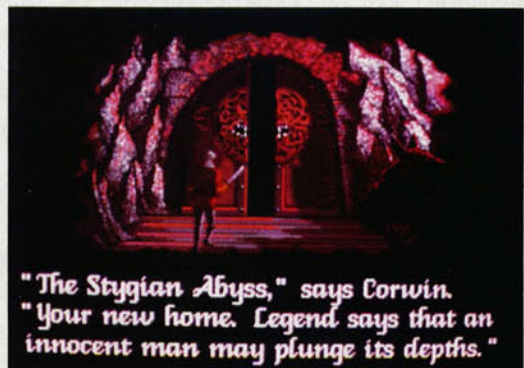


Scorpion's View

Origin's Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss

as told by Scorpia



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

Scorpia is an experienced and respected adventure game expert. CGW is pleased to provide this forum for her distinctive and often controversial perspective.

The plotline for *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* is similar to that of every other *Ultima*. "Avatar saves Britannia yet again." What sets *Underworld* apart from the rest of the line is the 3-D real-world modeling of graphics and movement. 3-D is nothing new in dungeons; it was being used as far back as Lord British's first published game, *Akalabeth*, more than ten years ago. Since then, a number of companies, especially FTL with *Dungeon Master* and SSI with *Eye Of The Beholder*, have greatly refined the point-of-view approach. Now comes *Ultima Underworld*, and 3-D takes on a whole new meaning. The key to this breakthrough is the use of full-range movement. In a typical point-of-view game, if you turn left, your perspective shifts by ninety degrees. There is no in between; you always do a quarter-circle turn. In *Underworld*, a turn goes through a full 360 degrees, and you can stop it at any point around the circle. Further, walking or running in the dungeon is not always on the usual straight line, nor is it of the "click-step, click-step" variety. Motion is smooth and continuous, and you can shift position as you move, including making a complete turn.

The use of light and shadow adds another dimension of realism. Dungeons are dark places, and torchlight doesn't go very far. In addition, the illumination varies according to the surroundings. When traveling through an area that has light-colored walls and low ceilings, you see better than when moving through open spaces, such as the swamp, using the same type of light source.

Sound is used mainly as an indicator of other creatures in the vicinity. Several have distinctive noises that you come to recognize after a while: lurkers, the frog-faced, tentacled critters that inhabit rivers and pools; creepy-crawlies such as slugs and worms; and flyers like mongbats, imps and gazers, among others. By listening carefully, you can often form an accurate idea of what's out there, even though you may not be able to see it yet. As regards music, there are three tunes in the game. Two of them play alternately, one segueing into the other, as you move around. These can be described as "bright march" and "spooky/erie." The third tune, a bit frenetic, comes on only in combat mode. The music, however, is rather loud, and sometimes obscures the sounds of dungeon denizens. It is generally better to have the music off to avoid unpleasant surprises when exploring new locations and to turn it back on when traveling through known areas.

Auto-mapping is the best I've seen to date. Each level of the Abyss has its own page, filled in as you explore the level. Along the right-hand side is an ample margin where you can write notes, using a nice-looking quill pen. In fact, you can write anywhere on the map itself. The preferred method is to number important locations and use the margins for the actual notes. When looking at the map, you can scroll up or down levels, too. There are blank pages beyond eight (the number of levels in the game) that you can use for additional notes. There's even an eraser in case you make a mistake or two. The only feature lacking in this otherwise excellent mapping facility is the ability to run off a copy on your printer. While you can look at the map at any time, there are moments when having a hard copy would make life a little easier.

So, what is the Avatar doing in this hell-hole, anyway? First of all, it wasn't always a dungeon. Sir Cabirus, a knight of the Crux Ansata (a paladin organization), brought various groups to the Abyss and turned it into the showplace of Britannia. It was meant as an example of peaceful co-existence, since the groups included such non-humans as Goblins, Dwarves, Lizardmen and Trolls. Everything went along fairly well, until Cabirus died and a few volcanic tremors shook the establishment. (Apparently the knight never considered the possible dangers of living inside a volcano.) These days, the survivors struggle to live on as best they can, and the Abyss has become a dumping ground for anyone the local baron doesn't care for. A trip into the Abyss is generally a one-way trip.

The Avatar has been dumped into the dungeon to find the baron's kidnapped daughter. The reason for this is explained in a lengthy introduction, complete with digitized voices. Unfortunately, this is the *only* place in the game where voices are used, which is a big disappointment. While the digitization is very good, it's hardly worth chewing up two meg of disk space merely for the lead-in. Far better to have used voices throughout the game, particularly in the dream sequences and other special circumstances.

Character generation is reminiscent of *Ultima IV*, the major difference being that you can raise skills, instead of attributes, during the course of the game. There are three sets of skills in the game: one for combat, one for magic and one for general. Different classes are given different choices for starting skills, but after play begins, it is possible to raise any skill. This is done by locating a shrine, chanting the appropriate mantra and hav-

Ultima Underworld Tips

Problems with vanishing inventory items have been reported in the game. What usually happens is that the original items in a container disappear and are replaced by something else. This happened to me one time when I opened a bag and found inside only two worn hand axes (something I hadn't even picked up anywhere at all!), instead of the objects I was expecting to see. To avoid these problems, make sure that no container of any kind ever holds more than seven objects at once. After I kept mine down to seven items or less, nothing ever disappeared on me again.

This brings us to inventory management in general. Not counting space for armor and weapons, you have only eight slots for carrying things around. That isn't much, so you must use the various bags, pouches, boxes and packs that you find to increase your carrying capacity. Even with that, you don't want to be carrying around too much, since you do have a weight limit (measured in stones). This becomes important as you find better armor, as armor and weapons naturally count toward the limit, and chain and plate is pretty heavy stuff. What most people do is set up caches of extra items in various safe locations (noting them on the map, of course!). Objects in this game do not disappear when left on the ground; they stay where they are. So you can set up equipment dumps throughout the Abyss, leaving items behind when inventory space or weight gets to be too much.

When you create your character, strength is the most important statistic. Strength determines how much you can carry and determines the starting values of your combat skills. The higher your strength, the better these values will be, and combat is very important in this game. I ran two characters through the Abyss, a Druid and a Shepherd, with starting attributes respectively of 23/17/20 and 23/13/20 (for ST/DX/INT). These values proved quite satisfactory. Regarding class, I recommend that you choose one of the three that are able to do some magic right off: Druid, Shepherd or Mage. Runes are not difficult to find on the first level, and once you have

them (and the rune bag), you can cast both light and food spells. This means you don't have to clutter up your inventory carrying light sources or food supplies most of the time. The other classes begin without spellcasting ability, and until at least one visit to a shrine (with enough experience), they cannot do any magic.

As an offensive weapon, magic isn't all that useful. Most offensive spells (such as lightning bolts and fireballs) are missiles and require a lot of space between you and the target. This room is often hard to come by. Opponents who have no long-distance weapons (spells or slings) will always try to close with you, so you have to keep backing up to get your spells off. If they do have ranged weapons, you end up in a long-distance duel, which is not the best way to fight. This applies also to distance weapons, such as slings and bows. They suffer from the same problems as spells, plus you have to find ammunition for them (slingstones or arrows), making them of limited use at best. After a while, I dumped ranged weapons entirely, preferring to carry an extra hand weapon as a backup instead.

Fortunately, your opponents are bound by the same rules you are (and a gold star to Origin for that one). They, too, need room to get off their distance weapons. Therefore, the best tactic when up against goblins (who use slings), gazers (who use magic) and fire elementals (who throw fireballs), is generally to rush right in, get close and stay close, swinging away all the time. When fighting elementals, it is also a good idea to have Sanct Flam up to provide some extra protection (especially if there's more than one of those critters around). Against opponents who have no distance weapons, the usual tactic is to swing as you go forward; back up quickly, readying another blow; then dash forward again. Of course, since they are also moving quickly, you can't always expect to fight on such a straight-line basis. However, backing up will give you a better view and some room to maneuver, and possibly cause your opponent to miss you.

When facing multiple opponents at once, constant movement is a life-saver. Don't stay in one

place; smack an enemy, move to another and keep going. By staying in motion, you make it harder for the critters to get a bead on you, especially if they have distance weapons. However, if you're up against a mixed bag of opponents, go for the most dangerous first and take it out as quickly as possible. Remember you can run away if things are getting too tough (and there's an exit handy). Most critters will follow you only so far, then give up the chase. This gives you a chance to rest, lick your wound, and try again later. During the game, you will be running a lot of errands for a lot of people. There is always a quid pro quo; no one gives away something for nothing. Take careful notes on who wants what, so you don't forget anything. When talking to various NPCs, keep in mind that you're the Avatar. Being polite, honest and humble will get you further than being rude, arrogant and mendacious. A little flattery is also helpful, on occasion. You have to keep your karma clean. That means not attacking anything that isn't outrightly hostile. If it isn't bothering you, leave it alone. As mentioned before, there are slugs, worms, rats, bats and other critters who are just going along, minding their own business. There is no need to kill these things.

Level seven is likely to be the most difficult one, since magic will not work there for some time (your mana flask drains right out as soon as you set foot on that level). Bring a light source with you, and a couple of poison antidotes. Cast a light spell (preferably Daylight) just before you go down the stairs to seven. Be prepared to do a fair amount of jumping around here, too. Make sure you stay away from any guard posts until you have the amulet. Most doors outside of the massive variety can be bashed open if you don't have the appropriate key, Lockpicking skill or Open spell. Weapons can be used for this, but chopping up doors is very likely to ruin them (except for the Sword of Justice, which never loses its edge). If you must bash open a door and don't have that sword, use your bare hand. It's a slow process, but will get the job done and preserve your weapons. Above all, take your time going through the Abyss. It's a huge place, with much to discover. You'll do better by exploring carefully, taking good notes, and saving often than by trying to rush through it. Good luck!

ing enough experience for an advancement. There are two types of mantras, set-specific and skill-specific. A set-specific mantra raises skills randomly. For example, Summ Ra, the Combat mantra, will raise three combat skills, usually by 1-3 points each. It pays to try out a shrine now and then to see if you're ready for another boost.

Magic is accomplished through the use of runes. By putting together different combinations of rune stones (as noted in the manual), and expending the necessary amount of mana, spells are cast. Half

your level, rounded up, must be equal to, or greater than, the level of the spell you're attempting, or it won't work. You begin with no runes; they must be found as you make your way through the dungeon. In fact, you begin with very little: no armor, a worn dagger and a few supplies. Everything else must be scavenged or traded for as you make your way down the levels.

This brings us to the point that not everyone or everything you come across will be hostile. The enclaves set up by Cabirus still exist, although not in their

former glory. Any beings, even be they ghouls or trolls, who live under the banner of the Crux Ansata (the ankh), are inclined to be friendly. It is in these places that you pick up important information, as well as some important items. Outside such locations, most of what you come across is likely to want your blood. Yet not *all* critters will be hostile to you. If something doesn't come charging your way immediately, take a moment to look at it. Any description other than "hostile" means that it will leave you alone, so long as you leave *it* alone.

Still, there is a fair amount of combat in the game, and most will find it a new, possibly frustrating, experience. Anyone who had problems with the "slip'n'slide" techniques of *Eye of the Beholder* is likely to have even more trouble in *Underworld*. In combat, the right mouse button controls your weapon. Holding down the button draws back the weapon; releasing the button releases the blow. The type of blow (overhead bash, slash or thrust) depends on the location of the arrow cursor when the button is first held down. However, the mouse (via the left button) also controls your own movement. Which way you move and how fast is, again, determined by the position of the arrow cursor on the screen. So you use the mouse to fight and move at the same time. What causes the difficulties is that your opponent is *not* standing still. Unlike virtually all other games, the enemy doesn't stay toe-to-toe with you. He (or it) is moving: back, forward, around the side, etc., and striking at you all the time. So you have to keep moving, too.

Trying to control both movement and weapon with one input device in the heat of battle is not easy. You *can* use the keyboard for movement, but then you have two hands (and eight keys!) to worry about. It's all too easy to hit the wrong movement key and find yourself in trouble, especially later in the game when you face multiple opponents.

The Abyss is a large place and, in some ways, can be thought of as a sort of vertical *Martian Dreams*: the game is not linear; there is much running back and forth, up and down, between levels. Unfortunately, you will have to do it all pretty much on foot. No easy method of traveling long distances exists outside of the single moonstone. You can teleport to the moonstone from anywhere with a Gate Travel spell or scroll, but the trip is one-way. The one good aspect to this is that once an area of the dungeon has been cleared out, it stays that way. You don't have to worry about endless battles with regenerating critters as you trek around the Abyss. They're gone forever,

so you can, at least, go quickly through the passages on your various errands.

Skills are a nice idea, but not particularly well-considered or implemented. For instance, Lockpicking was useless; almost any locked door short of "massive" could be bashed open eventually, even if you had no key, not to mention the Unlock spell. Appraise, supposed to be used in trading, had no meaning at all. What did it matter if you swapped a couple of spare weapons and a gem, if it got you a chainmail shirt? Search was laughable, since most secret doors show up on the map after you pass by their locations. Other skills were equally of little value.

For all that, *Ultima Underworld* is an impressive first product. The meticulous construction of a real-world dungeon environment is outstanding. Despite a few silly puzzles, the body of the game is substantial, with much to do and to explore. Combat, while difficult to master, is generally well-balanced. *Ultima Underworld* may be a dungeon trek, but it is certainly the dungeon trek of the future. **CGW**

TWIN ENGINE GAMING PRESENTS:

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OUT TIME DAYS is a highly interactive role-playing Play-By-Mail game with turns processed weekly. It has received excellent reviews, notably from *Flagship* and *Paper Mayhem*. Turn cost is \$5.00. The game is open ended and 99% computer moderated. The rulebook may be obtained for \$5.00 (refundable with startup). A special startup is available that gives you the rulebook, the startup turn, and five turns for only \$15.00.



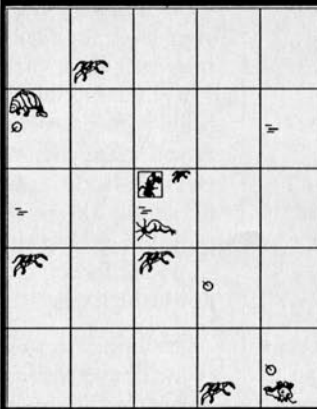
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Space Combat was designed to be easy to learn, but difficult to master. Every game starts with ten players, and as each is eliminated, the chances of the game ending will increase. Turnsheets are custom made on a laser printer to aid you in filling out your next turn. The games run about 12-18 turns. Cost is \$3.50 per turn. A rulebook (required before you can join) is \$1.00 (free if you mention this ad!).



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