

• In all honesty, you can just click that "skip" button during the cut-scenes.

# PUZZLE QUEST: CHALLENGE OF THE WARLORDS

Buried treasure

PUBLISHER: D3Publisher/ValuSoft DEVELOPER: Infinite Interactive GENRE: Puzzle/RPG/Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.gamergate.com) ESRB RATING: Everyone 10+ MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 105MB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2 players VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

## REVIEW



As my head hits the pillow, my mind instantly races with the sorts of obsessive thoughts usually reserved for games like *World of Warcraft* or *Final Fantasy*. How do I beat that insane boss? Do I need to grind out another level's worth of XP? Where do I put my next few ability points? Which piece of badass gear should I buy next? And then I remember that I'm getting all hot and bothered over what is, at its core, a casual puzzle game. What's going on here?

*Bejeweled's* match-three puzzles, *Final Fantasy's* level- (and equipment-) based character growth, *Pokémon's* gotta-catch-em-all shtick, *Fire Emblem's* corny anime-style cut-scenes, and even a touch of *Civilization's* world-domination game—*Puzzle Quest* dumps these disparate elements together under the auspices of a giant fantasy-world map, where various NPCs assign quests to hunt down this or that monster. Your "battles" take the form of matching colorful jewel-shaped trios: Broken gems equate to like-colored mana, while a trinity of skulls saps your opponent's health, and purple stars and money piles earn you extra XP and gold, respectively.

It's not just *Bejeweled* with hit points, though; each of four available character classes (Druid, Knight, Warrior, and Wizard) offers a unique selection of spells that slowly unlock as you level up, and learning how to use and effectively combo these spells (and allocate training points to your assorted combat stats) is where the fun lies. For instance, my Wizard rocks a mean fireball that instantly clears any 3-by-3 grid of gems, as well as a handy spell that steals the opponent's all-important red ("fire") mana. Equippable items (such as my ax, which frequently awards extra turns) and unlockable party members (my Half-Elf pal provides an off-the-top advantage against undead foes) add more strategic layers. All told, it's a pretty epic match-three game.

The ancillary modes and options make *Puzzle Quest* even more of a timesink: Repeated bouts

PUZZLE QUEST IS TO CASUAL GAMES WHAT WORLD OF WARCRAFT IS TO MMORPGS.

against randomly spawned monsters that you've already slain thrice enable you to "capture" the foes in question (via a variant "eliminate all the gems on the board" minigame). You can then research their abilities (i.e., play additional variant puzzle modes), leading to additional spells and stat bonuses. This all occurs in the game's main city, where you spend money to build forges, stables, mage towers, siege engines, and other all-important structures. Oh, and you can sack other cities, enabling steady revenue and remote access to the aforementioned facilities (and more minigame opportunities, as peasants tend to revolt). *Puzzle Quest's* profusion of activities and diversions keeps you shackled to it like some sort of Disney theme park or sinister Las Vegas casino-hotel—as clichéd as it might sound, I don't know if I've ever seen another game that hits the "just one more round..." nerves quite this hard.

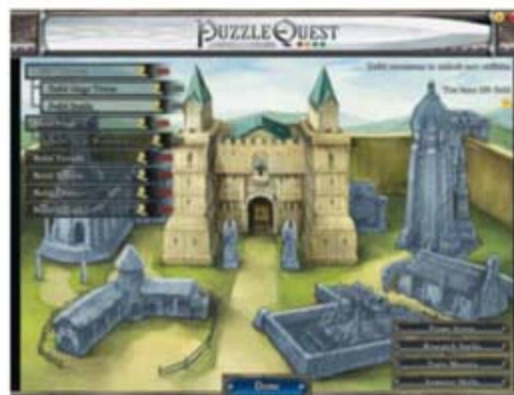
I daresay *Puzzle Quest* is to casual games what *World of Warcraft* is to MMORPGs: a vast, complex piece of entertainment that embraces all the very best concepts of its genre and improves upon them tenfold. Whoever you are, and whatever you're into, you absolutely need to play this game. • Ryan Scott

### VERDICT

• A near-perfect synthesis of all the most addictive game genres.

• No online matchmaking—and that's a crying shame.

10/10  
EXCELLENT  
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• *Puzzle Quest's* world is apparently the same one from the *Warlords* strategy-RPG series. How wonderfully...strange and random.

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