

RUN

Magic Carpet CD

Bullfrog's latest 3D opus – it's full of Eastern promise etc.

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| Publisher | Bullfrog |
| Developer | In-house |
| Price | £44.99 |
| Minimum System | 386, VGA |
| Recommended | 486DX2 |
| Sound Support | All major cards |
| Release Date | Out now |

IT'S ODD. THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO it. Brilliant, original, technically astounding yes, but odd – doubly so. Perhaps it just caught me off guard. It's always a little unsettling when encountering a game that isn't easily and immediately definable, and *Magic Carpet* steadfastly refuses to be squeezed into any kind of pigeonhole. So, for want of a better term, we'll call it a strategic shoot-'em-up. Don't be fooled by what you may have heard, or by the daunting impression the spectacular 3D

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graphics may give – *Magic Carpet* is Bullfrog's most straightforward, arcade-oriented PC game to date.

Throughout the course of *Magic Carpet's* development, the game evolved through many forms and styles – the inevitable upshot of Bullfrog having developed the landscaping routine first, then searching for a game design that made best use of it. It has been a God game, it has been an arcade blaster and now it has emerged as a combination of the two, a freakish hybrid of *Populous* and *Defender*. Confused? You will be.

Magic Carpet's aesthetic inspiration is clearly Arabian in origin – from our turban-

clad hero to the lilting Oriental pipe music, the look and feel is straight out of the Sinbad adventures. According to the atmospheric (and, surprise surprise, rendered) intro sequence, however, the action all takes place not in the Middle East of old, but in a mythical Universe on a planet blessed with copious amounts of natural magic, or mana. When supplies began to run low, the story goes, fierce competition between wizards degenerated into war, infesting the land with monsters and generally making life deeply unpleasant for the rest of the population. And so it fell to a young sorcerer's apprentice, armed only with a spell for a flying carpet, to take to the air and set about restoring order.

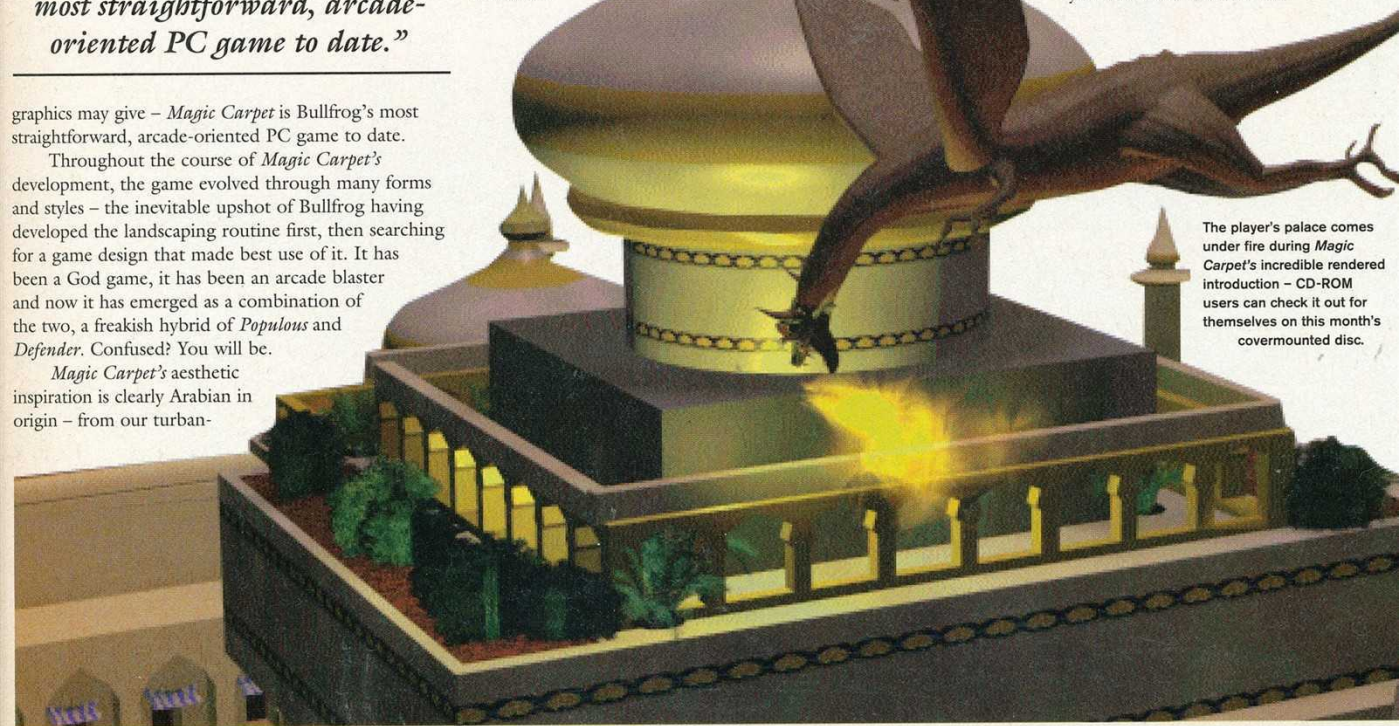
Magic Carpet's troubled world is divided into 50 island realms to be tackled by the player in turn. The object for each is simply to acquire enough mana to restore



(Above) As a powerful sorcerer, your study is where game options are selected. From here you can start a new game, continue an old one, load/save or connect to other PCs for network play.

the land to equilibrium and progress to the next. Mana is the game's single most important aspect – everything revolves around it, and nothing functions without it. Essentially, mana is spell energy, the fuel that powers the magic with which you can attack enemies and

The player's palace comes under fire during *Magic Carpet's* incredible rendered introduction – CD-ROM users can check it out for themselves on this month's covermounted disc.



gagged

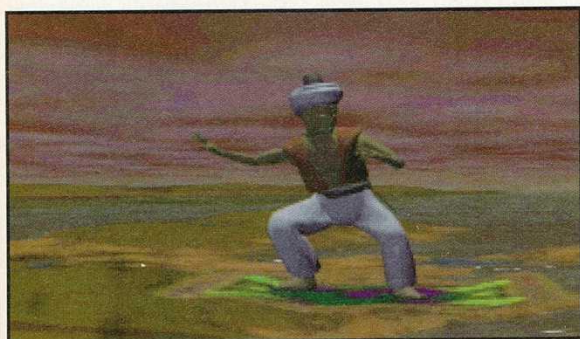
manipulate the gameworld. Much of the time is spent acquiring mana (more on that in a bit), and expending it via magic spells. *Populous* veterans will be familiar with the idea – the more powerful the spell or effect, the more mana it consumes each time you cast it, so efficient and effective use of power is central to a successful strategy.

So how do you go about getting this mana stuff, then? Well, this is where the shooty shooty stuff comes in. Every hostile creature in the land has its own energy, which is spread across the landscape in a shower of golden orbs when destroyed. Two of the first spells you acquire, a basic Fireball and a Possess spell, are all you need to set the process in motion. Kill a monster with a barrage of Fireballs, then claim the energy with the Possess spell (the orbs change colour to indicate you've got them) to make it your own. The more monsters you kill, the more mana you can collect and the more spell-casting power you have.

The real pivotal factor, however, is the creation



(Above) *Magic Carpet* looking at its most impressive (bar the hi-res mode, for which you need a Pentium), with sky contours and water reflections switched on. Here, an enemy castle is about to be destroyed by a meteorite. Cool.



(Above) More rugular escapades on display during *Magic Carpet's* intro – one of the longest ever seen in a CD game. Incidentally, this is our first ever CD Game Of The Month.

of a castle. Along with Fireball and Possess, Castle is one of the very first spells you'll find – use it immediately. Once cast, it builds a walled fortress that acts as both a protective home base and a storage facility for the mana you possess – hot air balloons travel back and forth, collecting your mana from around the landscape and dropping it off at the castle. The trick is to collect enough mana in your castle to restore the energy balance and progress on to the next world, which means first building a castle large enough to hold it all (cast lots of Castle spells – it gets bigger each time), then collecting the stuff with which to fill it.

Of course all this would be easy if there wasn't any opposition. The problem is the computer-controlled wizards (up to seven simultaneously) that are out to do the same as you – claim all the land's mana. They're out there, building castles, fighting monsters, possessing mana and generally getting in the way. Depending on the level, their posture varies – they may be happy to let you go about your business so long as you

extend them the same courtesy, but others are downright vicious, casting spells to attack you and your resources. There's only so much mana on each world and everyone wants it for themselves, so things can cut up rough, with rival wizards possessing

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(Above) A caterpillar monster takes some fireball stick from the player.

and re-possessing each other's mana, shooting down their balloons and laying siege to their castles in an attempt to steal what they can.

Wizards occasionally meet in direct dog-fights, although most are far too sneaky for such head-on confrontations. They're much more likely to attack their rivals by casting spells which they've collected from around the various landscapes – earthquakes and volcanoes (sound familiar?) can tear the land up from

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under your castle, for instance. Meteor and lightning attacks cause severe damage, while substantial aggravation can be created by the summoning of an army of marching skeleton warriors. There's very little room for scruples or moralising in here – just about anything goes.

Though described as a strategic shoot-'em-up, it's the cerebral aspect of *Magic Carpet* that's dominant – since the aiming of weapon spells is more or less automatic, the real skill is in the collection and handling of mana. It seems clear that, while attempting to branch out into more action-based territory, the team that created the likes of *Populous* and *Syndicate* is reluctant to jettison its strategic roots, and the result is this bizarre but curiously compelling cross-breed. The two game styles which have been brought together should, according to common sense, conflict, but instead they complement one another perfectly. Initial games, however, can be confusing and frustrating – you need a proper understanding of how things work and what you

should be doing before anything makes sense and the gameplay begins to click.

Special mention, of course, needs to be made of Bullfrog's astounding fractal landscape technology, perhaps the single most impressive technical achievement this year. As much as the broad strokes of the sweeping, undulating landscape itself, it's the small touches that impress – trees that burn when you hit them with fire spells, reflections in the lapping water, the everyday bustle of the people in the villages... this is a living, breathing world. It's easy to forget about the task at hand and simply go exploring, losing yourself in deep valleys, discovering majestic mountain ranges and taking a trip along the coastline.

There are plenty of impressively self-indulgent trimmings, too – a hi-res mode (looks lovely, but only Pentium users need apply), a 3D mode which works in conjunction with red-green glasses, speed blur effects and even an auto-stereogram (magic eye) mode for the privileged few who can actually see those quasi-3D images. There's also support for all the current Virtual Reality headsets and, most



(Above) Zooming in low to take a good look at the world's population – here, a small village is ripe for being possessed (simply cast a spell on the buildings) in order to earn still more mana.

(Main picture) The result of one of the game's most powerful spells speaks for itself – an earthquake has created a devastating chasm through the entire landscape.



(Above) Cast a Volcano spell, and this is what you can expect – it's costly, but nothing can survive those globules of molten lava.

importantly of all, a network multi-player mode supporting up to eight participants. Twenty extra levels have been designed for the multi-player mode, in which the gameplay is much the same, but warring with the rival wizards is naturally that much more satisfying and intense. Spells are more

“There’s very little room for scruples or moralising – just about anything goes.”

abundant in multiplayer, making for bloodier battles and more treacherous tactics.

This then, is *Magic Carpet* – a member of that rarest of breeds, the genuinely original game. Indeed, some players may find the mix of styles a little unnerving and uncomfortable, but that’s more likely their small-mindedness than any failing on the game’s part. Once again Bullfrog deserves much praise for coming up with an absorbing and eminently addictive game, and challenging people’s expectations into the bargain. Stunning to look at, compelling to get into and difficult to pull yourself away from once you’re there, *Magic Carpet* is a classic of sorts. It may be just a little too esoteric to achieve mass acclaim, but there will be more than enough people who appreciate its quirky brilliance to ensure the recognition it deserves. My advice is: buy it, play it, treasure it. We may not see its like again.

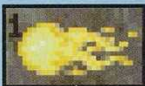
GARY WHITTA



(Left) This is what it's all about – those coloured balls floating around the landscape are pure mana – possess them to change them to your colour and claim the power for yourself. Lovely.

YOU PUT A SPELL ON ME

One of the most impressive things about *Magic Carpet* is the amazing and inventive variety of spells you can cast – 24 in all, ranging from the mediocre to the downright devastating. So join us on a magical mystery tour through the complete spell list...



FIREBALL Orbs of flame which cause minimal damage but are cost-effective and abundant.



POSSESS The most important spell of all – allows you to collect mana and claim it for yourself.



SPEED-UP Gives you an extra turn of speed, useful for escaping from enemies.



SHIELD Three-quarters of all damage inflicted on you is absorbed by a magical forcefield.



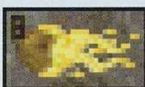
RAPID FIREBALL Hold down the fire button for a continuous stream of Fireballs.



STEAL MANA Temporarily depletes another player's mana by switching it to your supply.



FIREWALL Creates a column of flame that torches absolutely anything it touches.



METEOR Hurl this burning rock at your target to cause destruction over a wide area. Looks great too.



LIGHTNING STORM Cast this over a given target, and bolts of electrical energy fire down.



INVISIBILITY Does just what its name suggests, but lasts only until you cast another spell.



SKELETON ARMY Summons up a brigade of skeleton warriors to attack enemy castles.



EARTHQUAKE Creates a vast rift through the landscape, continuing until it reaches the open sea.



GLOBAL DEATH If you have enough mana, this wipes out all enemies within its effective radius.



CASTLE Use this to build your home base – the more times you cast it the bigger it gets.



HEAL Restores your health, basically – the more mana you have, the more effective it is.



REVERSE This spell is exactly the same as Speed-up but in reverse. Natch.



BEYOND SIGHT Cast this spell to reveal the locations of all other players on the map.



MANA MAGNET Cast it on one mana ball, and it attracts all those around it, making one huge orb.



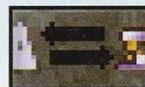
LIGHTNING A bolt of electricity that homes in on its target instantly, causing mucho damage.



DUEL TO THE DEATH Magically connects two wizards, who have to slug it out until someone dies.



REBOUND Any weapon fired against you is reflected back against the person who fired it.



TELEPORT Cast this to transport to your castle, then cast it again to get back to where you were.



CRATER Kills land targets instantly, while the shockwave knocks out airborne adversaries.



VOLCANO Produces a fiery erection spewing great gobs of molten lava everywhere.

PCG Rating

92%

The Verdict

Highs

Incredible 3D graphics, and compelling gameplay.

Lows

Needs a ninja PC, and it's unlikely to be to everyone's taste.

Brilliant and original in the way only Bullfrog knows how.