

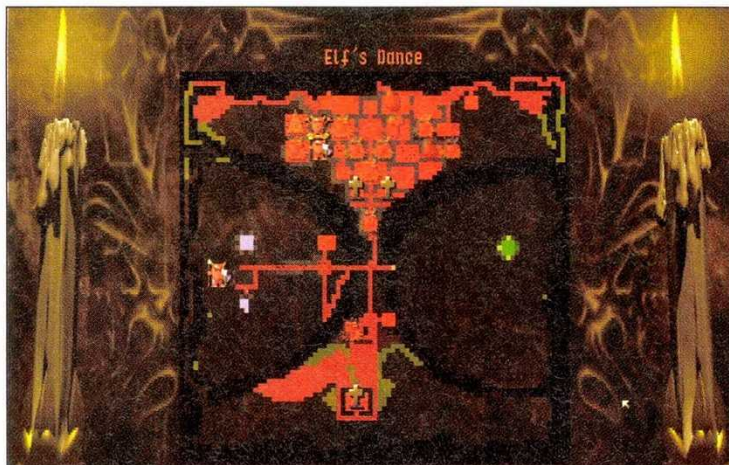
Dungeon Keeper

Subterranean homesick bile demons

British developer Bullfrog is not known for its alacrity in bringing products to market. Like their amphibian namesakes, they tend to spend a lot of time on the (metaphorical) lily pad before producing anything. Of course, what they produce is usually worth the wait. *Populous* is one of the great games of all time; the *Magic Carpets* are innovative and spectacular. Some two years ago Bullfrog announced the development of *Dungeon Keeper*, a game with the intriguing premise that the player would be the evil mastermind of a traditional dungeon, tasked with protecting its wealth and foiling the efforts of goody-two-shoes heroes to loot it. Naturally, everyone assumed it would take quite a while for this game to see the light of day; after all, consider the source. What was not expected, perhaps, was the near-total transformation the game would undergo from its initial design to its final 1997 retail form. What started out as a reverse role-playing game of almost wargame-like complexity has matured into (gasp!) a real-time strategy construction sim.

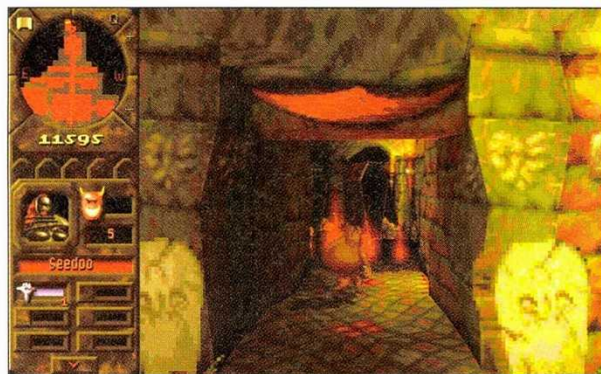
As it debuted this summer, *Dungeon Keeper* is a dungeon construction and operation simulator, much like Maxis' *SimCity* or Bullfrog's own *Theme* games, but with torture chambers, evil temples, and Bile Demons instead of hospitals, highways, and operating theaters. Players (IPX and modem support is built-in) create dungeons, research spells and rooms, populate their realms with creatures, and wage war upon each other. The solo game involves a series of "lands," with varying levels of challenges of the player's ability to manage and expand an underground kingdom. Foes include an assortment of hero types, who occasionally try to slaughter the dungeon's inhabitants and steal their treasure, and other dungeon keepers, who basically attempt to do the same. Multitplay pits several keepers against one another, competing for resources (gold), space, and monsters. Imps do all the work, while players recruit monsters to do

The overview map. Quite a dark metropolis here ▶



The dungeon through a Dark Mistress' eyes. Come back here, little imp! I wanna play doctor! ▶

Aftermath of a battle. Corpses galore—and soon the imps will drag the bodies to the graveyard, where they will rise as vampires! Talk about recycling ▼



the fighting. Play is rather like a cross between real-time strategy games like *Command and Conquer*, and the real-time tactical combat in *Lords of Realm II*. Battles degenerate rapidly into confusing muddles of gas, spells, blood, and screams, all (except the screams) of which are nicely rendered.

A unique feature of *Dungeon Keeper* is the ability of players to possess creatures, and travel the underground world in 3D first person fashion. Each creature moves and sees differently. Flopping about as a Demon Spawn is very different than waddling around as a Dragon, for instance, and the world looks very strange indeed through the eyes of a giant Fly. Certain improvements allow the grouping of multiple creatures, which players can lead in first-person mode, as a sort of flying-squad to intercept intruders and make the world safe for evil. Most of the time, gamers will be in a zoomable, slightly skewed, top-down view mode,



watching over their dungeon empire.

Graphically, the game is attractive, though the 3D mode will not make anyone forget *Quake*, or even *Dark Forces*. The sound effects are superb, and the opening cut scene is perhaps one of the best ever done, with pulse-pounding music and excellent pacing. The game has a wicked sense of humor, most of which is imparted by the voice overs of a fellow who could pass as the Grinch's double; he's that good.

All in all, *Dungeon Keeper* is entertaining, fast-paced, easy to get into, and technically sophisticated. It is also emphatically not what was proposed two years ago, and thus may be the cause of some displeasure among those who have been anticipating this title. What made the initial idea for this game so appealing was the "anti-D&D" approach of letting the player run the dungeon, while other players or the computer attempted to defeat the traps and creatures defending the hidden treasures hidden underground. What was envisioned seemed to be a much more focused, detailed, and strategic sort of role-playing game, with well-defined heroes, intricate dungeon designs, and a true interactive experience that would duplicate RPG experiences but from the opposite perspective. Almost all of that has fallen by the wayside. As it stands, the heroes are always computer controlled, and are essentially hollow and faceless. The only human competition comes from other



◀ **The Dark Mistress gets her reward.**
 "Beat me! Beat me! Make me feel cheap!"

▼ **The Bile Demons come home.**
 Sniff...sniff...what IS that smell?



the lead programmer for *Dungeon Keeper*, admits that the team had pretty much finished the game along the lines of the original specs, but decided it simply was not fun. They junked it, and began anew, thus the long gestation period

keepers, making this an all-Evil contest. *Dungeon* design, game pacing, and the format of the solo game in particular push *Dungeon Keeper* squarely into the ranks of the gather/build/expand genre of real-time games, albeit with an appealing twist. Everything happens too fast, situations are too scripted, for this to be more than a very good but still derivative real-time strategy game.

And that, of course, is the rub. This game has more in common with any number of real-time strategy games than it does with anything remotely resembling role-playing. While some complaints that have surfaced, such as the lack of human-controlled heroes, are piddling (heroes do not have a dungeon to build, so what is there to control?), others are more pertinent. The solo game is short, there is no editor, there is no Internet support, and the 3D engine for creature possession is primitive by today's standards. Knowing that Bullfrog had two and a half years' development to play with, one could be forgiven for thinking that they might have polished this one up a bit more. Farting Bile Demons, masochistic Dark Mistresses, immortal Vampires and irritable Horned Demons make great creatures, but in the end are arguably little different from the hordes of machine gunners, rocket men, and hover tanks that populate every other strategy game these days.

Does that matter? Depends. Simon Carter,

od for today's *Dungeon Keeper*. No doubt the resulting product is a fine game, but one cannot help but feel that Bullfrog was a trifle premature in dumping the original concept, which was truly ground-breaking. Much of the pre-release publicity and interest surrounding this game came from anticipation based on design specs that have not been accurate for a year or so now, leaving one wondering why neither Bullfrog nor Electronic Arts made any effort to let people know the game had changed. Gamers anticipating pitting their wits against an evil dungeon keeper now have to be satisfied with doing so as just another member of that foul fraternity, rather than as paladins of light and justice. Whether keeper vs. keeper combat proves to be the draw Bullfrog expects remains to be seen; certainly, it lacks the immediacy and traditional significance of an epic battle of good

The view from your dark tower...worlds to conquer ▶

and evil. Add to that the lack of Internet support, and the rather weak AI of the computer-controlled keepers, and *Dungeon Keeper* falls a bit short of being truly excellent.

Probably the best thing to do is to judge *Dungeon Keeper* for what it is, not what it could have been. In that regard, the game is still a winner. No single element in it is earth-shaking, but all elements work together in synergy. Sound, humor, atmosphere, look and feel, and pacing are all well done. The 3D mode is nifty, the user interface is slick, and the game seems to be technically solid. Whether it will appeal to the RPG crowd, which are likely to be the most disappointed of all gamers when they realize this is not the game they thought they were getting, remains to be seen. Early indications are that even this hard-core group will be won over by *Dungeon Keeper's* blend of whimsy, strategy, and action. For how long is unknown; the 25 solo and 15 multiplayer levels go by surprisingly quickly. The manual could be better, too. It fails to note that players can access multiplayer dungeons in solo mode, by typing "keeper95 -1player" at the DOS prompt from within Windows 95, for instance, and leaves other areas of gameplay obscure. By and large, however, this is a quality release, and worthy of consideration by anyone with an interest in strategy, construction, or fantasy games. After all, it is not everyday that one gets the opportunity to slap monsters around, pull the heads off of chickens and raise the dead. Unless, of course, that day is spent playing *Dungeon Keeper*. —Robert Mayer



Dungeon Keeper

Bullfrog • www.bullfrog.co.uk • Requirements: DOS, Windows 95, 60MHz Pentium or higher for solo gaming, 133MHz Pentium recommended for multiplayer, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, IPX, modem

