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BRAVE A NEW WORLD

Our front cover makes the outrageous claim that *Ultima Underworld* is worth buying a PC for. Tim Smith assesses the career prospects of our coverline writer

Four months. Four hard-fought, 'get off the 386 because we need to use it for another game' months. Four "just another hour and I'll go home" months. And the game is nearly finished. I'm fairly sure I've only got to go to the next level (level eight) and that'll be it. But there's also a horrible feeling in the Stygian pit of my stomach that I've missed something along the way and will have to go back for it. The reason you've had to wait so long for the review, by the way, is that for most of that time *Underworld* had been played on the beta-test version. I've had to start all over again with the final release version. What a shame. That means yet more hours spent solving puzzles, rushing around in corridors haunted by background sound effects, scared to go near to water, or open a door. What a shame. The last time a game had this effect, it was for money.

All the classic elements of adventuring are included: spells, combat, plot, monsters

OK, so I am on level seven, only one to go. But still, four months' worth of gameplay, all of which has been utterly compulsive, visually stunning and mentally taxing, takes it out of a body. Playing sometimes for five hours a day, saving and re-saving games, attempting new strategies, going over old ground to search for hidden doors and missed clues. Fighting, talking, trading and sleeping, all of this and still another level to go and then the escape. If nothing else, *Ultima Underworld* has turned a world-weary games player into an

excitable and very impressed youth once again. Why should this be?

One reason is that the technical aspects of the game are so right. From the piece-of-cake control system to the conversations, internal game logic and high-speed combat sequences, everything meshes. Even the music adds to the atmosphere. Each of your actions is accompanied by its own theme, from the menace of the combat theme to the moodiness of the search theme, the music when played out of a Sound Blaster card complements the game well.

The idea of the game is a familiar one: you have to explore level after level of the Abyss – an artificial settlement created years before as an experimental multi-racial (in fact



***Ultima Underworld* – a game that only the PC can handle.**

multi-special, if there is such a word) community. The Abyss was founded on the principles of the Avatar (for more information on this see the *Ultima VII* review on

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Our cover illustration affects the atmosphere of menace produced by the game. It's just a shame that the characters in *Underworld* bitmap when you get too close.

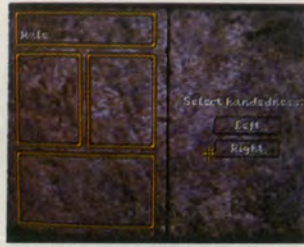
A COMING TOGETHER

Origin claims that the single-player, 360-degree cavern exploration system of *Underworld* and the party-based outside exploration system of *Ultima 7* will be brought together for new game some time in the next few years. There are also rumours that a CD-ROM based version of the game will be forthcoming.

CHARACTER BUILDING STUFF

Before braving the Stygian depths, you will need to have a character. Creating one could not be easier. And not only can you choose your name and sex, you can (in fact you must) choose which hand you favour to carry weapons and what character type you prefer. This latter choice takes in Bards (good at ranged weapons and magic), Druids (skilled with bow or

mace, good with magic), Fighters (no good with magic, great with any other weapon), Mages (tend towards magic use but can also use weapons), Paladins (tend towards weapons but can use limited magic), Rangers (excellent tracking and some magic), Shepherds (good all rounders) and Tinkers (no good with magic, but excellent at repairs and fighting).



You begin by choosing your sex and with which hand you prefer to fight.



Next choose your trade or set of skills. There's a wide range of them.



You also get to choose what you look like. This could last you months.



And here you are in all your glory, ready to do battle with the Stygian scum.

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GET YOUR SPECS OUT

Origin is aiming this game at highly specified PCs – 20Mhz 386SXs with a minimum memory of 2Mb and extended memory. It is the memory requirement that really puts the game out of reach of 286 owners. However, the different level settings in the game will give owners of slightly lower specified machines a chance to play and enjoy the game.



At very high and high-res, there is little difference to see.



But at low-level you can see the basic shapes that underlie the game.

page 37). Sir Cabrius was the idealist who set the thing up to see if the the disparate races could live together – it's a kind of fantasy housing project off the coast of Britannia rather than in South Central LA.

For a while it worked, then the charismatic Sir Cab died – rumour has it that he was poisoned. Following this, the place fell into disrepair. And this is the state in which you find it. The once grand halls and corridors are falling to bits, the stucco and marble is crumbling, and the sense of community has disappeared, to be replaced by inter-racial bitching, open warfare and the return of demons.

All well and good. In any other game all of this atmosphere would have been lost in the jerky motion around the Abyss. Not in *Underworld*. You get to see all of it

in full detail as you explore.

Claims are being made by Origin, that the game is virtual reality-based. It isn't. There is no body suit, no gloves, no helmet

“Come and get it you abomination in the sight of God!”
Dumb move

and no facility to pick things up yourself – maybe Origin got a little carried away with its achievement. But it does come close. Not only can you turn around on

your heels a full 360 degrees, you can still look up and down. In effect this gives you the illusion of being in the dungeons. And because the movement system is inertia-based, you get a real feel of the motion.

And for once the gameplay does not suffer from the technical advances. All the classic elements of adventuring are included: spells, combat, monsters, puzzles, plot and sub-plot. The same attention has been paid to the game design as has been paid to the technical aspects.

This is not a straightforward case of rushing from top to bottom of the Abyss in order to get out and see the end screen as quickly as possible. The central narrative – rescue the Baron's daughter – is strong enough to retain the interest of the inexperienced player. However, the sub-plots are

INTERFACING UP TO THE ABYSS

The *Underworld* interface could not be simpler to use. The left mouse button acts as your feet, the right acts as your hands, eyes or mouth. You move by pushing the mouse to the left, right, up or back. You

can even jump by hitting both mouse buttons simultaneously. All movement is inertia based, which means that if you run full tilt down a corridor and then try to stop immediately, you will be carried forward.

Watch out for this as many of the corridors are on more than one level and you could end up toppling over the edge of a precipice. The rest of the screen is explained below.

- Access options, such as sound and detail levels, plus save and load game
- Conversation icon
- Pick up icon
- Examine icon
- Combat icon (cannot be used in water)
- Use item icon (can also be used to pick-up)

The colour of the dragon's eyes show the state of the enemy's health



- The backpack holds less important items – click to open it
- Your character showing weaponry, rings and armour
- The round boxes hold vital items for quick access and use
- Rune bag – open it to select spells
- The blue bottle shows manna, which is used when casting spells – the red shows the hit-point level

- Combat power level indicator – red indicates full force
- Active spell box – In this case, three light spells are at work

- Compass – red arrow indicates North
- Text scroll – what's going on in the world
- Chosen spell – click to use

SPOT THE PLOT

Here's a startling concept; the plot for *Underworld* is actually quite important to the gameplay. Here you are on your return to Britannia after a gap of 'many years' when you are nabbed by the henchpeople of the Baron Almríc. Apparently, his daughter has been kidnapped and taken to the Abyss. Apparently, you are to blame. And apparently, you are to be

chucked into said Abyss with only your underwear and sense of injustice to keep you company. You are not even allowed to prove your innocence. The only way you are going to get out again is by finding the daughter, rescuing her from the evil influence that holds her and hope she hasn't decided to do a Patti Hearst. After this, you have to fight your way back up.

Throughout your subterranean sojourn you will bump into people who have either been consigned to the pit for their supposed sins, or have lived there for years.

You will also be plagued by dreams from an ancient gentleman called Garamon who seems to want to rush you along the way. He might hassle your dreams, but pay attention.



Paranoia is your only salvation as you are wrongfully arrested.



Here is the real culprit, you surmise. It was he who stole the Baron's daughter.



And the Baron is none to pleased about the theft of such a large capital asset.



By the way, this old fella will keep hassling you throughout the game...

also gripping. You have to keep the peace among the different species, or rather, not cause any dissent. You also have to restore the lost artifacts of Cabrius' shortlived reign. These plots have you moving around the Abyss and even returning to levels that you thought you had done with long before. Conversations you may have had on level three will affect the way you behave on level eight. In real time, the conversations could have happened weeks before, so keep notes. The Stygian Abyss is, in fact, a paranoid schizophrenic's nightmare – everything has meaning, or seems to have. That's everything from floor tiles to shrines, from lumps of wood to full-scale settlements. And to make matters worse, there are even tricks being played on you the whole time.

For example, there are several characters who, at first sight, look distinctly unpleasant – all your basic gameplaying instincts will tell you that these chaps are bad guys (I won't give away the game by telling you the exact details). Your first reaction will be to rush into them, battle axe above your head, screaming: "Come and get it you abomination in the sight of God!" Dumb move. Even if you have met similar creatures along the way, even if they have laid into you with the ferocity of a drunken maths teacher wielding a size 12 steel-toe

capped slipper on the last day of term (residual memories, lord bless 'em), it is still a dumb move to approach creatures in an aggressive manner without checking them out first. One piece of collateral damage (US military jargon for dead, innocent and potentially friendly – love it) on level two could mean several impassable passages and locked doors later on. Be circumspect.

The Stygian Abyss is, in fact, a paranoid schizophrenic's nightmare

The ground rules will alter slightly depending on the character you choose to play. Different characters offer different means of approaching the game, from the door-busting, thug-your-way-through fighter, to the more subtle mage, you could play *Underworld* a different way each time you enter the game.

Now for a few criticisms. When you meet another character in combat, or when you attempt to barge past a friendly or mellow character in order to get to a valuable clue, the initially well-drawn representations bitmap quite horribly. In non-technical terms, this means they change from clearly defined beings into chunky, blocky looking beasts.

Now, had the game been designed on, and designed to run on, a 50Mhz 486 this problem might have been circumvented, but the current state of PC technology tends away from this. Who knows, *Underworld II* will probably get around such niggles.

The second nigger is more to do with the way the gameplay was designed. The conversations are limited. They work on a multiple-choice basis, with you picking numbered answers or questions to put to your oppo'. Had the *Underworld* designers talked to the *Ultima 7* designers a bit more, and had taken up the conversation system from *U7*, then the jarring shock of

TALKING A GOOD TRADE



The conversation and trade screen. The boxes above contain items to be traded.

Underworld is not all about blood, guts and combat – try going into the Abyss as a mage or even a shepherd to confirm this.

There are also some very useful conversations to be had. Although some of these have their element of humour and all are multiple choice, it is the one element of the game that could do with some improvement. Happily though, once you've had a conversation with someone or something, it will be remembered for the rest

of the game, meaning that you don't have to waste time repeating yourself.

One main element of the conversation, and an essential point for your survival in the Abyss, is trade. It is here that you can pick up food, new weapons and even vital clues and pieces of the on-going puzzle elements.

The more experience you gain, the wiser you will be when trading. Always keep in mind that no one in the Abyss wants to make a duff deal. There is also a mantra to be chanted at one of the many shrines which will enable you to assess the quality of deals.

VIRTUALLY TRUE

On the back of the box, Origin claims that you can 'move smoothly and continuously through the first virtual reality dungeon'. Although we would all like to believe this, it is not strictly true. VR is far more complex than this and, if this apocryphal story is true, potentially more dangerous. It seems that a car tester had been using a VR system to put a high performance car through its paces. Having driven a virtual few thousand miles, he decided to drive home. On the way home he crashed his own motor into a tree. His reasoning for this act was that he thought tree would disappear.

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COMBAT AND HAVE A BALL

Sooner or later you're going to meet a character who just does not want to talk about things in a grown up and sensible manner. In fact you're going to meet quite a few...

And your honour (combined with the fact that you're not playing a game like this because you're a pacifist) means that you just have to face

up to this bullying. You could always run away – and sometimes this is the best option especially in the early stages

But then there's another option open to you; slice the living daylight out of the enemy with a large weapon and plenty of aggression.

Depending on your skills, you will have armed yourself with a suitable weapon, from dagger to battle axe, which should be in the hand you have

favoured in the character creation section. You might also like to have a spell prepared and a shield in the other hand – combat usually takes place at high speed. In the early stages there are only usually one or two enemies. In the later stages they come at you, as the saying goes, mob-handed. So, once you have readied a spell and girded your loins, it's time to get in there and show them who's boss, much like this...



There's always that sick minority who just want to cause trouble. Well this chappie has just gone too damned far.



It's out with the trusty battle axe and ready to brawl. Notice the way your hand is also in shot as you move to beat the guy up.



Notice the way the hostile fighter is thrusting his sword at you. Now it's time to stop playing and really show who's boss.



Apparently you are, because all that remains of the hooligan is a pile of potentially very useful bits and pieces for you.

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MASTER THE ART

Although *Underworld* makes use of the 360-degree view system, it has been tried before, albeit in much simpler degree, in the form of *Castle Master*. This hack-'n-slash outing can now be found in the Domark PC Games Collection.

standing there punching in numbers might have been leavened. This said, the *Underworld* conversations still trounce those of many other games.

These criticisms aside, *Ultima Underworld* is one of the first genuinely new and exciting games to come out on any computer format for some years now. And it's only available on the PC – no other machine is ever likely to offer this game at its full potential.

The fact that it requires such a highly specified PC might put many readers off. It shouldn't – *Underworld* is undoubtedly good enough to upgrade your 286 or even buy a 386 for. There are months of entertainment in the box and new developments around the corner. It's a pleasure to play and play. ■

Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss

Origin/Mindscape£39.99
Telephone0444 246333
Number of 5.25-inch HD disks6
Number of 3.5-inch HD disks4

Floppy drive systems – Will not run from floppy drives

Compatibility – Origin recommends a 386 running at 20MHz

Display

CGAX Hercules.....X
EGAX VGA.....✓

Backing up

Copy protectionX
You won't get far without the manual
Hard drive installation✓
Takes up 19Mb hard disk space

Sound

Sound Blaster✓
Roland✓ Adlib.....✓

Memory required2Mb

Yes, 2Mb of RAM

Control

JoystickX Mouse✓
Keyboard✓

FOR

Incredible control system and game environment with 360-degree movement. Interaction with other characters. Non-linear exploration.

AGAINST

Other characters bitmap when close-up. You need a highly specified PC to play it. Conversations a little weak.

RATING 92%

SPELLS TROUBLE

You might like to try making your way through the Abyss without the use of magic, but then again you might like to try open heart surgery without training, or visit a ruptured nuclear plant without protection.

Magic is necessary, with spells ranging from simple Make Food, to the more complicated Gate Travel and Roving Sight via Fly, Protection and even the odd bit of telepathy.

And, like the rest of the game system, using magic couldn't really be easier. You do have to collect the runes that, when combined in the correct order, make up the hexes that could mean the difference between life and restart.

And of course, the really useful runes only crop up in the later stages and in the most out-of-the-way places. You've been warned.



Your rune bag is your friend at all times. It is a small grey bag into which you have to place the runes you find on the way.



Opening up the bag reveals a substantial number of tiles, or runes. Placing them in the correct order creates a spell.

A PILE OF OLD MAP

The Abyss is huge; eight levels, each with sub-levels, some with hidden doors, teleportation areas and heavy undercurrents in the rivers. For many people who hate the hassle of creating reams and reams of gridded maps while attempting to fight, this size and complexity of geography could mean not playing the game at all.

But Origin has thought of this and has provided a godsend in the form of automapping. The system is called up once you have discovered your map scroll in the first level. From then on, every room and corridor you explore will be fully marked out for you. Even better, you can make your own annotations to the maps for later use.



Auto-mapping makes playing *Underworld* a real joy. No longer do you have to worry about having your sense of fantasy disrupted as you get lost once again.