

Abyssmal Perspective

Origin's Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss

by Allen Greenberg

Among the arsenal of special effects equipment that became available to the film industry during the 1970s was an item called the Steadicam. This amazingly portable device allowed a film director to compose uninterrupted film sequences that smoothly travel from one location to another. It was the Steadicam, for example, that carried the viewer eerily along the nightmare encrusted hallways and garden mazes of Stephen King's imposing Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film *The Shining*. Settling into *Ultima Underworld — The Stygian Abyss (UTSA)*, one might wonder if Lord British is not guilty of strapping one of these devices onto some unfortunate employee from Origin Systems and depositing that person into some medieval, horror-filled tunnel in order to capture some rare motion picture footage. If this is indeed the case, that employee apparently survived long enough to contribute a unique action perspective to this eagerly anticipated entry into the growing field of dungeon-style role-playing programs.

Inspired, perhaps, by their own company's success in bringing depth and realism to space combat simulation with the *Wing Commander* series, the designers of *UTSA* have replaced the traditional graph-paper design of other dungeon games with an environment that flows past the player in a continuous stream. More than this, the game presents a dungeon world in three admirably realistic dimensions, along with occupants who are constantly in motion. This is an ambitious project, and not without its share of problems. However, it represents a significant step toward the elusive "conceptual world building" that some have unjustly claimed to be "virtual reality."

As in most recently released dungeon adventures, *UTSA* is best controlled using the mouse. This, along with the game's real-time action, an icon-based command system and the ability to di-

TITLE:	Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss
SYSTEM:	IBM
PRICE:	\$79.95
PROTECTION:	None
DESIGNER:	Paul Neurath
PUBLISHER:	Origin Systems Austin, TX

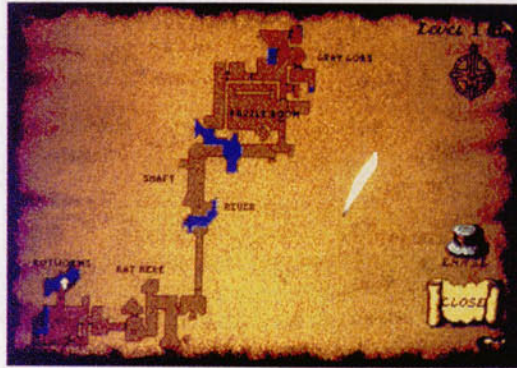
rectly manipulate objects on the graphic screen are now well-established features in the genre, and from what this reviewer continues to call the "gut-level interface." In *UTSA*, however, players may discover that the mouse is barely adequate to accommodate all of the functions assigned to it, much as a good flight combat simulation often demands a more complex input device.

In fact, players will need to acquire some skills formerly associated only with flight or driving simulations, such as the ability to stay "on course" while moving ahead in narrow corridors. Speed of travel is also under the player's control, as is the ability to leap across chasms or jump to different heights. *UTSA* is certainly no arcade game, but timing and coordination are necessary tools for survival.

"Power steering" has also been added to *UTSA* and this can cause some frustration. In other dungeons, players simply click on a left or right arrow in order to turn 90 degrees. Here, players select either a clockwise or counter-clockwise turn, the degree of which is determined by the amount of time the mouse button stays pressed. This is necessary because many hallways and openings branch off at other than right angles. However, bringing the turn to a stop at the correct point can be difficult and a lot of time will likely be wasted spinning around at intersections. Players also have the ability to tilt their point of view up or down. With all of these robotic functions in operation, it is not long before the illusion takes hold that one is actually controlling Britannia's version of R2D2 in Wonderland.

Combat within the dungeon is yet another affair controlled by the mouse. Enemies can attack from all sides and seem to harbor very little guilt when it comes to remaining outside the hero's

limited field of vision. The player's attack is a two-step process, in which a weapon is first pulled back and then released. A more powerful attack results when the time between these two steps is lengthened. A good strategy for combat appears to be one of constant movement, so that players may wish to try a move-pull-move-release pattern. Obviously, combat in *UTSA* can be quite different from other dungeon games in which the hero remains stationary or simply turns from one attacker to the next.



that has already been established in the *Ultima* series. There is no need to gather ingredients for spells, but players do need to collect rune stones, each of which has been inscribed with a letter from Britannia's alphabet. Once a letter has been added to the hero's inventory, it may be used an unlimited number of times in constructing spells, most of which will be familiar to graduates of earlier CRPGs. The ability to cast a particular spell depends on the player's level and number of spell points or "mana" available. As in other games, spells may be used in combat either to alter a player's condition or to bring about changes within a given area. One of the more popular spells allows the hero to soar through the dungeon like a bird. (Did someone mention "flight simulator" earlier in this column?)

UTSA is very much a part of Richard Garriot's *Ultima* universe. Sometime following the events of *Ultima VI*, it is revealed that Baron Almruc has been personally assigned by Lord British to lead an experimental, multi-attribute settlement on the Isle of the Avatar, directly over the former Stygian Abyss. Following a ghostly summons, the player, in the role of the overworked, under-appreciated Avatar, is falsely accused of kidnapping the Baron's daughter. What, then, begins as a rescue mission to save the girl soon becomes a far more critical quest to save Britannia from an unsuspected evil. Within the nine-level, multi-kilometer Abyss, the Avatar will encounter such *Ultima* standards as the meditation shrines and objects of virtue.

The dungeon also contains a variety of magical objects that, upon experimentation, produce an entertaining variety of results. Many of these objects are hidden behind puzzles while others may be obtained from certain occupants of the dungeon. There is a variety of puzzles and mini-quests to be solved in the game and they range from the mechanical manipulation of levers and switches to heeding the impassioned plea of a dead spirit. Other

Spellcasting in *UTSA* also draws heavily on the system of magic



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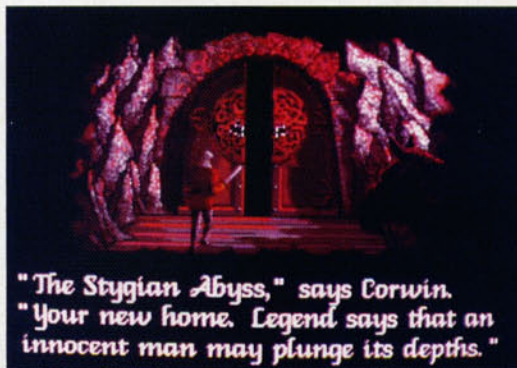
FLIGHT CONTROL SYSTEM



important questions involve the identity and relationship of Tom and Judy as well as the gentle culinary art of preparing Rotworm Soup.

Conversation with NPCs, using only the finest pseudo-Shakespearean English, is yet another important aspect of *UTSA*. For this, the player responds to questions and statements by selecting phrases and responses from a menu. As experienced Avatars are well aware, unprovoked combat or other mistreatment of innocent characters will result in a diminution of a player's attributes. Non-playing characters not only possess some useful inventory, but also have quite a bit of information to offer. It is possible to trade items with them or obtain their services in repairing inventory already owned.

Although an acknowledged Avatar, the player must enter the dungeon with a minimum of experience. Characters from the *Ultima* series may not be transferred here and so the player must first choose to be a fighter, mage, bard, tinker, druid, paladin, ranger or shepherd. Within each class are several skills, one of which the player must choose to excel in. To survive, however, the player would be well advised to diversify and master as many of these skills as possible. All classes are able to cast spells, al-



"The Stygian Abyss," says Corwin.
"Your new home. Legend says that an innocent man may plunge its depths."

though mages have the obvious advantage. A player's skills will improve as a result of meditation at one of several shrines using special mantras, both of which may be found throughout the dungeon. The player will also enjoy an increase in vitality as experience is gained and a higher ranking is assigned.

The program uses a common method for carrying and manipulating inventory, that is, clicking on a container opens a window to reveal its contents. From here, an object may be taken, used or consumed. Unexplained changes in the hero's inventory appear

to be the result of a bug in the program and Origin has already been made aware of the problem. For now, it is important to both examine inventory and save the game often.

There are also very definite limitations as to how much a character may carry and this amount is further reduced by the presence of heavy protective armor. Throwing modesty to the winds, it may help to accomplish certain tasks without clothing.

Graphically, most of *UTSA*'s "fireworks" are in its animations and not in its backgrounds. Most scenes are murky and dim in appearance and objects generally lack detail. At times, certain perspectives are confusing. Chasms that appear to have been crossed already may *still* prevent the player from moving forward. Similarly, certain doorways that appear to be within reach remain frustratingly unapproachable.

The game's sound effects are minimal, even with a recommended soundboard. The program does, however, feature an interesting and effective musical score. Far more impressive sounds and pictures have been produced for other dungeon games, generally on the Amiga and Atari ST computers.

UTSA is one of the new generation of Origin games that will require high-performance computers on which to run. A minimum configuration includes a 386 SX processor, two megabytes of RAM and an expanded memory manager. VGA graphics capability is also required, as is a hard drive. The program will occupy between eight and 13 megabytes on the drive, depending upon which sound and display options are selected.

Two features of this package deserve a final special mention. First, the program includes a powerful auto-mapping feature that actually allows the player to permanently annotate the map as it is displayed. An option to dump this map to a printer would have been even more appreciated. Second, the documentation that accompanies the program is outstandingly clear and complete, yet relatively brief.

What may be overlooked in *UTSA* is its enjoyable story and well-crafted puzzles. More than that, the designers have admirably avoided overwhelming the player with an excess of any one obstacle. Other dungeon exercises have too frequently called on preposterous battles and endless forests of mazes to provide the main challenge. Herein lies an enjoyable challenge with a unique game-playing engine to back it up. To that abused employee at Origin who carried the SteadiCam — "Nice Work!" **cgw**

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