turn their attention to something more sprawling and complex and «gamey», e.g. *Fantasy Grounds*, whereas younger generations, spoiled (in the good sense of the word) on *Mass Effect*, *The Witcher*, or at least *Skyrim*, will find the game too technically obsolete and, more importantly, too focused on rules and strategies rather than atmosphere and story. For all its worth and innovation, *Baldur's Gate* was a transitional game, and transitional objects of art are always on the forefront of danger. But on the other hand, it is also this transitional character which makes it (and its sequel) somewhat unique or, at least, in a class of its own.

One obvious plus of the game is that it is very, very, *very* replayable — at the expense of worse visuals, less voiced dialogue, less *intimacy*, if you will, than more modern RPGs, you can live out dozens of different lives in the world of *Baldur's Gate* without feeling that they are all ultimately the same. Different personalities for yourself, different choices, different party members, widely different combat strategies — *Baldur's Gate* is indeed a mega-chessboard of nearly infinite combinations, and each one, due to clever handling of dialogue and a ton of work invested in the individual scenarios, will have a slightly different feel to it. However, you shall have to love it first — if you *suffer* while slogging through your first playthrough and somehow completing it, the second round will hardly make it feel better. And speaking from the position of somebody who was *that* close to rage-quitting the game after having his ass handed to him by the first (and then the second, and the third, and so on) enemy he encountered in the field, I can certainly testify that *Baldur's Gate* takes a lot of wooing and courting before it finally consents to reciprocating your love.

Is all that hard work ultimately worth it? shouldn't we just leave the game be as a testament to its own epoch? is there an actual reason to gather your party and venture forth, instead of spending your time and money on all the bright new RPGs that continue to be steadily produced each year? Obviously, my answer should be «yes» to this last question, but justifying it in

clear, transparent, irrefutable terms would be extremely difficult, almost as difficult as striking down your first assassin in Candlekeep at Level 1. How about this: *Baldur's Gate* features a certain unique combination of simplistic innocence — an innocence that would soon be lost, with a new age calling for more Depth and Complexity — with a self-mocking tongue-in-cheek attitude that can hardly be found these days. (In this manner, it is very similar to the adventure game masterpiece of the same year, *Grim Fandango*, whose sarcastic innocence I have already described in a separate review). It can make fun of its characters, each and every one, while also nudging you to love them like little children at the same time (and with their tiny sprite models, they *do* look a bit like little children — little children armed with giant miniature space hamsters, that is). It inverts and satirizes fantasy clichés, while at the same time following and respecting them. It almost achieves the impossible by showing you all the ridiculousness of the AD&D rules by simply applying them relentlessly as you go. At the very least, it actually got me playing an AD&D game which, at one time, was probably one of the least likely genres I would have ever picked up (next to mech simulators and the Sims) — and that certainly got to count for something.

And in conclusion — a big thank you to the Beamdog team for brushing the dust off the game in the next millennium and bringing it up to speed. Although they could have probably done more than they did (for instance, bringing on some of the original voice actors to voice more lines wouldn't have hurt), they did ensure that the game now smoothly runs on modern PCs, and all of the new content is integrated so smoothly, you'd hardly even suspect it was not in the original game. Somewhat more questionable is the fully original sequel, or, rather, «missing link» between *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate II*, which Beamdog produced in 2016; called *Siege Of Dragonspear*, it could technically be called yet another expansion pack, but in reality it is pretty much a stand-alone title with its own specific features. Although it went largely unnoticed by anybody except for the game's veteran fans, reaction on the side of the latter caused quite a bit of controversy, which is well worth thinking about — but I shall probably reserve this for its own review, because, good or bad, it definitely deserves one.