

ICEWIND DALE

Of ice and men

Icewind Dale has a good pedigree. Not only is it based on BioWare's Infinity engine, which powered Baldur's Gate, but it was developed by Interplay's Black Isle Studios which, prior to this game, created the well-received Planescape: Torment. It's a good, traditional roleplaying game, based on the AD&D rule set (second edition, if you're interested) and set in a not too tropical region of the Forgotten Realms. You'd expect it to be good and, quite honestly, it is. But is it as good as Baldur's Gate? Ah, well that's not such an easy question to answer...

The plot is sketchy to start with. Your plucky band of six adventurers turn up at a small fishing village called Easthaven. Although it's only autumn, thick snows have already covered the land and food supplies are running short. To make matters worse, bands of hungry orcs and goblins are plundering caravans and homesteads, so supplies are not even guaranteed to last. You decide to join an expedition to neighbouring Kuldahar, where things are even worse. People are starting to go missing and there are rumours of a great evil in the nearby Vale Of Shadows. As you progress through the game, the story unfolds and you begin to find out the truth about the premature winter.

But before you can even get that far, you have to create your party of adventurers. In Baldur's Gate and



As well as ale, you'll find gossip and quests in the local hostelry

Planescape: Torment, you created a single character, and then recruited non-player characters to join your party over the course of the game. In Icewind Dale you create six, and you must try to keep them all alive because none of the non-player characters you meet will join your party. There are the usual character classes (fighter, ranger, paladin, cleric, druid, thief, bard, mage and specialist mage) and the usual races (human, elf, half-elf, dwarf, halfling

and gnome) and it's up to you to make the strongest party possible. I chose a fighter, a ranger, two clerics (since clerics can heal you during battle, and are also quite strong fighters), a thief (for picking locks and disarming traps) and a mage.

At the beginning of the game you have to be very careful, because even fairly small creatures like goblins and wolves are capable of giving you a kicking. Your fighters may be able to cope, but mages are extremely

vulnerable at this stage, since they can have as few as six hit points. Later on, though, mages will be useful, especially in the Vale Of Shadows which is populated by dead creatures who are immune to normal weapons.

It's imperative, though, that you be careful to keep your characters alive in the early stages. You can get them resurrected at the local shrine if they're killed, but their constitution suffers, and it'll cost



Built between the roots of a giant oak, Kuldahar offers some respite from the snow

won't earn as many experience points, so this feature almost cancels out its own usefulness. The best tactic, then, is to use your cleric's healing powers as much as possible, and if you're still taking a beating, run away and find somewhere to sleep. You recover hit points while you sleep, but monsters don't, so they'll still have the same amount of damage as they did when you left them. Crafty, huh?

When you start the game in the hamlet of Easthaven, you'll come across a number of small quests which will earn you experience points. Whether it's returning an heirloom to a troubled fisherman or killing a wolf that has become trapped in someone's workshop, it's good to take as many of these simple tasks as you can. The reason for that is, once you've left Easthaven, an avalanche will prevent you from returning until much later in the game. That, and the fact that the game becomes rapidly more difficult once you're travelling through the countryside.

Of course, once you reach Kuldahar, you have a base to which you can return, sell your loot, buy

better equipment, pay for healing (if you need it) at the shrine and sleep on comfortable beds at last. But during the quests, you'll probably die rather a lot.

Unlike Baldur's Gate, which takes place mainly above ground, Icewind Dale is more of a dungeon hack. There's a small dungeon just outside of Easthaven, but I found my characters too weak to cope with the orcs who lived inside it during the

early stages of the game. If you miss this dungeon, there are plenty more in the Vale Of Shadows, which are populated by undead nasties such as skeletons, shadows, ghosts, mummies and wights. That's if the yetis don't get you on the way to the dungeons, of course.

After you've slogged through numerous crypts to complete that particular quest, you'll have to journey to the Temple Of The



You can't ignore some of the spell effects

you 200 gold pieces a pop, which is a lot of money during the early stages. I found the easiest thing was to make good and plentiful use of the Save Game feature.

The downside of that is that it takes ages (or what seems like ages to this impatient gamer) to load games, particularly if you have an old dinosaur of a PC such as mine. Alternatively, you can tinker with the difficulty settings, but if you set it lower than the standard setting, you



You find a mill besieged with goblins – are there any human survivors?

Forgotten God and slog through a load of other dangerous levels, and then it's off to the caverns of the Dragon's Eye. And so it goes on...

Although I was frustrated by all the loading and saving of games whenever one of my characters died (obviously you can just leave them dead, but when you're up against powerful enemies such as wights and mummies or worse, you need all the fire power you can get), but I did find the game very enjoyable. It's the

sort of game that you can lose yourself in utterly, and get a nasty surprise when you next look at your watch to find the little hand on the number two – that is 2am. In that respect it's very much like Baldur's Gate.

I can safely say that if you're a big Baldur's Gate fan, then you'll love Icewind Dale. It's not a revolutionary game and it won't change the face of the modern computer roleplaying game as Baldur's Gate did before it.

But what it does offer, though, is hour upon hour of enjoyable roleplaying. It's a real pleasure to see your characters change from wimpish novices who can't even take on a few goblins, to real heroes who can destroy powerful foe with +3 swords and devastating magical spells.

Starting as first-level characters, you can reach the 18th level with your rogues, and just below that for the other classes, which is something Baldur's Gate wouldn't let you do (it was saving those later levels for the sequel). Consequently, Icewind Dale throws some really nasty creatures at you late in the game. It's designed so that all your battles are going to be tough. Goblins are tough to beat at the beginning, the undead creatures are really tough when you enter the Vale Of Shadows, and you're going to have to keep your wits about you when you go up against the really big guys towards the end. When I was hacking and slashing my way through the tombs of the Vale Of Shadows, and I'd come across a room with a spell-throwing skeleton, a couple of wights and some skeletal archers, I'd think, dear god, this has got to be near the end



You'll be needing to wear your thermal undies

of the dungeon! But no, there would always be a worse room further on, and still I'd managed to clear it eventually.

Few games are so well judged in terms of the difficulty curve, and Icewind Dale gets it almost perfect. Consequently, it's enormous fun to play. It isn't perfect. I found a couple of bugs, and the pathfinding is not as good as it could be (some of your characters seem to decide that they'll take the most direct route to a point, never mind that it involves leaping over a bottomless chasm or walking through the odd wall or two). But these are small points, and while they may get you chastising your PC, they don't cut into your enjoyment level too much.

Overall I'd say Icewind Dale was a great buy for anyone interested in roleplaying games. It offers hours of well-judged playing time, with plenty of incentive to keep you playing.

While Diablo II is probably the most eagerly awaited of this month's crop of roleplays, I'd take Icewind Dale any day. Parties are always more fun.

PROS: Hours of compelling gameplay, well-judged difficulty throughout
CONS: AI is still a bit suspect

Cal Jones



Shops are useful – not just for selling items, but also for buying stuff you don't need

DETAILS	
LABEL:	Interplay
WEB:	www.interplay.com
DEVELOPER:	Black Isle Studios
PRICE:	£39.99
MULTIPLAYER:	Internet, LAN
OUT:	Now
AGE RATING:	ELSPA 11+
SYSTEM	
Min Installation:	Win95/98, P233, 32Mb RAM, 600Mb hard disk space, 4xCD, 4Mb VRAM
We recommend:	P300, 64Mb RAM, 1.5Gb hard disk space
Control:	Mouse
Supports:	None

