

"Avatar? Yes, ta"
replies Dean Evans
when asked to become
the hero in Origin's
RPG super-sequel.

Pagan: Ultima VIII



Three o'clock in the morning. Three o'clock! When I finally left the upper catacombs and strolled wearily into the Pagan sunlight, the afternoon, the evening, let's face it, the entire day had gone. I should have left it there. I should have saved the game at Stone Cove, quit and turned off the machine.

But I didn't. I just wanted to get that tiny bit further. I just wanted to try out that last spell the Necromancer gave me. 'Create Golem' he said it was called. I need some dirt and some blood and...

Okay, I know it sounds like I've already popped down to C&A to put my anorak on order, but Richard Garriott's latest Ultima offering, Pagan, has me well and truly hooked. I'm amazed. I've never liked RPGs before; the whole genre excites me about as much as a Rumanian shotputter in a little black dress — and that's not at all, before you say anything.

But playing Ultima VIII (or U8, as I'll refer to it from now on) is like reading a good book. You get so involved you just want to keep turning over one more page, travelling to just one more location, before you finally switch off the lights and try to get some sleep. In fact, I don't think it's really an RPG at all — but I'll get to this later.

Created by Richard Garriott back in



The Avatar's life expectancy is getting shorter and shorter by the minute. Very rarely do things get this drastic in U8, but when faced with Trolls (big and stupid) and Ghosts with heat-seeking skull missiles (I kid you not) you either fight bravely or shout "Arrgggh!" and run away.

the early 80s, the Ultima series is probably the longest running and most complex collection of games in computer history. Simply and sweepingly put, it's a fantasy role-playing game, a story that chronicles the exploits of the Avatar — fearless warrior and paragon of virtue — as he battles plagues, thwarts sinister plots and confronts huge alien entities.

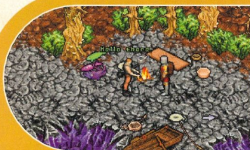
Most of the adventures have been set in the fictional land of Britannia, a

Tolkien-style kingdom ruled by Garriott's alter ego Lord British. Now in U8 things are hotting up and the battle between the Avatar and his enemy the Guardian rages beyond Britannia and across dimensions to the isle of Pagan.

If you battled to the end of Ultima VII: Serpent Isle, you'll know that your celebratory "Wa-hey I've defeated the Guardian and saved Britannia" party was rudely gate-crashed when the

Avatar was dragged away by a huge, red hand.

As the curtain rises on U8, the animated intro sequence shows the aforementioned huge, red hand reaching through into another dimension and dropping the tiny form of the Avatar (and that's you that is) into the barren land of Pagan, a place where forces loyal to the Guardian are in total control. You start the game with no con-



After the Guardian dumps you in the freezing waters off Pagan, you are rescued from certain death by a friendly fisherman called Devon. "Go to the library", he says...



...And so you do. Bentic is the librarian in Pagan's only city, Tenebrae. After a long and riveting chat he suggests that you go and see the mad hermit on the plateau. Righty-ho mate.



To get to the plateau you've got to fight your way through a tunnel. The zombie is simple to beat, the skeleton easily dodged... by far the hardest bit is this platform jumping.



tacts, no money, no weapons and no armour. All you've got is a friend called Devon, two fish and some warm underwear. Things can only get better.

So after walking west, rooting around in a barrel for a knife and watching a beheading, it's on to the city gates. U8 centres in and around the city of Tenebrae and your aim is to follow the plot, learn the secrets of the four schools of magic, seek out a fifth magic, become a god (as you do) and then battle the four elemental titans to free Pagan, with two falls, two submissions or a knock-out deciding the winner.

You know the sort of thing: one man against terrible odds, strange magics, even stranger monsters, female executioners in tight black leather and so on. U8 follows the tried and tested quest-based adventure format and that's really all I'm going to say about it because half the fun is discovering all the different locations, items and monsters for yourself. No, really.

Of course, with each new Ultima game Garriott and co completely revamp the game engine and the first thing that you'll notice as you wander around U8 is the superb quality of the graphics. Whereas in Ultima VII you viewed your character from above, U8 employs a slightly sexier isometric-3D view, which allows a greater degree of detail and a lot more realism.

You can see how gorgeous the game looks from the screenshots; the sprites have been enlarged by up to 30% and the animation is smooth and fluid. The Avatar now runs, jumps and teeters on cliffs like never before. Each character has over 400 frames of animation and the Avatar is drawn with a whopping 1,200 frames. Zombies limp, spiders scuttle and floating eyeballs, er, float. In short, on a visual level U8 is simply beautiful.

But size isn't everything and although U8 has some stunning animation, a tortuously complicated plot and a suitably dramatic musical score, there are a few minor changes that might force Ultima veterans to leap out of their comfy chairs and take to the streets in protest.

First, due to the big visuals there's no room this time around for your band of faithful companions and second, the attention to detail has meant that



(Top) The mage woman flirts with death by summoning a fire demon from the darkest depths of the pit. In U8 the inhabitants of Pagan either worship the air, the earth, the water or the fire elemental. Each religion has its own powerful magics and you'll need to master all of them.

(Above) Calling little fire demons into home-made pentagrams is undoubtedly a neat trick, but things really start to get serious when you summon the boss elemental himself. Ladies and Gentlemen put your hands together for Pyros, god of fire. No flash photography, please..



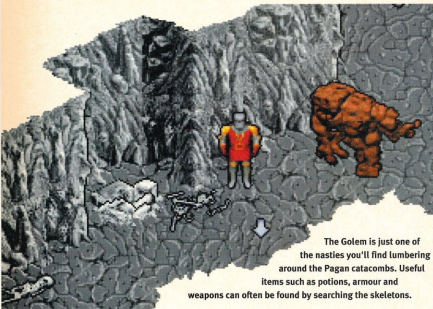
The way is long and hard. After the joy of jumping, a simple lever puzzle must be solved to raise some gates and allow you access to the plateau. Dramatic bridge fight first though.



Mythran the wizard lives a happy but lonely life on the plateau. According to him, your best chance of escape lies with the Necromancers near the city. Back we go...



The Necromancers are a shifty lot and we'll let you into their gang unless you retrieve a ceremonial dagger from the Lady Mordee, ruler of the city. Apparently her maid has the key.



although U8 is still impressively big, it's only 25% as large as Ultima VII.

Okay, not too much of a problem so far. But where people might have been expecting Garriott to improve the graphics, bump up the scrolling speed and make the control interface a bit less fiddly, what has actually happened is that U8 has undergone a quantum leap into the mainstream.

Yes, if you're an Ultima fan there's a third thing I don't think you're going to like. As Origin are trying to make the Ultima games appeal to a wider audience, i.e. to the 'first-time roleplayer' like myself, U8 has been slimmed and trimmed and has become more of a platform-jumping arcade adventure. The few token RPG stats seem to be just chucked in there for good measure.

But while Ultima devotees will fall dramatically to the floor screaming "Blasphemy! Blasphemy!", the new arcade emphasis is probably the one reason why newcomers will really like U8. I've admitted that RPG's usually bore me stupid, so the last thing I want of an evening is to spend two hours in the Armpit & Firkin chatting to assorted cut-throats and rumour-spreaders about the seven virtues and the black jewel of Mondain. Nor do I want any truck with Orc-batters, Beholders and hit points at all. None what-so-ever. Strangely, U8 isn't like this and although you still collect magic items and your stats affect your performance, it really doesn't seem like an RPG at all.

Oh, there are hit points and dexterity ratings and you can only carry a certain weight, but whereas success in Ultima VII often depended on saying the right thing to the right person at the right time, in U8 speedy progress will depend on how good you are at jumping platforms, dodging fire-bombs and solving simple lever puzzles. In fact most of the harder sections involve no character interaction or complex puzzles at all, just repeated bouts of abyss leaping and maze wandering.

There's no denying that U8 is a stunningly impressive game and I like it enough to take it home to meet my parents, but it's sooooo slow. The scrolling is often horribly jerky and if there is more than one monster on the screen (and there frequently is), it chugs along so slowly I often wanted to ram the

PASS NOTES

No 4,762: The Avatar

Ages: As old as you want him to be.

Appearance: Knight of the Round Table.

Job: Hero and star of the brand new

Ultima game, Pagan, written and designed by Richard Garriott.

Richard Garriott? You mean the Origin programmer who has a plait in his hair and owns a huge mansion that he opens up on Halloween to stage a lavish and expensive haunted house party for all his friends? Yep, that's the one.

What's this Avatar business then? The

Avatar is the central hero, a man who has the unenviable ability to arrive naked anywhere in the universe and still triumph against impossible odds. Of course, he wasn't always called the Avatar, he actually became the Avatar after finding the mysterious seven virtues in Ultima 6. Anyway, the Avatar is your persona in the gameworld and you move him about with your mouse.

Avatar is a title? Absolutely. He's not Bob Avatar or Avatar O'Brien. Apparently 'Avatar' translates to mean 'Champion'.

Yuck! Yes, he's a Mr Goody-Two-Shoes.

What does he do? Generally he strides purposefully around strange lands, hacking away at monsters, chatting to friendly bar-keeps and sneaking into unlocked houses to nick all the owners' cash.

But you said he was good? Yes, but I didn't say he was perfect.

What else? He's been known to dabble in the magic arts and in this latest game he can run, jump and climb like never before. Clicking on him with the mouse brings up the statistics screen (strength, dexterity, how much armour he's carrying, etc) while clicking on the backpack shows you what is currently being carried in the inventory.

Prospects: Looking good. He's contracted to do at least another two Ultima games - and then plans to nip up to Stratford to do some theatre. Will probably be played by Annie Schwarzenegger when Ultima: The Movie comes out.

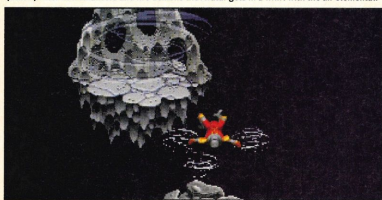
Most likely to say: Oh crap, where I am this time?

Least likely to say: Anything unless you've forked out an extra £20 for the speech pack.

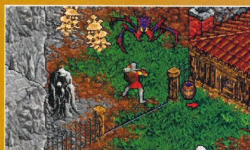


(Above) Double click on the Avatar and you bring up the status screen (pretty self explanatory really). Click again on the backpack and a picture of your current inventory pops up.

(Below) After necromancers and fire demons the Avatar gets in a whirl with the air elemental.



After getting the dagger, the Necromancer ritually murders his superior (he was dying anyway, you see) and takes you on as his apprentice. Next you have to find some reagents...



The new Necromancer needs some sticks and a rare flower called Executioner's Hood (?). Oops, none here and by the way fighting a Kith (the giant spider thing) is akin to suicide.



"Go and seek out the old Necromancers", he said so off I went. Now is really starts to get hard but every necromancer gives you a new spell to learn. 'Withstand death' is handy...

mouse through the screen in frustration.

Because of the large graphics and the detail, if you haven't got a 486 machine I suggest you don't even try playing U8 — the game will move at a snail's pace. It's painfully sluggish on a 25MHz 486, slow on a 33MHz and just about bearable on a top-whack 66MHz 486 DX2. If your machine isn't well-endowed in the processor department, it may well become almost unplayable.

If the speed problem is frustrating, the fiddly U8 control system is absolutely infuriating. Essentially the interface is the same as Ultima VII, with the Avatar's movements controlled with the right mouse button and things like conversations and the inventory screen accessed by pressing the left.

Instead of clicking on the place you want to travel to and watching the Avatar stroll casually to it (a la *The Day of the Tentacle*), you have to navigate around manually. Normally this wouldn't be a problem but sometimes the controls won't respond and simple things like picking up items and walking through doors can become a nightmare.

In a game where quick movement and arcade reflexes play a much bigger role, there are times when U8 can be seriously annoying. Because of the fiddly controls and the real-time combat and platform jumping it's wise to save your game as often as possible. Unfortunately there are only eleven free Save game slots, and it takes so long to save and load games that if you've been playing for a month I guarantee at least a week of that time will have been spent waiting for your last save to reload.

But if you can ignore all these niggles, U8 is a hugely involving and absorbing game. I'm hopelessly lost in it and if you're looking for a game that will keep you going for months rather than weeks, U8 is most definitely it.

The attention to detail and atmosphere is incredible: zombies rise out of the ground, skeletons crumble and reform like an old Clash Of The Titans special effect, and there's always something new to kill and discover.

Yes, I know I've just spent five paragraphs saying how frustrating it all is, but that really doesn't detract from the fact that U8 is still a superb mix of real-time combat, arcade puzzles and fantasy role-play.

Ultima veterans may not be happy about the way the game has repositioned, but if you're a first-time role-player and you've been wondering what all this Ultima business is all about, U8 is a simple and friendly introduction. Because of the speed and control problems it doesn't quite make it up to the dizzy heights of a PC Games Star award, but I like the game so much that if I ever see Richard Garriott again I might even offer to buy him a pint, Maybe.

That's it. If you've got a fast 486 go out and buy U8. If you like Ultima go out and buy U8. Hey, and if you, point me towards the Hall Of The Mountain King, would ya?



You may start wearing a sack but give it a week and you too can have shiny armour...



IT'S A BIT LIKE...

Playing U8 you're struck by just how much the gameplay resembles *Alone In The Dark*. Richard Garriott is known to be a big fan of the Infogrames classic, and the gameplay and character movement in U8 is highly similar. Like *Alone In The Dark*, U8's combat can be fiddly and enemies are often dispatched by luck rather than with any real skill. Obviously U8 is bigger and more complex but if you fancy atmosphere, unmitigated violence and voodoo magic, *Alone In The Dark 2* neatly fits the bill. It's a damn sight easier than U8, anyway.



ULTIMA VIII ...



...ALONE IN THE DARK 2

What's so great about Ultima VIII?

PC Review's role-playing specialist and Ultima fanatic Cal Jones gives her views on Richard Garriott's latest opus.



Ultima VII was a fine game, but the interface was a little tricky for novice role-players to master. Unfortunately, rather than rectify this glaring fault, Origin has made the interface even less friendly.

The Avatar can now run, jump and climb, which is nice on a cosmetic level but complicates the game-play. It often takes several goes to pick up an item or walk

through a doorway, which irritated the Hell out of me.

What's more, there are now numerous arcade style puzzles in the game, such as leaping from one platform to another. As I said in my review of the game in PC Review (May issue), if I'd wanted a platform game I would have bought *Prince of Persia* or *Flashback*. I think Origin should have concentrated on improving interface, scrolling and game speed whilst retaining the depth of plot Ultima games are famous for, instead of introducing these arcade sections.

Even if all this leaping around does appeal to first time role-players (I found it irritating), I think that they will be put off by the awkward controls. Ultima VIII is more an arcade adventure than an RPG and, in my mind, this is a mistake.

PAGAN: ULTIMA VIII

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RECOMMENDED SPEC

33 MHz 486, VGA, 640K, 4Mb RAM and 35Mb of hard disk space.

ALSO SUPPORTS

Adlib, Sound Blaster and Roland sound-cards.

THE GOOD...

- A superb plot, nice sound, beautiful animation and lots of atmosphere. What more could you ask for?
- The sheer size means that it'll take you months not weeks to complete.
- A good introduction to the series for the first-time role-player.

...AND THE BAD

- Ultima veterans may grumble about the real-time combat and platform jumping.
- The control system is very fiddly.

OVERALL

89%



After meeting the seven necromancers it's on to the Hall Of The Mountain King. More stupid platforms and you're there. Phew.