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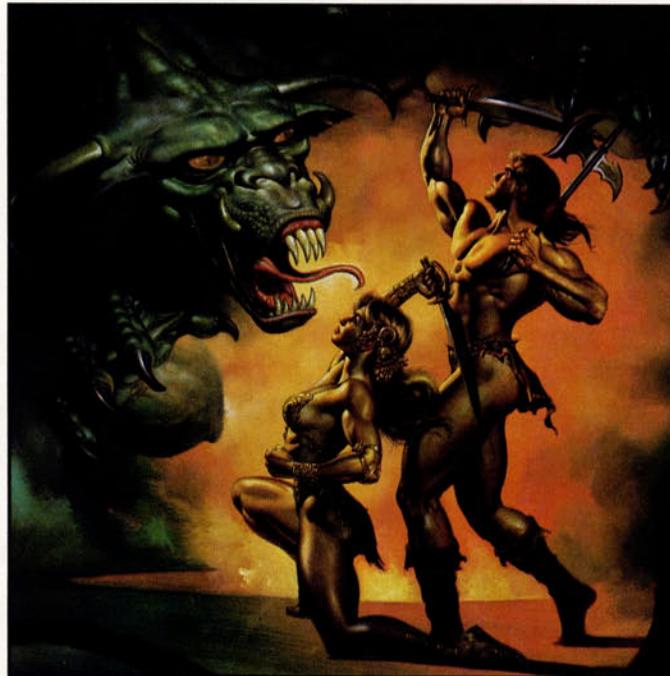
Purgatory stinks. It reeks of the dead and dying among filth-choked streets, decaying buildings, and open-air cesspools. Few survive for long in this noisome parody of a city and those who do quickly lose what humanity they once had. They go mad or prey on the weaker inhabitants, always on the lookout for new blood to bully, beat, or rob. This time, the new blood is you, dumped naked and unarmed into a hell on earth from which, so it's said, there is no escape but death . . .

So begins *Dragon Wars*, the latest role-playing game from **Interplay**. No party of adventurers has ever started out in a more unpleasant, hostile environment with so little, which is exactly nothing. No armor, no weapons, no money, no spells. "Nada", as they say on the west coast. It's a chilling thought. Yet, despite the depressing prospects, there is hope. Your situation is far from impossible. For the clever, the brave, and yes, the desperate, there are ways out of this city of the damned, and not necessarily feet first. It all depends on the risks you're willing to take, and how good your party of four is with various skills. The characters who come with the game are a good bet. They form a well-balanced group (although you may want to change their names) and the necessary skills are well-distributed among them. These aren't just demo characters to get you started. They are seriously constructed and carefully planned out personas who are capable of finishing the adventure.

Of course, you may feel happier creating your very own people, instead of using the pre-generated bunch. This is fine, but before doing that, study the others very carefully. Note what skills each one comes with. All of them have a purpose, and some are critical to success in the game. Each character begins with no skills, and attributes of 10. You have 50 points with which to "buy" attribute increases and

Interplay's "Dragon Wars"

by Scorpia



TITLE:	Dragon Wars
SYSTEM:	Apple II (with 128K)
PRICE:	\$49.95
DESIGNERS:	Paul Ryan O'Connor & Brian Fargo
PUBLISHER:	Interplay Productions Costa Mesa, CA



skills, not necessarily on a one-for-one basis. How you allocate these points is up to you, but once you're finished, there is no going back to undo something (unless you want to delete the character and start again).

Your third option is to bring over one or more characters from any of the three

while you decide where they should go. Level itself does not confer any benefits in combat or spell-casting. It is just a way of marking when you can increase the abilities of the characters. Once you're satisfied with your characters, they are set

down in the middle of Purgatory and the game begins. There are many unpleasant people and critters roaming the streets and alleys. Confrontations will be frequent. In a *Certain Other Series* (heh), this would spell instant doom and aggravation. However, that is not the case here. You don't have to fight

unless you really want to (and, at the beginning, you certainly don't!), since all opponents start far enough from the group to allow everyone to run away safely. Expect to do a lot of running as you explore the city. There is, of course, only

Bard's Tale games. Don't do it! You won't like the results. Regardless of level, they all come over with physical stats of 16, a couple of skills, and 10 points for skill or attribute increases. This is less than it sounds, especially if the characters transfer with a high level. For mages in particular, this is a problem, as it costs 10 points for each Magic skill beyond Low Magic. The character eats up the points right there, with nothing left over. Since you can expect to finish the game with characters somewhere between 8th and 10th level on average, you see where the problem lies in starting with high-level ones. Their advancement will be very slow, and the precious points gained on level increase (see below) will be few and far between. The only time you might come out ahead with a transferred character is to bring over a low-level fighter. It simply isn't worth bringing over a mage. Overall, you will do better starting with a brand-new group.

Every time a character reaches a new level, he or she receives 2 more points to put into skills or attributes. These points can be used immediately or held onto

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Dragon Wars

so much running one can do; eventually, fighting becomes necessary. The trick is to take on the weaker opponents, those you have a fair chance of defeating with bare hands. Soldiers and guards do *not* fall into this category! Born losers might be a better choice.

Combat is totally menu-driven. When a confrontation occurs, a picture of the closest foe is displayed on the left, and a main option menu comes up on the right. This is where you choose to Fight, Run, or Advance. Advancing moves the party forward ten feet. Running causes each party member to flee individually. This can be dangerous in close combat, as some monsters may be faster than some characters and hence, get in a shot or two as they run away. Fighting, of course, brings up a sub-menu of choices for each character, one at a time. Essentially, you can attack, dodge, block, cast a spell, use an item, run, or move forward or back in line. Additional sub-menus appear when "Attack" or "Cast a

spell" is chosen. Casting a spell requires the most decisions, as you must choose the type of magic, the type of spell, and finally, the spell itself. While this is a lot to wade through, familiarity makes it go faster, especially since you only need to type in the first letter of each choice (plus return). Also, you will probably have a small selection of favorite spells to use in combat, thus casting can go very quickly indeed. When there is more than one group of opponents, you also have a choice as to which one you want a particular character to attack. Range (which is given) is extremely important here, both for spells and distance weapons such as bows. Different spells have different range limits, so keep the manual handy to make sure you aren't wasting magic on someone unreachable. The same holds true for distance weapons; i.e. a long bow can shoot farther than a regular bow. As you experiment with different ranged weapons, you will learn what the optimums are for each one.

Health is always important and, once all combat choices have been made, the menus are replaced by the names of the characters with bar graphs beneath them. The first bar, in red, represents hit points. Should this reach zero, the character is dead (and you can be dead a long time in this game). The second bar, in green, shows stun. If this goes down to zero, the character is alive but unconscious. He can be revived during combat with a healing spell or potion. Should none be available (or there's no time to use one), the character is restored fully (as far as stun goes) when combat is over. A character always takes stun damage when hit, and stun is always twice the physical injury. Thus a blow that causes three points of damage on the red bar will do six on the green bar. In many cases, a character will drop from stun damage instead of death. The third bar, in blue, appears only for mages, and measures how much magical energy remains for spell-casting. If this goes to zero, or close to it, that character is unable to cast spells. Magical energy does not regenerate automatically; you need a dragonstone or magic pool to restore it. Should the entire party become

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Dragon Wars

stunned, it is not the end. You are simply turned around and moved away from the combat square, just as though you had run. Physical damage remains, but the stun bars are renewed, and everyone (who didn't die in combat) is still alive. Of course, if everyone does die, you'll have to restore to your last save and try again.

In this game, death is even more necessary to avoid than in other games. There are no spells, no handy temples, no wandering priests to bring back the deceased. There is one, and only one, place where resurrection is possible. It is not easy to reach or find. Should someone die, my recommendation is to restore the game, because you need all the people you can get.

Magic, as you've probably guessed by now, is no longer a case of "nuke 'em till they glow". Those days are over. Combat spells are much more restrained. The

majority of the group-effect spells do a maximum of 24-36 points of damage. There are a few spells which can be more potent, by virtue of the points put into them (Inferno comes to mind as an example), but don't expect to find anything of god-like power (even if you get it from a god). This is true of goodies in the game as well. There are many neat things out there, waiting for your hot little hands, but you won't be stumbling over swords (+50) or armor (+90), since there aren't any. Further, combat gives you experience points (and sometimes a little cash). Anything beyond that has to be found. No chests with mega-items will be presented after you slaughter the goblins . . . or anyone else for that matter. The good stuff is tucked away and you'll just have to ferret it out on your own.

Some of the Neat Things out there are NPC's you can add to the party. Up to three of them can be included in the

group (giving you seven characters in all), and you would be wise to take in some extra help. They fight, cast spells, use items, etc., as you direct them to, so there is little difference between them and the regular party members. NPC's also go up in level, just as the characters do, thus they, too, improve over time. In general, the game works very well. Combat is properly balanced, and you will need a mix of muscle and magic in most encounters to prevail.

Treasure is *equally* balanced. All of it has been placed specifically with no random items in the game. This is a brilliant stroke, as it prevents the "Monty Haul" syndrome, while still providing everything the party needs to complete the game. The designers have been generous, but not outrageous.

Also, there are many subplots in the game, though their overall effect is relatively minor. For example, if you manage to destroy the city of Phoebus, it will not materially affect your chances of success. On the other hand, you certainly won't

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Dragon Wars

be able to do anything in Phoebus again, since it isn't there any more (ah well, this is why we have save games . . .). Still, these various subplots add a great deal to the game. There's nothing like being drafted into the enemy's army to make you sit up and take notice! Selling yourself into slavery (horrible thought!) as one way out of Purgatory leads to a simple but complete adventure of its own. It doesn't change anything, but you'll certainly have some nervous moments as you sneak around in chains trying to escape. Everything builds to the moment of your final confrontation with Namtar. Make no mistake, this is a *mean* one. Forget all those wimpy evil-doers who drop dead in the first round of combat. Namtar is one tough customer and you will remember this fight for a long, long time. It is probably the best end-game battle of any CRPG I've ever played. Decide *that* one for yourself when you get there. Those who hate mapping (and they are legion) will rejoice over the auto-

map feature. It automatically records all places you have been (unexplored areas are black) and remembers them, as well. Outdoors, indoors, town, dungeon, wherever, the auto-map will faithfully record it for you, along with significant land features (trees, walls, doors, etc). Of course, it only shows your current area. If you're inside a city, for instance, the map is only of the city. If you're in the outdoors, the map is of the outdoors, although you will see the landmarks on it (the ones you've visited, that is).

The graphics (Apple double hi-res) are excellent. While the monster pictures are not fully animated, they do have movement (some of it quite subtle). Since combat is not in real-time, take a moment when an encounter begins to enjoy the pics (it will probably be the only chance you have to do so). When you're not fighting, the display shows your current location, with 3D view.

On the down side, the most important

factor is the lack of conversation. While there are many very nice paragraphs in the manual to read, there is no real dialogue between the characters and people they meet (as one would have in an *Ultima* or *Magic Candle*). More interaction is needed in this area. There are some minor annoyances: you don't know anything about an NPC until you've taken him into the party; having items examined at a store reveals nothing about their special powers (if any); if a bow is unequipped, its arrows or bolts are also unequipped; requiring two rounds in combat to re-equip them both.

Fortunately, none of this is very detrimental to playing the game. In spite of a few rough edges, *Dragon Wars* leaves the "Bard" series in the dust. Tighter design, attention to detail, balanced combat, and a carefully constructed plotline all combine to produce a CRPG well worth playing.

Bottom line: Highly recommended, especially for those tired of hack and slash epics.

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