y Bill Jahnel

ungeon Master II is a welcome sight to the fantasy gamer.   While the view of the world is definitely in the 3-D party mold of Wizardry, the technology and interface show a great deal of innovation.   Dungeon Master II also boasts "real-time" events, combat and otherwise, creating a relatively unique play and feel to the game.   It is suitably complex and long to enthrall even the most hardcore gamers for hours.   However, a steep learning curve in the interface may intimidate some users.   Someone apparently assumed knowledge from a previous product (DM I, not released on the Mac) which frustrates you early in the game and a few puzzles late in the game that rely far too much on the manual dexterity of the user marring an otherwise engrossing fantasy adventure title.   While the title comes on CD, this is really more of a carrier of the game.   It is best to reserve a full 16 megs for installation. However, once installed, you no longer need the CD and, in an achievement that still baffles me, the game saves are around 50k or less.   A remarkable feat for a game that remembers where every item in its universe is located (if you drop something, it will always be there) and where creatures are generated and have their own routines.

Starting Up
Unlike many fantasy dungeon games where you spend an eternity rolling up just the "perfect character," you are presented with a scenario of waking out of a cryogenic sleep three heroes to join your main character (already assigned to you).   There are only four classes of character of which each person you select may have a mixture of all four:

fighter, ninja, priest, and wizard.   Although strategy hints will be placed in the appropriate section, it is notable that getting the spellcasting skills in your initial repertoire is probably more important than getting the fighter or ninja skills.   If you work hard enough at ANY class, you will eventually gain its abilities.   One of the truly cool things about DMII is that whatever skills you emphasize in each character will determine what classes they rise in experience levels.   For example, fighting increases fighter levels, spellcasting has you raise in mage and priest levels (as appropriate to the spells), and various rather arcane things (including missile weapon and bare hand attacks) have you rise in Ninja levels.   Each increase in level of a class also will increase one or more skill ability (strength for a fighter, etc.) by one point.

Combat is in real-time.   When a creature attacks, you click on the weapons armed in the hands of the front 2 characters and they attack.   You can spellcast from all four positions. Casting spells requires you to utter syllables that forms the spell and then the spell is cast if you have the energy to fuel it.   You can actually "pre-cast" one spell having already paid for it and have it waiting until you release it and some spells (particularly priestly spells) actually create potions (you must have an empty potion bottle in a hand to fill) which can then be drunk at a later time.
 Like anything with real-time environments, there are positives and negatives to this approach.   Being only one person, I ended up, at best, really only manipulating 2 (sometimes three) characters at a time.   Unlike the old Wizardry trick (you assign characters an action round by round, then they all act,) this is more immediate, more heart-pumping, less exact, and harder to manipulate.

Exploration
The game will be great fun for people who like exploration.   Even the spells are not delineated at the start.   You must find magic items that have the spell abilities in them or make good guesses to construct and find new spells.   Much of the early part of the game involves understanding the elements of the world and survival.   If I kill a worm and it leaves body parts behind, what are they for?   Spells?   Missiles?   Food?   (Actually, the last -- worm remains do a body good!   (yuck!))   And I guarantee the first time a worm comes up out the ground and chomps at you, you'll have a slight heart attack!

There are a number of very exciting moments in the game.   However, sometimes the game mechanics get in the way of the enjoyment.   One notable problem is that the single healing spell that exists must be cast as a potion and then consumed; juggling the potion to drink it requires going into an inventory screen and dropping the potion on the character's mouth and back out.   This is much harder to do in a battle than one would do in real life.   With as many combinations of how the characters work (the set of hands on the top screen allow you to move items held in one's hands whereas the set of hands on the right side of the game must be clicked on to open or activate an item in the hands) can be confusing to the beginning player.   I re-read the instructions many times and finally had to go to a help board on America Online before I figured out how to open a cashbox and put money in it.

There are some positives and negatives in saved games.   On one hand, the game generates a backup save file whenever you quit a session so when I had a power outage and my normal save file had become corrupted, I was able to continue from not too far in the past rather than having to restart altogether.   However. there is no "save as" feature.   The only way to create a backup of an area before you test something out that might prove fatal is to log out of the game, duplicate the save file, rename it, and play forward form there.   The process is tedious and unnecessary for a relatively simple command to implement.

Also, the game suffers from some expectations that you should be aware of certain spells from the first game.   Most spells still exist from the first game, but Mac users (not having had a version of DMI released for their machines) are unlikely to know these.   This leads either to a lot of lucky guessing, or long, long waits in the game before you get spells that are relatively rudimentary to a character's existence.
 One fundamental aspect of the game that also bears mentioning is that there are at least three areas where one must employ a great deal of manual dexterity to solve a puzzle.   The worst involves having to run backwards through a series of portals.   This is ridiculous. Having checked around and found no alternate solutions, I really believe DMII missed the mark heavily on employing these dexterity-based traps.   Real time-combat is one thing but most players in a fantasy game are not looking for run and shoot.   At best, these puzzles should be only for getting extra items or special magic that are detours not essentials to the game (if you cannot pass the gate puzzle mentioned, you cannot access the second half of the game).   Many players in the help boards complained about the very same areas I found myself frequently frustrated and spending many hours on a repetitive task trying to get the EXACT motions correct to bypass it.   Worse, the game even has one or two items that act to "Freeze time."   Yet while these affect monsters, they have no effect on the inanimate objects where they would do the most good.   They missed a great opportunity here to let players have an "out."

Also, since there is never any sure way to know an item's full properties in the game, it can be very frustrating trying to make decisions about what is the best armor or weapon or magic combinations to carry.   Since the game has a prominently advertised hint book, one feels uncomfortable in the possibility that the lack of ability to discern some of these items might have stemmed from a dual interest not only in the sense of exploration but also in the hope that it might increase interest in getting the hint book.

Another poor choice in game design involves armor.   All characters are subjected to fatigue limits on weight, and quite frankly, they made their armor so heavy that characters never really get to use it.   The game was poorly balanced in that none of my characters made good decisions about which armor types to wear nor even at their highest levels could they try out different types of armor without negatives.

Finally, near the end of the game, the designers became happy on repetitive monsters.   You

can't seem to stop for a few moments before another floating attack minion comes by and annoys you.   This was a complaint registered by many users and it would have behooved the makers of DMII to drop down what seemed to be an endless and tedious number of attack minions constantly bothering the PCs.

In Summary
Dungeon Master II is a superior game in its class and sure to bring hours and hours of entertainment to gamers.   It is a warmly welcomed addition to the Mac line and suffers little of the standard complaints normally leveled at translations of PC games.   However, the steep interface learning curve at the beginning may very well frustrate early players, and the movement-based puzzles and continuous problems with the overburdening weight of armor may make many players near the end of the game grit their teeth in frustration. However, these flaws remain minor compared to the well-designed gameplay of the rest of the game, the creatively-designed monsters and environments, the interesting puzzles, and a well-conceived game overall.   While the problems in this game are apparent, they are not crippling, and I would still heartily recommend this game to fans of the adventure gaming genre.

Pros
• Exciting action
• Ease of character selection
• Fewer number of classes
• Characters advance readily in areas of strengths
• Interesting monsters, challenges, and puzzles
• Good gameplay overall and makes for many hours of adventuring
• Saved game files are incredibly slender
• Game makes a backup of save game file in case of crash

Cons
• Encumbrance issues with armor make armor nearly worthless
• Dexterity-based puzzles are out of place and frustrating
• Steep learning curve initially with interface
• Some apparent expectation of playing previous version which has not been released on the Mac
• No way to "Save As." You may find yourself trapped in an untenable position of starvation and have to restart

Publisher Info
MacPlay
17922 Fitch Avenue
Irvine, CA 92714

Phone:
(714) 553-3530
Hints:
 (900) 370-PLAY
Email:
 IPTech@AOL.com
WebSite:
http:/www.macplay.com