

Dungeon Keeper



A bile demon's vile bowel attack (above). Sparks fly as players launch a volley of spells at one another (right)



The copyright notice on **Edge's** press copy of *Dungeon Keeper* contains a humorous question mark after the '1997' date stamp, fitting given that the game has suffered the mother of all slippages. What was to be a neat little extension of the god sim genre almost three years ago has become not only a labour of love for Bullfrog leader Peter Molyneux, but also his swansong, as he prepares to strike out under a new development banner. As parting shots go, few get better than this.

The original concept has been retained, with the player finally getting to sit on the other side of the fence in a fantasy battle between good and evil. The threat in *Dungeon Keeper* comes in the form of hapless do-gooders intent on sacking the player's

carefully crafted dungeon, slaying its monsters and shamelessly making off with the gold. In order to thwart such pesky kids, keepers must fashion the sort of dungeon that will attract exactly the wrong element, luring all manner of monsters into employment, to help expand and fortify the underground lair and build up a powerful army to defeat the myriad invaders. It's not just heroes that pose a threat; other keepers, be they computer-controlled or other humans in multi-player mode, are also in it for the money.

Dungeon Keeper is a strange brew, one that can almost be regarded as a blend of the standard god sim with the realtime wargame elements of *Command & Conquer*. Even the way rooms are constructed for various purposes – the storing of treasure, monster lairs, libraries, torture chambers, even temples – echoes the freeform approach to architecture used in Bullfrog's *Theme Hospital* or even Maxis' *Sim City*. But really, this is a singular creation that almost defies pigeon-holing, such is the breadth of vision governing the whole thing. Molyneux believes it to be his best, most ambitious creation yet, and he's probably right.

Which makes explaining the playing process somewhat tricky. Essentially it's based around the age-old expansion-versus-resources balancing act, as the player sends out ever-willing imps to dig out passageways and rooms. Nearby seams of gold must be mined to pay for such work, which then requires a treasure room in which to store it until pay day. The dungeon-in-the-making then requires monsters to nurture and lairs to be built in which to house them. A food-providing hatchery must then follow, and it's not long before keepers are directing the construction of training rooms to build up monster experience levels, research rooms to come up with useful inventions like doors and traps, and prisons in which to place disobedient monsters, or heroes with the potential for corruption – all of which further saps those precious gold reserves. Even torture chambers can be



The graveyard spawns vampires when enough enemy bodies have been buried. Clearing unsightly dead bodies from the path of your pack of monsters also boosts their morale



The aftermath of a battle, as seen through the eyes of a monster (top). Fodder in the hatchery (above)



Correct, studied positioning is critical to the efficiency of special rooms

There are 20 different levels to play through, featuring a broad variety of architectural styles. Hidden levels, end-game levels and five comprehensive tutorial sections are also included in the *Dungeon Keeper* package

constructed, while later levels introduce graveyards in which to house undead and temples where sacrifices can trigger hidden effects. Such surprise features are integral to the *Dungeon Keeper* experience.

As if the process of dungeon building wasn't complex enough, there's also the small matter of the keeper's minions, who all wander through the dungeon under their own steam, eating, sleeping, training, and taking on appropriate tasks in places such as the workshop or research room. Each creature type exhibits different characteristics too, showing animosities toward other races and even differing attitudes toward the keeper. Recalcitrant subordinates can be given a smack with a simple mouse-click. But while such discipline works well on imps, who would otherwise go mining for gold rather than reinforcing walls or laying floors, the likes of sorcerers and bile demons demand respect. Picking up gold from the treasure room and lavishing it on such powerful monsters is often a far better way to get results.

Such ambitious scale could so easily have buried *Dungeon Keeper* but for a control system that's been refined to an unbeatable level. Icons are – for once – self-explanatory (though keyboard shortcuts are also available) and control is context-sensitive. On-screen query modes, label explanations, level-specific instructions and a substantial quota of tutorial levels all ensure that this most ambitious of point-and-click games can be played without referring to the weighty manual. Even the AI routines are accomplished enough to make the actions of the monsters seem perfectly natural – a genuine accomplishment given the number of creatures running around, and the vast amount of possible actions at any one time.

While the game goes for broke with the fantasy role-playing theme, there's a playfulness here that ensures talk of spells, spooky monsters and experience levels is never taken that seriously. Rather it appropriates RPG clichés because they offer the best

opportunities for on-screen pyrotechnics and wish fulfilment. After all, who wouldn't relish the idea of controlling a horde of undead, or viewing the world through the eyes of a giant spider or powerful demon? And with the opportunity to take direct *Doom*-style first-person control of creatures using a possession spell, it's perfectly possible to do just that.

It's arguable that the combination of a polygonal 3D gameworld and sprite-based creatures betrays the game idea's age. However, it's hard to believe that even the most powerful PC could show the ant-like activities of the dungeon any other way. And thanks to some excellent lighting, shadowing and translucency routines, as well as appropriate lensing effects when using the possession viewpoint (dragons have a view clouded by smoke, while giant flies have a suitably multi-faceted view of the world), such criticisms become irrelevant; *Dungeon Keeper* is easily the most atmosphere-drenched and minutely detailed god sim to date. And once the ultra-challenging higher levels and manic multiplayer tangles work their magic, it becomes apparent that it's also the best.

A genuine milestone, *Dungeon Keeper* ups the stakes for the point-and-click genre in terms of presentation, imagination and ambition. Some may find its depth off-putting, but it mixes styles more effectively than any other game in its field and offers a tight, immaculately paced experience. The challenge lies not in fighting needless complexity, but in learning how everything acts, reacts and interacts. Molyneux has created a masterpiece that again epitomises everything that's good about computer rather than console gaming.

How he will top this is anybody's guess. **Edge** just hopes gamers don't have to wait another three years to find out.

Edge rating: **Nine out of ten**

EDGE	Format: PC	Publisher: Electronic Arts	
	Developer: Bullfrog	Price: £40	Release: June