

COVER STORY

Turban-charged

After years of concentrating on the strategy genre, Bullfrog has decided to break the mould with *Magic Carpet*. Cal Jones speaks to Peter Molyneux to find out why.

Magic Carpet is something of a departure for Bullfrog. All the company's previous games — with the possible exception of *Flood*, a platformer which never made it on to the PC — have been strategy based. *Populous* defined the God-game genre. *Powermonger* was a Populous-style war game. *Syndicate* mixed strategy with extreme violence and *Theme Park* was an out and out sim. *Magic Carpet*, however, is completely different: not only is it a first-person perspective game — something Bullfrog has never attempted before — but it's also primarily an action game. Is Bullfrog afraid of becoming typecast?

"Because we were known for our strategy games, we wanted to do something different," says Bullfrog director, Peter Molyneux. "We wanted to do an action game, although *Magic Carpet* does involve some strategy too."

A bit like *Syndicate*, perhaps? "Not really. *Syndicate* is mainly strategy with a bit of action, whereas *Magic Carpet* is mainly action with a bit of strategy. We were hoping to create a game anyone could pick up and play, and we're also gearing up to the next gener-

ation of consoles, which will probably be much more biased towards action games."

Magic Carpet has undergone several changes since it began development over a year ago. The original scenario was quite different: the player would take part of a beggar who, on hearing that the princess wanted to marry a commoner, decides to present himself to her father, the sultan. To prove his worth, he has to complete a series of tests using the sultan's treasures, notably a magic carpet and a magic lamp.

"But we had to change it when *Aladdin* came out, because we felt that the stories were too similar," says Molyneux. So the magic lamp went, but the carpet remained.

And talking of carpets, the one problem (albeit a very minor one) with *Magic Carpet* is that you never really get the feeling that you're standing on your flying rug — you don't see any tassels flapping in the breeze and the game lacks an 'external' view, a standard feature of all conventional flight sims.

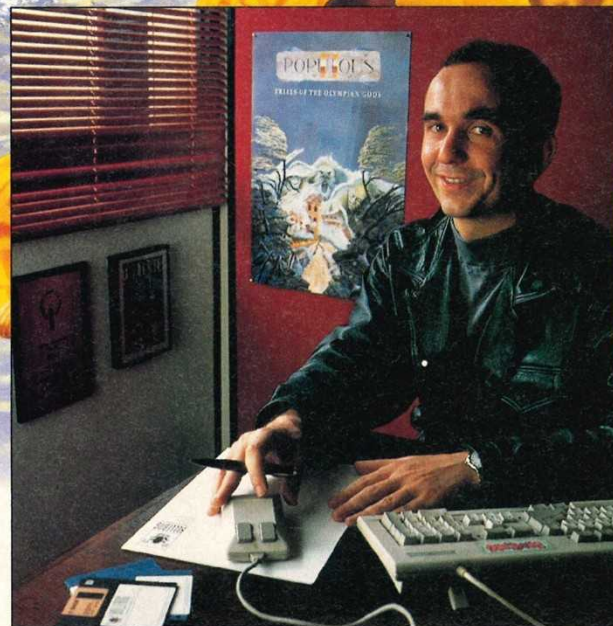
"Originally we wanted to make it like *Virtua Racing*, where you can either look through the driver's eyes or zoom out and see the car from behind. Unfortunately it didn't really work. The carpet tended to move around too much and kept getting lost in the landscape. We *could* have put it in, but it would have looked rubbish."

Carpet magic

The finished version of *Magic Carpet* looks far from rubbish, though. Even on a 486 the movement remains reasonably smooth. However, you can't help noticing the Intel Pentium logo which flashes up after the intro sequence. Is Bullfrog suggesting that you need a Pentium to run it at its best? After all, not that many home users have Pentiums

Peter Molyneux (right) and Les Edgar founded Bullfrog almost ten years ago, and the company's first release, *Populous*, was released in 1989. Amazingly, the game was rejected by every major games publisher bar Electronic Arts on the grounds that it was too different.

FEATURES





"Because we were known for our strategy games, we wanted to do something different."

Left: once your castle reaches a certain size, you get a private army of archers to help defend it. only view your agents from a fixed point above the isometric landscape, but in the follow-up you will be able to rotate the landscape and even zoom in to street level to get a closer look at the gore. Speaking of which, there will be a couple of tasty new weapons in the Syndicate 2 arsenal. One, the anti-gravity gun, hurls the victim 50 foot up in the air. Molyneux gleefully describes the other as "a sort of dart gun. Shoot someone with it and their arms and legs fly off."

Creation is a very different kettle of fish, if you'll excuse the pun. Apparently inspired by a scuba-diving holiday, Creation takes place underwater and features lots of nice 3D fishy graphics. Surely even Bullfrog couldn't find a way of incorporating violence into a fish game (but then again, Molyneux does keep piranhas, or rather, a piranha: the others chewed each other to death).

Set in the Syndicate world, it takes place a couple of hundred years after the war at the end of Syndicate 2. The premise is that the weapons used in the war were so powerful that they ignited the atmosphere, forcing the survivors into the oceans where they lived in large underwater cities. After a period of peace between the different cities, catastrophe strikes. A large fungus meteor strikes the ocean bed, contaminating the surrounding area and mutating the fish into fierce spiky monsters. The resulting food shortages create tension between the cities, the outcome being conflict.

Further in the future is Dungeon Keeper, a tongue-in-cheek role-playing game which is about a year away; Theme Hospital, which is the second game in the Designer series (after Theme Park) and involves running, well, a hospital; a game called Biosphere and a mystery sports game which is so secret that Molyneux refused to let on which sport was actually going to be simulated. I get the feeling that each of these games will, in turn, be "the best game Bullfrog has ever done." But then they probably will be, won't they?

● *Magic Carpet is reviewed over the page.*

Below left: the spectacular intro sequence took almost as long to finish as the game itself.

Below: if you play Magic Carpet on a slower 486, it's advisable to keep graphic detail low. It still looks good, however.

at the moment. "No, they don't," Molyneux admits. Of course the game runs faster on a Pentium, but it doesn't include any Pentium specific features." However, 486 users will find that Magic Carpet is a bit sluggish at full detail. So if you want clouds in the sky, reflections in the water and anti-aliasing, maybe you do need a Pentium after all.

Bullfrog isn't alone in writing games which are aimed at high-end PCs — Origin has been doing it for years (Wing Commander, which needed a 386, came out at a time when most people had XT's and 286s) and it seems to be a bit of a trend with games companies at the moment. But isn't this just a case of trying to make life easier for the programmers?

Under development

"We did most of the development for Magic Carpet on 33MHz 486s, so no, not in this case," says Molyneux. "But there are games being released which really shouldn't need a high-spec machine." Molyneux mentions one particular game which, when released in autumn last year, claimed it needed a 66MHz DX2 — a requirement which seemed a bit excessive at the time. "I spent ages playing it just to find out if there really was a game in there. The combat system was atrocious — all that messing around trying to

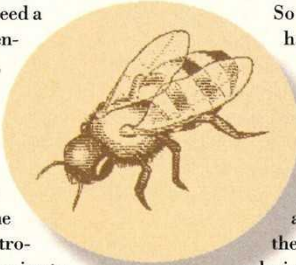
target ships with cross-hairs. After that I decided that there wouldn't be any targeting in Magic Carpet."

As a result, combat in Magic Carpet is a simple matter of pointing and shooting. So long as you're pointing in roughly the right direction and the monster is in range, fireballs and other spells act rather like heat-seeking missiles, finding their prey automatically.

Molyneux certainly seems pleased enough with the game. "Personally I think Magic Carpet is the best game we've ever done." But then again, he said that about Syndicate and Theme Park and he'll probably say it about every game Bullfrog releases in the future.

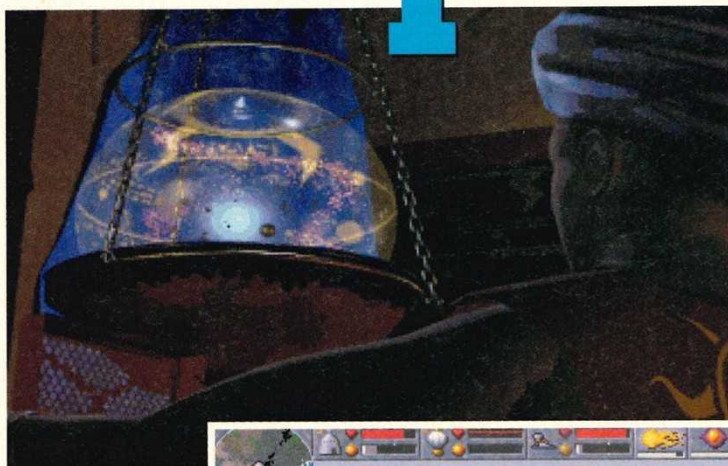
"I didn't say it about Powermonger. I thought Powermonger was shit. We only had a week to put it together, whereas we've spent over a year on Magic Carpet."

So what of the future? Bullfrog does have several potentially excellent games in the pipeline. Of these, Syndicate 2 and Creation are likely to appear within the next six months. Syndicate 2 is based along the same lines as Syndicate — corporation wars, cyborg agents and nasty weapons — but the game engine has been completely redesigned. In the first game you could



Magic Carpet

It's a flight sim. It's a shoot 'em up. It has action and it has strategy. Could Bullfrog's rug-sim make all other games redundant, or will it crash on take off?



Right: my God, they're everywhere! Skeleton warriors are easy to destroy, but when a big group of them get together, they can damage your castle big time. Fireball 'em, quick!

All Bullfrog games share a common goal: world domination, whether it's by being the most powerful god (Populous and Populous II), the most ruthless corporation (Syndicate), the shrewdest military general (Powermonger) or by building the world's most successful theme park (er, Theme Park). Magic Carpet fits in neatly with this idea. The game is set on an Arabian-style world rich in magical energy, or mana. After years of harmony, the land was rendered barren through the greed of its resident wizards, who not only drained the land of power but also summoned the nastiest monsters they could find to help them gain dominance. It wasn't long before the monsters got fed up of serving their pompous masters, and so they turned against the wizards, causing great damage and terrifying the local people. Eventually, one

wizard decided enough was enough and, aided by his young apprentice, prepared an earthquake spell to destroy his opponents. Unfortunately, he underestimated the power of the spell and died in the resulting cataclysm, leaving his apprentice to restore the balance of the world.

And as if you hadn't guessed, you are that apprentice. The earthquake has split the world into 50 island realms, each overrun by trolls, dragons, skeletal warriors and other nasties. Your task is reunite the world by killing these monsters, while also defeating other wizards who seek to take the lands for themselves. When you kill a monster it releases a ball of mana, and the more mana you collect, the more powerful you become.

Weaveworld

If the world domination bit is common to all Bullfrog games, the style of Magic

Carpet is dramatically different. Populous, Powermonger and Syndicate were all isometric games, but Magic Carpet has you flying around a spectacular rendered 3D world on your airborne Axminster. And just as Bullfrog's previous releases all contain a hefty element of strategy, Magic Carpet is more of an action game — the thinking man's shoot 'em up, if you will. The basic aim is plain enough: shoot the monsters and collect the mana. But actually, it's not as simple as that. Because you're a mere apprentice rather than a full-blown wizard, you start with the bare minimum: your flying doormat and barely enough mana to keep you airborne. Your first step is to get your hands on some



WEAVING A TALE

Magic Carpet has one of the best intros I've yet seen, and although the intro is by no means the most important part of the game, this is definitely worth a second look.



Let's kick that old carpet into life with a bit of magic.



Nice day for a bit of rug surfing . . .



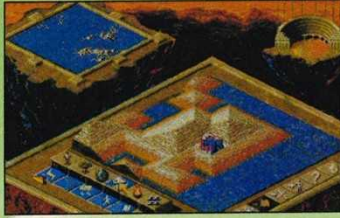
Blimey! The mother in law's turned up and she doesn't look happy.

ALTERNATIVELY YIIVITANIVETIA



Doom
Id/Transend, £34.75
Rated 9, Issue 28

OK, so Doom is based on terra-firma and Magic Carpet takes place in the air, but both contain involve lots of killing and both are brilliant in multi-player mode. Doom is the king of the 3D shoot 'em up genre, with scary monsters, buckets of blood and a tense, claustrophobic atmosphere. Unmissable.



Populous
Hit Squad, £14.99
Not reviewed

Bullfrog's first game, the first ever god sim, has more in common with Magic Carpet than you might think. Again the aim is to beat a rival over many levels, though in this case you're removed from the action, which takes place over an isometric landscape where you must destroy the enemy god's worshippers.

spells, which you'll find in urns dotted around the landscape. To discover where they, and other useful things are, bring up the overhead map by pressing return or clicking both mouse buttons simultaneously. Spells are represented by red dots. The black dots you see swarming around are monsters (avoid these until you have the fireball spell), gold dots are unclaimed mana balls and dots of other colours are mana which has already been possessed by you or rival wizards.

To pick up a spell you simply need to swoop over it. Once you've tickled the urn with your tassels, the spell is yours for the casting. The first spells you find are possession, castle and fireball. I guess you understand what a fire-

"Magic Carpet is more of an action game — the thinking man's shoot 'em up, if you will."

ball does, but the other two spells are equally important. When a monster is destroyed and drops its mana, you can't just pick it up: you have to convert it into your particular 'flavour' and then you have to store it somewhere. So once you've armed yourself with these spells, the first thing you need to do is build your castle. Select a good spot (away from any villages and preferably in the sea), cast your castle spell and, hey presto! One instant

castle, complete with its own balloon. Yes, that's right, I did say balloon. And no, I'm not mad. Not quite. Balloons are very, very important because they go around picking up mana and taking it back to your castle for safekeeping.



To the mana born

But before your balloon can collect the stuff, you have to claim it using that handy possession spell. In its raw state, mana is gold and as such is useless to you.

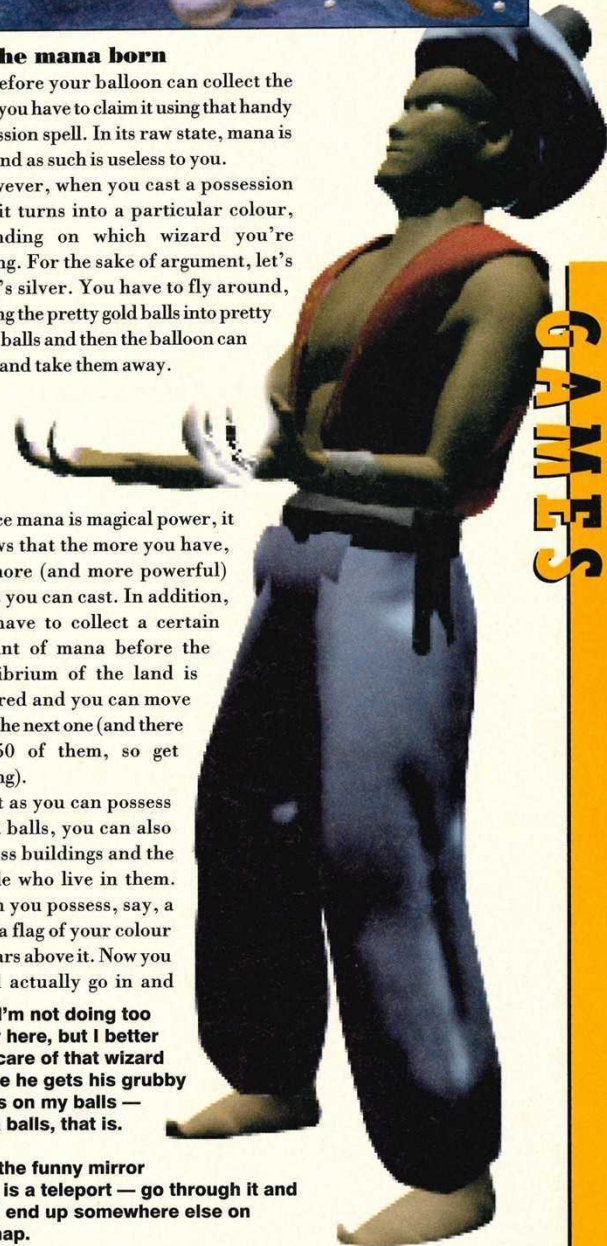
However, when you cast a possession spell it turns into a particular colour, depending on which wizard you're playing. For the sake of argument, let's say it's silver. You have to fly around, turning the pretty gold balls into pretty silver balls and then the balloon can come and take them away.

Since mana is magical power, it follows that the more you have, the more (and more powerful) spells you can cast. In addition, you have to collect a certain amount of mana before the equilibrium of the land is restored and you can move onto the next one (and there are 50 of them, so get moving).

Just as you can possess mana balls, you can also possess buildings and the people who live in them. When you possess, say, a tent, a flag of your colour appears above it. Now you could actually go in and

Top: I'm not doing too badly here, but I better take care of that wizard before he gets his grubby hands on my balls — mana balls, that is.

Left: the funny mirror thing is a teleport — go through it and you'll end up somewhere else on the map.



GAMES



Time to summon up that old anti-dragon fire.



Gotcha! Anyone fancy a bit of char-grilled reptile?



Phew, that was tiring. Let's head back home for a quick 40 winks.

"What we have here is exhilarating action, subtle strategy and great graphics."

fireball the tent, killing the people within and releasing their mana (which, let's face it, is more fun), but strategically that's a bad move. Tents hold two people, and there's a small chance each year that they might produce offspring. Now if you possess the tent and inhabitants, you get around 10 times as much mana as you would if you simply killed them. More importantly, their mana is available to you immediately, because you don't have to wait around for the balloon to come and pick it up.

Arabian sprites

Right, so you've grasped what mana is, how you get it and where you store it. Let's talk about the thing which probably attracted you to the game in the first place, which is the flying bit. Controlling your rug is pretty simple. The cursor keys move you forwards, backwards and sideways, and the mouse handles your angle (that is, whether you're heading into the clouds, taking a nosedive or banking left or right). Using both hands to play can take some getting used to, but the once you've got the hang of it you can perform some pretty nifty manoeuvres (except looping-the-loop — you'd fall off). And it's a good view from up there. Once again the Bullfrog graphics team has done a great job — the ocean has real waves, hills disappear into the mist, water reflects, the sky has fluffy white clouds (though you need a DX4 or Pentium if you want the game to turn smoothly at full detail) — it really is stunning. You can even play in full-colour 3D mode (using the glasses in the box) or, if you're determined to give yourself a migraine, stereogram vision.

Trouble is, if you spend too long admiring the scenery, you end up getting yourself killed. On the first level monsters



Above: The overhead map shows you where everything is: black dots are monsters, gold dots are unclaimed mana, silver dots are my mana and red dots belong to the enemy wizard.

Below: Not only can you possess mana, but you can also possess tents and houses. This is a smart move, because it gives you more mana than if you simply kill the poor villagers.

are thin on the ground: all you need to do is kill a few worms and you're home and dry. OK, so they're giant worms and they spit fireballs at you, but once you've toasted them with a few fireballs of your own they soon keel over. It's on the later levels when you start to run into real problems. There are swarms of giant bees which sting you to death, trolls which chuck rocks at you, genies which steal your mana, dragons and, worst of the lot, other wizards.

In the single player game, rival wizards are computer-controlled, but you can set yourself up against some human opposition if you have a handy network (and the multi-player option is superb). Human players are generally brighter than their synthetic counterparts, but either way they're bad news. Your aim is to get all the mana, which, funnily enough, is exactly what they're trying to achieve — and this usually results in a mana war.

Sunny spells

On later levels you can pick up some more powerful spells — lightning bolts, earthquakes and volcanoes to name but a few. Plus if another wizard dies (even if only temporarily) he leaves behind a corpse, and if you use your possession spell on it, you gain all his mana and spells.

So Magic Carpet can get quite strategic after all. You can use your castle spell as a weapon. You can start forest fires by fireballing a tree, and the resulting blaze harms other creatures. You can dogfight. You can send an army of skeletons to trash enemy castles. I could go on, but I think I've made my point.

So what we have here is game which contains exhilarating action, subtle elements of strategy and gorgeous graphics. Does it get my recommendation? Is the Pope Catholic? Magic Carpet is very different from anything Bullfrog (or any other company for that matter) has done before, but it has all the quality and gameplay of the Surrey-based team's previous releases. Yet again Bullfrog has created a true original. And yet again it's brilliant.

■ Cal Jones

TECHSPEC

9
RATING

Wall to wall excitement.

Publisher: Bullfrog/EA

Price: £44.99

Contact: (0753) 549442

Minimum PC: 33MHz 486, MS-DOS

Minimum memory: 4Mb

Minimum graphics: MCGA

Sound: Roland, Sound Blaster

