Genre Role-Playing Game
Publisher Origin
Developer Blue Sky Productions
Release £TBA Late March

ULTIMA UNDERWORLD:
THE STYGIAN

Stunning. That's the only word to describe Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss. Actually, that's not quite true. There are loads more. Roughly two thousand, in fact, enough to fill six pages. But I'll get to them in a minute. For now, 'stunning' is the only single adjective that completely sums up the whole Underworld experience.

And what an experience it is. It's the closest thing I've seen to Virtual Reality - You can't stop me! I've said it now! - on a home computer.

But before I start getting into serious hyperbole territory, let's get the plot out of the way. Once again the player assumes the role of the Avatar, hero of many previous Ultima games. Feeling a strange and urgent compulsion to return to the land of Britannia, the player steps through a magical moongate... and straight into trouble.

The player finds himself in a lavish castle bedroom where a kidnapping is in progress. A mysterious mage and his servant troll are clambering through the open window, an unconscious young girl slung under the slimy monster's mighty arm. Before the player can act the bedroom door is flung open by the castle guards who promptly take the hapless player prisoner.

A short while later and the player is brought before the sour-faced Baron Almric, whose gorgeous pouting daughter Arial was the kidnap victim. Unconvinced by the explanation as to why the player was in his daughter's room (come on,

would you believe it?) the Baron orders that the player rescue his stolen child.

Witnesses saw the wizard and the troll entering the dreaded Great Stygian Abyss. Many years ago a devotee of the Avatar's ways set up a colony in the Abyss's labyrinthian depths consisting of all manner of weird and wonderful Britannia denizens to see if they could ever co-exist in peace and harmony. Some hope. The colony soon dissolved into anarchy, with differing factions splin-

tering away from the main group and forming their own communities in various parts of the Abyss. (Okay, so it's hardly the most plausible explanation as to why the Abyss has so many differing creatures in such close proximity, but it'll have to do.)

The Baron's guards escort the player to the entrance to the Abyss and throw him inside. As the mighty door slams shut behind him, the player hears the chief guard shouting that the player will not be allowed to leave unless he's accompanied by Arial...

As usual, all this preamble is conveyed by a long animated intro. It's no better or worse than any other of it's type, although those with a Soundblaster fitted to their PC will enjoy the odd laugh or two at the stilted digitised speech recorded for the characters by various Origin staff members, including Richard 'Lord British' Garriott himself. (Scream!) Particularly chuckle-worthy is the guard's voice - 'eees gort er Corkney accent thert's abart ers loikely ers Dick Vin Doike's in Mairy Porpins. (Embarrassing but true, the guard's voice was recorded by Martin Galway, who is actually British born and bred.)

Before any actual dungeoneering can take place, the player has to go through the usual RPG chore of knocking together some stats to make a fantasy alter-ego to explore the game world with. To be fair, Underworld's designer's have made this, the most boring aspect of RPGs, pretty painless - the player only has to make a few simple Yes/No decisions to get up and running.

The only real poser given to the player is which of the eight professions he wants to take up. There's the usual wizard or warrior but more exotic livelihoods are available for those who want to try something a little out of the ordinary. For some reason I was drawn to being a shepherd - don't ask me why. Characters are defined by four main characteristics; strength, dexterity, intelligence and vitality. These and the profession then determine the character's fighting and spellcasting abilities.

D:
NABYSS

Sorry, Shadowlands. I'm afraid you've got to lose your Benchmark status, and after only one month at the top too. Ultima Underworld just blows you clean out of the water. Although lacking Shadowlands' unique multiple-character control, Underworld scores higher in almost every other department. After all, this is the nearest anyone could get to going down a medieval dungeon without wearing a cast-iron codpiece and doing it for real. A masterpiece.

an outcast is angered by your action.
an outcast is annoyed by your action.
You need more space to fire that weapon.
You need more space to fire that weapon.
You need more space to fire that weapon.

Nothing really prepares you for your first experience of the Underworld environment. It's the next true evolutionary step in the RPG genre and as much a technical advance on FTL's Dungeon Master as that game was on the top-viewed efforts that existed before. You can bet your Elven boots that you'll be seeing a lot of Underworld clones in the next few months or so. Well, PC owners will anyway. There's some serious number-crunching going on beneath Underworld's attractive exterior, and I'm afraid that the poor old Amiga and Atari ST just can't keep up. Sorry.

Like Dungeon Master, the player views the game world in first-person 3D. But whereas FTL's game only allowed the player to walk forward in jarring ten-foot chunks and turn in abrupt right angles, Underworld is a far more realistic and truer 3D environment with the player able to walk and turn smoothly just about anywhere he wants. Not only that, but the floor rises and falls smoothly, there are ledges and shelves to clamber onto and deep chasms to leap across. It's even possible to go for a swim in the many pools and rivers that course through the labyrinths. It's all frighteningly realistic, and the feeling of 'being there' is enhanced by the motion effects, like the slow bob when player goes walkies and the swaying and dipping when in water.

There are four detail levels which allow the player to compromise between speed and detail to his heart's content. At the lowest detail level the rea-

***S**tunning is the only single adjective that completely sums up the whole Underworld experience. And what an experience it is.*

son for the incredible flexibility of the game world becomes apparent; everything is modelled in polygons overlaid with texture maps. The only time this is noticeable in the game is when the player moves right up close to a wall and looks at it obliquely - objects you'd expect to stick out from the wall's surface, like switches, lie flat on it because basically they are just drawings on a flat surface.

The dungeon's inhabitants are less impressive. They all move around and animate adequately as long as they don't get too close. When they do they begin to disappoint. There's a distinct blockyness to them, like the trackside objects you get in a Sega arcade racing game. Once you get used to seeing the effect it's not so bad, but it does detract from the dense atmosphere a bit.

Walk, run, jump and swim - just about anything you can do in the 'real' world you can do in ▶40

ULTIMA UNDERWORLD

IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE...?

The creatures waiting to be met in the Underworld are a nasty lot. Smelly, slimy, villainous, treacherous and downright un-likeable, they'd sooner stick a knife in your back than give you any help.

But there are some decent types down there in the catacombs. Keep an eye out for the Banner of Cabirus (shown right) painted on any doors - beyond you'll find fellow humans willing to lend a hand and offering food and comfort to the needy. They're a bit like the Salvation Army of the World of Britannia, except they don't try to raise funds for their cause by going around the local taverns desperately asking pissed revellers to buy copies of The Warcry.

nothing you've ever seen before will prepare you for your first experience of the incredible Ultima Underworld. If it got any more real you'd have to undergo a medical examination to make sure your heart was capable of withstanding the rigours of the game! But to give you, the dear reader, some idea of the perils that lie ahead for would-be dungeon delvers, peruse these shabbily-arranged screenshots on this here spread.

This scrap of parchment bears all the map-making scrawls you've made on your travels. As well as showing all the corridors and rooms (which are drawn by the computer) you can add your own notes and messages.

This, believe it or not, is you. Good-looking fella, aren't you? When generating your character at the beginning of the game you're given a range of fizzogs to choose between - pick a better one than I did, per-lease.

Remember that if you've decided your character is right hand-ed then you must drop any weapons to be used in the right-hand inventory slot. Put it any-where else and it'll be useless. Bit of a tragedy when you're in battle, that.

This is where you get your 3D first-person view on the whole Underworld. In this shot you can see the way that the dungeons are made up of sloping floors, ledges and walkways. Pretty amazing, isn't it?

(Top to bottom) The top icon accesses all the SAVE/LOAD options and allows you to do other things like alter the detail level and QUIT to DOS.

Select the second icon, the TALK icon, then click on a creature in the main window to have a chat!

Choose the next icon to make an easy PICK UP. Collected items can then be deposited in one of the onventory slots over the other side of screen.

The LOOK icon, third from bottom, lets you read notices and exam-ine objects.

FIGHT! Click here and up pops your arm holding the weapon of your choice.

Ooh - you're just a USEr. This, the last icon, controls every-thing from pulling a wall switch to unlocking a door.

This is the STRIKE STRENGTH INDICATOR. When in Fight mode, the player tries to hit the vile enemy creatures by clicking on them and then holding the mouse button down. The longer the button is held down (indicated by this indicator changing from pearl to red to amber to green) the harder the blow. The trade-off is that the player can't get so many hits in.

The super-handy fine n' dandy COMPASS. The red tip always point to the North, and as if this wasn't enough to help you navigate around the dank mazes there's also a briliant auto-mapping facility. User friendly or what?

It's blank at the moment, but normally this is full of mes-sages reporting such things as 'You have hit the troll' or 'The door is locked'.

Hey, hey, hey - that's *your* arm holding a sword and lashing out at the goblin!

This blue liquid represents th player's Mana level - if this too low you'll not be able to cast the more powerful spell

The player's health is represented by this rapidly-diminishing bottle of red fluid (blood, presumably). Eating food, drinking special potions and resting restores valuable vitality.
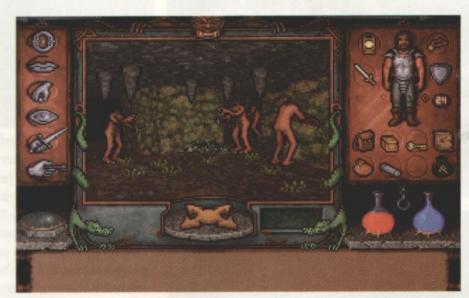
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ages.

(Above) Look at 'em all! Some nifty sword work will be required to get out of this room alive. On the early levels monsters attack in manageable ones and twos, with the only group encounters being with friendly chaps. Later on and the above is typical of the hordes you're expected to wade through. But remember that not all problems have to be solved by violence...

(Left) Just what *is* that creature doing in that small cubicle. Do you really want to know?

(Left below) Thrackat-azooom! Some smart runestone-from-the-bag pulling looses off a mighty lightning bolt at one of the two slimy trolls.
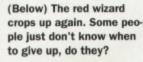
Troll hit by lightning bolt!

(Right) This lot panic a lot in battle - they're always losing their heads! (Boom-boom!) If you want to get a hat, get a head...

(Left) This red wizard is a particularly nasty opponent, able to cast all manner of flesh-withering, bone-cracking prestidigitations.

(Below) The red wizard crops up again. Some people just don't know when to give up, do they?

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37▶ Underworld's fantasy realm. And you'd be forgiven for thinking that this wide-ranging implies a cumbersome control interface but you couldn't be more wrong. All player control is via mouse and/or keyboard, with the former providing the most fluid method.

The main game screen is dominated by a window showing the player's 3D view, to the left of which is a set of five action icons. Moving around is easy; the player moves the mouse pointer over the window and clicks. Depending where the pointer is located in the window, the player's character will walk forward, walk forward and to the left or right, step left or right, step back, jump or simply turn left or right.

It's all very logical. If the pointer is at the top middle of the window then the player will walk forward and if it's at the bottom middle of the window then the player steps back. Get the idea? As a memory aid the pointer changes into a appropriate directional icon as it's moved about the window. Although initially it seems a bit confusing I was surprised at how quickly the control became instinctive and second nature.

You can probably guess the routine for using the action icons: click on an icon then click (using the second mouse button) on the object in the window. For the experienced player even greater ease-of-control is provided by the fact that making the icon selections can be short cut past via a variety of mouse-click combinations.

Most of the icons are pretty straight-forward and self-explanatory. 'Look' allows the player to examine the weirder objects found lying on the corridor floors and read any messages scratched into the stone walls. 'Pick up' allows the player to add newly-discovered items to his inventory and 'Use' lets him... er... use them in a manner appropriate the context of the situation. Thus, if the player has a key then it can be clicked on a locked door to try and open it; 'use'ing it anywhere else is unlikely to produce any result.

More interesting is the 'Fight' icon. When clicked upon the player's currently-held weapon appears in the bottom of the world window, as if the player were really holding it. If the player is weaponless, then a fist appears. Holding down the second mouse button starts to build up the strike's power, indicated by a glowing pad changing from green to amber to red. It's up to the player to decide whether he wants to opt for lots of quick but relatively-weak blows or slower but highly-powerful smashes. Depending on where the player located the mouse pointer in the game window a variety of moves can be executed, from simple jabs to violent slashes. There's never been a more authentic or exciting simulation of man-to-man fighting on computer.

Spellcasting is performed in a way familiar to experienced Ultima fans, except instead of using natural spell components (which are a bit hard to come across in a dungeon) each spell is cast by pulling magically-inscribed runestones from a special bag in the correct order. The difficult bit, of course, is finding the runestones. Over forty spells are possible, allowing the player to do anything from summoning an earthquake to casting a lightning bolt to making the player's character fly.

But, as soon becomes apparent, chatting in the Underworld is just as important, if not more so, than out-and-out hacking. Via the 'Talk' icon the player can try and engage in conversation with any of the dungeon's denizens providing that they're willing. This takes the form of a multiple-choice reply to the computer-controlled characters statements, which although limited by it's very nature is more than adequate. It's also possible to trade with the characters met, which is vital in some cases to complete the mini-quests that crop up from time to time.

The best thing about the creatures that populate the Underworld is that they are more than

*U*ltima Underworld is a real knock-you-down game. At first it is truly hard to believe that it's running on a standard home computer.

(Top) Goodness gracious great fire elementals! Ah well, if you can't stand the heat get outta the dungeon.
(Above middle) You can't even go for a nice refreshing swim without having to worry about lurkers in the depths - they somewhat more dangerous than an old bicycle frame!
(Above) Rats! These vermin are the least threatening of the entities to be found in the Abyss's cavernous depths, but that doesn't mean you should become complacent about seeing them off.

PC Version

A game as complex as this doesn't come cheap - at least, not as far as your hardware is concerned. Underworld is strictly a 256-colour VGA game only and Origin recommend a 386 PC or better to get the best out of it (although I found the game worked more than adequately on a 20MHz 286). The more soundboards you've got the better (Roland for music in tandem with a Soundblaster for speech is the ideal combination - but you could've probably guessed that for yourself). Surprisingly Underworld comes on just four floppies and takes up just ** Mb of your valuable hard drive space. Who says big things don't come in small packages anymore?

Amiga Version

Thanks to a special blitter trick discovered by Origin's top programmers we're promised a faster screen update, 4096 colours on-screen and 12-channel sound, including full speech throughout the game. And to celebrate the release Origin are arranging a special tour or Britain by their trained fleet of areonautical pigs. Expect to see Amiga Underworld on the shelves and you're hopelessly optimistic.

ST Version

When Atari launch an ST with a 20MHz 68000 processor, 256 colours, synthesiser-quality sound and a built-in hard drive then maybe, just maybe, you can expect to see Underworld on your machine. But until that happy day arrives the chances are slimmer than Twiggy's thigh.

moderately intelligent. They'll respond to your actions intelligently, so if you make friends with something but try to steal its food then it'll respond in the same way you would, i.e. with a swift sock to the jaw. Likewise in combat, creatures won't just stand in front of you trading blows until either they or the player are dead. If its all going badly they may well back off to recover or try a different strategy.

Underworld is a big, big game. It consists of eight huge levels, each with a number of smaller sub-levels leading off from them. Unsurprisingly, it's easy to get lost and making a map is a necessity. Now I for one hate trying to play a game while balancing a piece of graph paper on my knee at the same time, but Underworld's designers have made this sort of shenanigan a thing of the past. The game features an automatic mapping facility, leaving you to get on with the fun of exploring. Even better, you can write notes on the map so you'll never forget where that huge pile of gold was. If only all RPGs provided a similar handy utility.

Ultima Underworld is a real knock-you-down game. At first it is truly hard to believe that it's running on a standard home computer. It's not

(Top, above and left) A selection of scenes from the lengthy intro. Never mind the graphics, listen to the speech - it's (unintentionally) hilarious.
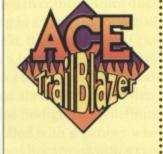
only great to look at, but it also plays superbly and has enough depth to keep even the most experienced dungeon-delving veteran going for months, if not years. If you've got a PC, then you've got to have Ultima Underworld.

● David Upchurch

GIVE ME MORE DETAILS!

Ultima Underworld boasts four detail levels to choose between. At the highest detail level you get the full works - walls, floors and ceilings all lovingly detailed. Go down one detail level and you lose the coarse stone ceiling - it's replaced by a graduated grey flat surface. Go down one more detail level and you lose the stone-floor effects, again to be replaced by simple polygons. At the lowest detail level there's no texture mapping at all - all the dungeon corridors are depicted in polygons. Boo! At least that means owners of fairly under-powered machines can enjoy some of the experience.