

# Damned If You Do



*DUNGEON KEEPER: It Brings Bad Things to Life*

by Chris Lombardi

The laws of Karma could have predicted this. Since the beginning of gaming, we've played almost exclusively on the side of Good. We've saved untold thousands of lands from the ravages of Evil and sent legions of hellspawn scurrying back to the pit from which they sprang. It was only a matter of time before Black came back with a score to settle.

But who would have guessed that 20 years of goody-two-shoes gaming could be countered by a single game? *DUNGEON KEEPER*, a real-time strategy game from Peter Molyneax and his minions at Bullfrog Software, is evil enough to do exactly that. It's evil not only in its high-level premise—the gamer dons the acrid cape of the *Dungeon Keeper*, a vile lord of an

underground domain who is intent on destroying all that is cute and happy in the world—but also in the details of day-to-day devilry and the dull, workaday elements of rat-bastardry. Torture, ritual sacrifice, environmental disaster, cruelty to animals, wanton slaughter, petty meanness, avarice, and hate are all proudly on parade. Consider our karmic debt paid in full...with interest.

As *Dungeon Keeper*, your job is to hew a gloriously hideous dungeon from subterranean rock, attract evil creatures to your palace of pain, and use those creatures to either fight off hordes of looting adventurers or destroy a rival *dungeon keeper*. En route to victory, you must play the control freak of all control freaks, ensuring that your creatures are fed, trained, and paid; *dungeon traps* are being built and set; spells are being researched; and your own creatures aren't brawling in the barracks. It's like

being nanny to a gang of half-ton toddlers with fangs and claws.

## IT'S CALLED A PICK-AX, DIG?

The foundation of the game is *dungeon design*, which plays out like *SIMCITY* in Hell. From an overhead isometric perspective that can be freely rotated, zoomed, and panned, you map out a floor plan in the virgin rock. Hordes of Imps, the workhorses of your minions, dig out the rock. They also mine gold, fortify walls, and mop up corpses after battles. Should you wish your Imps to work harder, or should you just feel like a nasty SOB, you can reach down with your bile-colored claw/cursor and give an Imp a good smacking—just one of a dozen twisted, brilliant, and therapeutic design elements.

When the Imps have finished their digging work, it's time to carefully place *dungeon rooms* for maximum efficiency. There are 14 different room types, which range from the straightforward, functional Lairs, Hatcheries, and Training Rooms to exotic locales such as the Torture Chamber (wherein you wrench info from captured enemies and convert them to your cause) and the Temple (wherein you can sacrifice creatures in hopes of pleasing the gods). Exactly how these rooms work is, like much else in the game, a mystery. The game's manual is loath to give out the most basic of info, presumably leaving the details to experimental players and Bullfrog's self-published strategy guide.

Unlike the manual, the game itself brims with nuance and

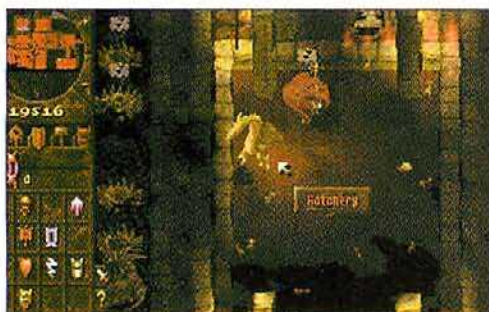


**MONSTER MASH** Inside that cloud of poison farts and ozone rages a huge battle. The mini-combat status screen at the bottom allows the Keeper to monitor his troops.

**Price:** \$49  
**Minimum System Requirements:**  
 Pentium 90 (P133 recommended), 16MB RAM, 65MB hard-disk space, 4x CD-ROM drive, DOS 6.22 or later, LocalBus or PCI SVGA-graphics video card, Sound Blaster-compatible sound card, mouse.  
**Multiplayer Support:**  
 Modem (2 players), LAN (2-4 players).  
**Designer:** Peter Molyneax & Bullfrog Productions  
**Publisher:**  
 Electronic Arts  
 San Mateo, CA  
 (800) 245-4525  
[www.bullfrog.ca.com](http://www.bullfrog.ca.com)  
**Reader Service #:** 343



**PRIZED POSSESSIONS** The Keeper greedily surveys his Treasure Room through the eyes of Fig, an eighth-level dragon.



**CHOW TIME** Creatures chow on chickens in the Hatchery before heading off to bed. The window in the upper-left corner shows the entire dungeon layout.

divinely superfluous detail. For instance, every creature that you attract to your dungeon has its own name and 10 individual statistics, from its kill total to its blood type. None of this info matters in the slightest, but it's cool. And it's clear that *cool* was the byword of the Bullfrog team.

#### REALTIME? TRY NO-TIME

The general pace of the gameplay is totally manic. *DUNGEON KEEPER* is similar to other real-time games, but with double or triple the workload. It's like a *RED ALERT* where you not only have to build a Tower of Nod, but also have to ensure that the little men in the tower are working efficiently. It's like a *WARCRAFT* where you can direct units to a location, but if one unit gets pissy because it's hungry, it starts attacking your troops. It's like a *RED ALERT* where your Harvesters...well, your Imps are *exactly* like Harvesters: stupid, and requiring constant redirection.

In many of the 20 single-player scenarios, your opponents are roving bands of adventurers who tunnel toward your dungeon. The key here is to choose

when and where you will fight, which is a matter of fortifying your dungeon walls so that the adventurers can't tunnel through. At the same time that you're fortifying, you need to expand your dungeon, which opens up weak points to the adventurers' picks. This dynamic creates a deliciously tense siege mentality.

Attacking a rival Keeper is a different, and somewhat odd, story. Here, it's a war of efficiency and attrition, a matter of sheer numerical supremacy. You must attract and train your creatures faster than your opponent can. When it finally comes down to combat, there's little you can do to help your cause tactically, with

the exception of casting spells, due to one strange element of the design: You can pick up your creatures and plop them down anywhere on the map that your Imps have "claimed." So, anytime you have contact with the enemy you can instantly drop the entire strength of your army on that spot, at which point a hugely chaotic melee ensues, which often involves 20 or more creatures. The best a Keeper can do is watch an iconic combat dialog, casting a variety of defensive and offensive spells, and pull the wounded out of battle.

Because of this "creature plopping" there's no concept of a surprise attack, flanking, or any other traditional tactical concern in *DUNGEON KEEPER*. Battles are won in the training and recruiting of creatures during the preparation period. In most cases, defeating a rival

Keeper (by destroying his "dungeon heart") is a matter of breaching his walls, plopping creatures in, and winning a massive battle, which gives your Imps time to claim more territory. And then you repeat the process. This, particularly in multiplayer games, can take a long, long time.

As does the game as a whole. Twenty scenarios doesn't sound like much, but it's plenty. The scenarios are nicely paced, starting out with a few excellent

## The Eye of the Beholder

*DUNGEON KEEPER* offers you something you always wished you had in *SIMCITY*: the power to come down from your isometric perch and strut around in the world you've created. With the help of the Possess spell, you can drop into the mind of a creature and see your dungeon in all its 3D glory. The 3D engine is no *QUAKE* (or even *DOOM*) but the view down there is fascinating because it's yours and it's alive.

In theory, the 3D view is even functional. While possessing a creature, you have access to the creature's unique perspective and most of its abilities and spells. You can use your creatures to explore, fight, and work, but with the exception of a few special situations, it's almost always more practical to stay in the iso-view and orchestrate the show. But, hey, sometimes even a *Dungeon Keeper* has to stop and smell the rotting viscera.



**CLASH OF THE TITANS** A troll watches as a tenth-level dragon and Horned Reaper get it on. A fly in the foreground thinks twice about jumping in.

tutorials that gradually introduce you to the remarkably easy interface and all the fun toys in the Keeper's toy box. The sense of discovery in the first half-dozen scenarios is truly thrilling.

### TOUGH AS HELL

Once you get beyond the tutorials, things get a lot tougher, both because the scenarios are larger in scope and because many of them are designed as puzzles. In some scenarios, for instance, the rival Keeper's dungeon is difficult to reach and requires some tricks to destroy. In many others, powerful creatures are hidden in caves that a Keeper might stumble upon. If he does so too soon, he's finished, and the scenario must be started over with a lesson learned. Puzzle scenarios seem to be a common design technique, particularly in real-time strategy games, both as a way of adding variety to what is fundamentally a grinding war of attrition, and to cover up weaknesses in the computer's intelligence.

These days, multiplayer gaming is the common answer to the AI problem, and it's here that we encounter DUNGEON KEEPER's greatest potential success and failing. Multi-human play with a game as deep and complex as

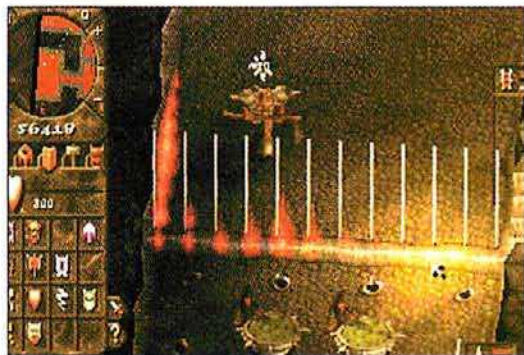


▶ **RUDE AWAKENING** If adventurers tunnel right into a Lair to take your napping creatures by surprise, you need not worry; you can always plop all your free bad-boys into the melee.

DUNGEON KEEPER promises to be extraordinarily rich and subtle. Indeed, after just a few LAN games with some gaming buds, we saw some very clever tactics emerge, which required the development of countertactics and counter-counter-tactics—a sure sign of a great multiplayer game.

Unfortunately, the game only supports LAN and modem play, which was the standard—considered progressive, even—three years ago, when Bullfrog began development. But the world has since gone the way of TCP/IP, which isn't supported. Bullfrog has made some noise about a TCP/IP upgrade, but as of press time, there's no sign of it. What's more, the multiplayer play can be very slow, unstable, and has a nasty 5–10 minute resync period. Bullfrog thus faces a double challenge in getting this game on the Net.

But even if they don't, DUNGEON KEEPER will still stand out as a damned fine creation. Its utter uniqueness and sense of style alone are worth the price, especially in these days of recycled inspiration. It's a true gamer's game; tremendously deep, demanding, and open to



▶ **BEHIND BARS** The Keeper's minions are more complex than the hordes of WARCRAFT, and some, such as the Horned Reaper, often require "special care."

exploration. Let's just hope that Bullfrog can get this game on the Net, for if they can't, half of this game's potential will lie locked away forever in a dungeon few can reach. And that would be the worst of all the evils this game brings to life. ☹

### AI0U1

Creating a good AI is notoriously hard in complex, real-time strategy games, and the designers of DUNGEON KEEPER didn't escape that pitfall. As in Bullfrog's MAGIC CARPET, the AI here is supposed to be extremely advanced, learning the player's tendencies and adapting its strategy to him, which is an extremely tough thing to verify. It clearly does some things well—rote, efficiency-oriented things at which computers excel. But it's weak where AIs are always weak—on the attack and in planning broader strategic goals. This is not to say that DUNGEON KEEPER's AI is especially bad, it's just typically bad.

▶ **APPEAL:** Sociopaths and/or servants of the Dark Lord. Also, strategy fans, particularly fans of realtime, looking for a totally fresh take on the concept.

▶ **PROS:** The most unique game in years; stylish, multifaceted, and as deep as the pits of Hell.

▶ **CONS:** Puzzle-oriented scenario design a turn-off for pure strategists; multiplayer play is currently limited and buggy.

