

# Icewind Dale

*"If you have to shoot, shoot—don't talk"*

Some games present you with moral choices, each fraught with consequence. Others guide you through extensive conversation trees, searching for the right nuance. *Icewind Dale* does neither—in nearly every situation, the best tactic you have is shoving three feet of steel into someone's gut. And this, Gentle Reader, is not a bad thing. For old style hack and slash role-playing, you can't beat Black Isle's latest *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.* game. Just don't expect any moral epiphanies.

Dispensing with the highbrow "you're the child of a destroyed evil god" malarkey that gave *Baldur's Gate* its rich (and thoroughly enjoyable) patina of pretension, *Icewind Dale* sets you up as leader of a band of freebooting adventurers looking for excitement. You find it in the backwater (or back-ice, given the temperature) town of Easthaven, in the Spine of the World mountains. One of the Ten Towns, Easthaven is a ramshackle hamlet whose only claim to fame is the knucklehead trout fished out of the nearby lakes. Your party of six knuckleheads, er, doughty adventurers, agrees to join up with an expedition to nearby Kuldahar, where "bad things" have been reported. Along the way, of course, more "bad things" happen....

## High Plains Drifter

While the game features a solid plot, the only real reason for it is to give you an excuse to kill creatures and take their stuff. There are a few twists and turns, but it's the loot and experience point

awards that keep you moving through the game, more than any desire to find out what is happening to Kuldahar. Even so, it's a more successful approach than many more thematically ambitious games, because the writing is good and the voice acting of the NPCs is solid. When you do come across a story encounter, it's actually interesting, and your frequent battles at least seem to fit into a sensible framework. That's more than you can say about a lot of role-playing games, sadly.

*Icewind Dale's* saga of ancient evils, hoary vendettas, and subterranean cities is about on par with the surprisingly entertaining TSR *Forgotten Realms* novels, on which the game is loosely based, and about as well written. Throughout the game, and particularly at the end, you'll notice some tie-ins with R.A. Salvatore's *Icewind Dale* trilogy. While you won't find Wulfgar or Drizz't, you will run into some, um, otherworldly foreshadowing and some familiar names. For a game that's not supposed to be heavy on the story, there's actually a pretty solid backdrop in place. Robert Jordan doesn't have much to worry about, but if you were concerned that the game would be nothing more than mindless combat, rest assured. There is definitely a purpose to the carnage, even if the carnage tends to be pretty important in its own right.

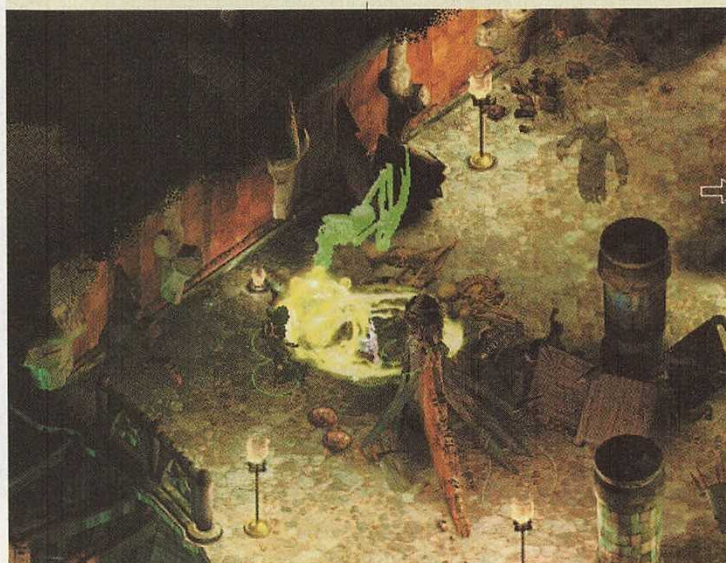
The most significant consequence of the game's focus on combat over story is the absence of a single, "this is supposed to be YOU" character. You direct your party of six as if a disembodied guiding spirit, rather than manifesting yourself as an on-screen avatar like in *Baldur's Gate*. It doesn't matter a whit if some of your band die—just resurrect 'em. Alignment and behavior don't matter much, either. There's nothing critical that you can mess up by taking an "evil" or hostile approach through the conversation trees, and most conversations with NPCs

### UPSIDE

Lots of combat, gorgeous settings, tons of treasure

### DOWNSIDE

Dull and reactive AI, tedious and repetitive combat



Some days, you just wish the dead would stay dead, damn it!



Fightin' trolls in th' gloamin', tra la la la....



Oops. When you said "loud enough to wake the dead," I thought you were kidding. Guess not.

## THE GOODS

**GENRE** Role-playing Game

**PUBLISHER** Interplay

**REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II  
233, 32MB of RAM

**MULTIPLAYER** 2-6 players

**RATING**





Um, this ain't Kansas I don't think.



Excuse me, sir, which way to the sauna?

inevitably end in combat anyhow. You might miss out on a few goody-two-shoes experience quests by being evil, but much of the time you'll gain nearly as much from just slaughtering everyone, if that's your preference. Where *Baldur's Gate* actively penalized evil characters, *Icewind Dale* is mostly amoral.

### At the Mountains of Madness

Technically, the game uses a slightly enhanced version of BioWare's third-person isometric Infinity Engine. Maps are pseudo-3D, characters are sprites, and the backgrounds are hand-painted. Screen resolution is fixed at 640 by 480, which looks pixelated on larger monitors, and the interface bars take up maybe a quarter of the available screen real estate. You can activate 3D-accelerator support for spell effects, but the effects aren't much different from the 2D versions, and performance

is sometimes worse. Almost everything else is identical to *Baldur's Gate* after the latest patches and the *Tales of the Sword Coast* expansion pack.

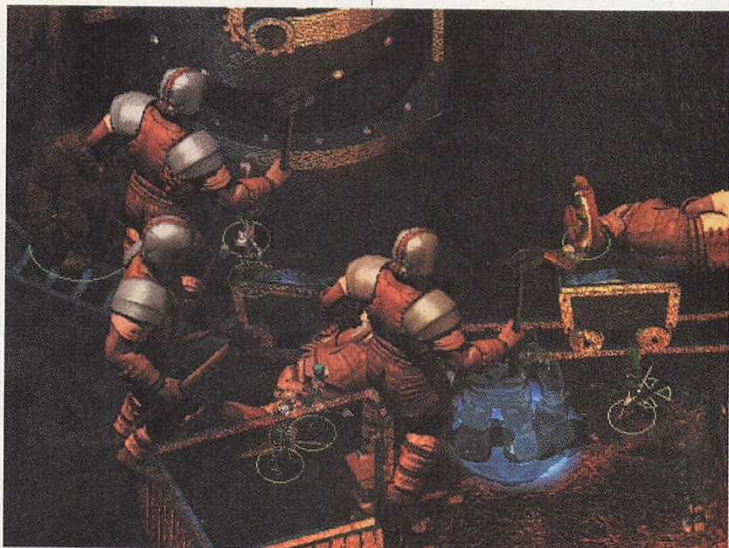
You move around the world via an area map, and new areas open up as you progress through the game. It seems pretty small at first, but it's not. Most areas you visit have sub-areas as well, and each area is pretty well designed to minimize down time. You won't spend any time wandering through barren wastelands praying for a random encounter, at least. Most areas are great looking, and are usually well designed, but some are a pain to navigate. Kuldahar, which serves as your base of operation for most of the game, is a pathing nightmare, because the roots of the great tree that shelters the town makes it impossible to take a straight line between any two points. Unit pathing in general is only adequate, with one or two

characters almost always getting lost and wandering around the various maps looking for a way home. It's better than *Baldur's Gate* in that respect however.

The game works well enough, with only a few mysterious crashes. The problem is, it could have been a lot spiffier. BioWare is developing *Baldur's Gate II* for Black Isle, and that game uses a much-enhanced version of the engine that supports higher resolutions and removable interface panels. Early builds of *Icewind Dale* also made use of those features, but they're missing from the final version. According to Interplay, there were some contractual restrictions on how much they could borrow from the work being done on the higher-profile BioWare title, hence the lower resolution and fixed interface design. True, they never promised these features, but it's frustrating to know that there's no technical reason the game

couldn't have had those enhancements. And they would have made a difference, too; the lower graphics detract from the excellent artwork, and the obtrusive interface results in too much scrolling to keep all of your party in view.

Those sorts of quibbles aside, the game is pretty solid. There are patches, of course, but playing without them is possible, as long as you're not too unlucky and save often (something that's pretty much true about every RPG). As in all of the Infinity Engine games, you can occasionally screw up the conversation triggers with tactics that are a bit too imaginative, particularly if you are fond of luring out bad guys and dispatching them one at a time rather than charging into a huge melee. Combat and movement controls are familiar and relatively intuitive, and there's a host of configurable hotkeys. If you've played any of



Damn, those guys are big.



You think he's a free agent? Minnesota could use some good linemen.



information display is too cluttered to really handle all of the nuances of the AD&D rules. The available AI scripts for your party members are decent, but you'll inevitably find that none of them are precisely what you want. That leads to a lot of micromanaging your party, which in turn means you'll have to pause combat a lot, hence leading you to wonder why the designers didn't simply go with a turn-based system in the first place. Nevertheless, it's fun, tactics do matter, and winning the tough fights takes some thought.

frustrating times however.

### Treasure of the Sierra Madre

One of the complaints gamers had about *Baldur's Gate* was the level cap, where your characters couldn't advance beyond about the eighth level. Now you can go up to around 15<sup>th</sup> level (14<sup>th</sup> for mages, 18<sup>th</sup> for thieves), or 1.8 million experience points. This means more spells, better abilities, more hitpoints, and of course correspondingly bigger monsters. It also means more and better loot to outfit your party to better deal with the nasties of the Spine of the World Mountains. Most monsters don't respawn, though, and there are precious few wandering monster encounters, so there's not much opportunity to beef up your characters before (or after) the final battles. Luckily, there's so much combat in the game that you should have little trouble hitting double-digits before the denouement. If you don't, though, you're pretty much out of luck, as the final battle segues straight into

That thought, though, often leads you to some rather gamy exploitations of the game system. The monster AI is highly reactive, but otherwise nearly totally inert. The best way to clear the many monster-packed rooms you'll encounter is to lure the beasts out one at a time. This, combined with the old "toss a fireball blind into a room you know is full of monsters because you saved, peeked, and reloaded" trick, makes virtually all of the major battles relatively easy. You can also usually rest safely anywhere as long as you aren't in the line of sight of a monster, so with a little luck you can guarantee an inexhaustible store of spells and healing. Of course, you don't have to use such tactics, but if you forego them the sheer volume of monsters is likely to overwhelm you. If you don't mind the gamesmanship, the many battles are pretty entertaining, as the settings and variety of opponents you'll face are fascinating. If you're a stickler for "realism" in your RPGs, you're in for some

### No diving.

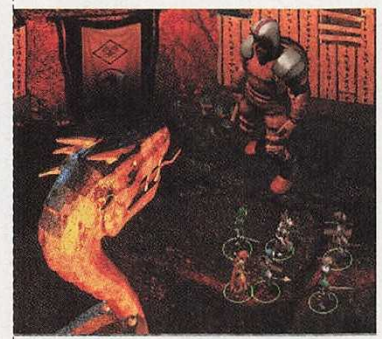
the other Black Isle RPGs of recent vintage, you'll feel right at home here. The 2D artwork is fabulous, the animation is generally very good, and the music is atmospheric. Sound in general is good, except for the voices of your party members. While the NPCs are blessed with excellent voice talent, your crew seems to be made up of morons, airheads, and goofballs. It's not as bad as, say, the *Lands of Lore* or *Might and Magic* games, but it's pretty silly. At least there's no Imoen, all the gods of Faerun be praised, though one of the female voices sounds suspiciously similar....

Each area on the world map is crammed with locations teeming with monsters, and each sub-area is generally divided up into a few more densely populated rooms or chambers. Except when traversing an already-cleared map, you'll almost never have to walk more than a few virtual feet before encountering something to fight. Whether it's a few beetles in the basement or a demones in a deep cavern, you'll face constant combat from the get-go.

Whether all that fighting is something to look forward to depends entirely on your tolerance for the Infinity Engine's combat system. It's the same pausable real-time mechanism that's sustained the last two and a half Black Isle AD&D games, where you can set it up to resemble a turn-based game or let it rip at top speed. It works well enough, once you get the settings the way you want them, but it's still too fast and the

### Highlander

Speaking of gods, Tempus (one of the *Forgotten Realms'* more militant deities) would be particularly proud of this game. If it's combat you want, you've come to the right place. Most computer RPGs are pretty combat heavy, but *Icwind Dale* is combat centered.



A Fire Giant and a dragon-headed ship have a heart to heart talk, while the adventurers listen in rapt admiration.



Makes you wonder if the dwarves suffer from delusions of grandeur.



Hey, lady, there's a dress code here ya know!



Whew, that was tough.



Grave-robbing for fun and profit.

a rather entertaining if over-acted final cutscene before dumping you back at the main menu.

Unlike *Baldur's Gate II*, which promises a lot in the way of perks for higher level characters, *Icwind Dale* doesn't give you much for

your efforts beyond the requisite increased hitpoints, better combat abilities, and higher level spells. There's really very little difference between a sixth level fighter and a twelfth level fighter beyond the obvious performance improve-

ment. Throughout the game, this sort of pervasive sameness dulls the impact of the beautiful artwork and proven game engine. You move, you fight, you loot, you rest, you do it again, until you get a cutscene that propels you to the next round of fighting, looting, and resting. It's enjoyable, sometimes compellingly so, but too often it's repetitive, as in "oh jeez, another room filled with Neo-Orgs." Even the treasure, of which there is an astounding variety, begins to pale after a while, when you get your umpteenth magic long sword or potion.

Just when you're about to give up, however, you come across a particularly juicy battle where you actually have to think to win, or you find a unique and valuable item that gives one of your characters a real boost. You wander into a gorgeous temple or ruined Dwarven city or encounter a fierce giant three times the height of your tallest character. As you carefully plot each fireball and magic missile, and select the proper magic arrows for your magic bows, the game manages to capture some of the charm and appeal of the original tabletop pen and paper experience. "You hit the Frost Giant for 12 points of damage!" "I rolled a 20 on my saving throw!" "Where are the Doritos?" Er, maybe not the last, but everything else comes through in spades when it all clicks.

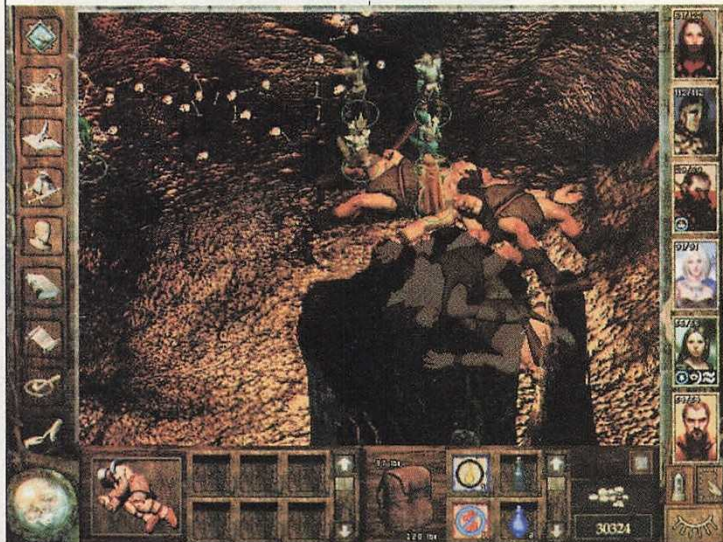
**Not Diablo II**

*Icwind Dale* had the misfortune to debut on store shelves the very day that Blizzard's *Diablo II* arrived. The two games are almost completely dissimilar, but

some unfortunate marketing efforts by Interplay have created something of an impression that their game was also an action-oriented RPG, full of fast-paced combat. Not so. Where *Diablo II* focuses on rapid clicking, continual combat, and constant treasure scavenging, Black Isle's game is much more traditional. Battles are tactical, the pacing is slower, the rules are more complex, the story is more substantial, and it has a definite beginning, middle, and end. Then again, you might be playing *Diablo II* six months from now, going through it on Battle.net one more time trying to find another item set or a rare sword, while *Icwind Dale* languishes on the shelf. Once you finish this game, you probably won't want to play it any more, because it's pretty self-contained. Nearly everything is scripted, with few random elements.

If you like role-playing games you owe it to yourself to consider *Icwind Dale*. It's a very solid, attractive, and entertaining game, in a very traditional way. You can play with a group online or over a LAN, cooperatively, if you want. You can play an evil party if you want. You can play a bunch of paladins if it pleases you. You'll get about the same experience no matter what you do, but at least that experience is fun. It's by no means as epic as its predecessor, nor as intriguing as the excellent *Planescape: Torment*, but it's far more than just the random collection of dungeon crawls Interplay once pitched it as. Just don't dismiss it a *Diablo* clone; the game deserves a lot better than that.

—Robert Mayer



Ettins done et my kinfolk.



Glowing blue mushrooms...man, I thought the seventies were over!