

SOFTWARE REVIEW

- **Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss**
- **Origin**
- **£39.99**
- **(0444) 246333**

And on the first day there was Dungeon Master (on the Amiga and ST) and the people played it and the people saw that it was good. And on the second day there were PCs and the people used them and the people saw that they too were good. And on the third day work began on the PC version of Dungeon Master and it was hit by bugs, delays, company closures and non-floating publishers, and this was bad.

And on the fourth day PC programmers started to bring out their own Dungeon Master clones and the people played them

Ultima Underworld The Stygian Abyss

and saw that while they weren't quite as good as the original. Yet seeing as how they had nothing else they would make do with them until DM arrived. And on the fifth day Origin saw Dungeon Master and the clones and saw that they were basically pretty good but didn't stretch the machine to the limits and since it had produced the Ultima series and the Wing Commander games it could do one, and make it a whole lot better. And on the sixth day Ultima Underworld appeared and knocked the socks off everything that came before it and made the completion of PC Dungeon Master a bit of a lost cause reality. On the seventh day? I received a review copy (and saw that it was good, damned good).

It's kind of odd. Just as the industry feeling towards Origin is starting to pale (with everyone realising that just because the games look and sound like nothing on Earth, they don't necessarily play that way), the ground-breakers from Texas come up trumps with a game that scores in almost every aspect, from graphics to gameplay, from aesthetics to atmosphere and, most importantly, from beginning to end. Ultima Underworld is not the kind of game that's going to gather dust in a hurry.

Here we go again

Hordes of you are no doubt already running for cover at the mention of Origin, clutching your 286s and 20Mb hard drives tightly to your chest and kicking yourselves for not buying a machine with three or four megs of memory. While it's true that Underworld needs a pretty powerful machine to run on (see the Hardware Requirements panel for full details), Origin has actually put in some thought for the low-end owners and the installation guide that comes with the box is extremely helpful for working out exactly how to set your machine up.

It describes in detail the minimum set-up, then proceeds to take you through the installation process step by step, informing you how much memory and hard disk space each of the 'optional extras' takes up. It's wise to read through this manual

Never one to do things by half, Origin jumps on to the Dungeon Master bandwagon, but does it with a certain amount of flair

before you start, making notes on what you can and can't do with your particular machine, thereby speeding up the whole process. One point definitely worth noting is that it even describes a procedure for making and booting up your system with a bootable floppy disk, freeing up as much memory as possible by backing up your autoexec.bat and config.sys files, then modifying them. In all, this manual (just one of three that comes with the game) is clear enough to take even the most novice of DOS users through the ins and outs of memory usage and DOS setup procedures. It's more than about time Origin started caring about the 'less fortunate' owners and this guide does the job perfectly.

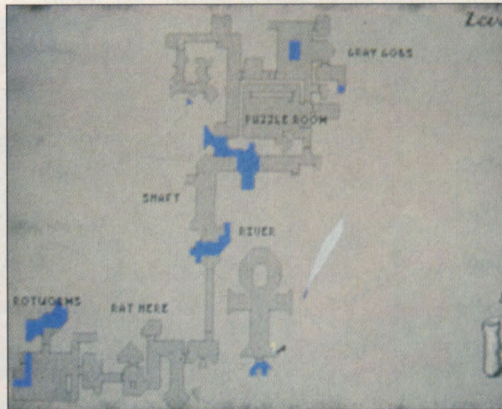
It's also strange that what is possibly Origin's most technically complex game to date comes on a measly four high-density 3.5" disks. From the people that brought you the 14 disk (and two separate package) Wing Commander 2 affair, you can't help but feel a little disappointed, worried even, that the game might not be as big and spectacular as you thought. Ah, ye of little faith! This is Origin we're talking about here. Just take a look in the box.

I've never known a game to need *four* manuals before. I've known DTP packages to need four manuals and spreadsheet software to need four manuals, but never a game. Apart from the installation guide, you get a 32-page player's guide which takes you through the opening stages of the game and details all the controls, the different screens and the different aspects of play (swimming, combat, magic, etc.), a 30-page reference guide that describes much the same thing but reduces it to a 'what button does what' list and a 30-page 'Memoirs of Cabirus', which is the usual fictional account of life in Britannia and the Underworld.

It describes the various monsters, spells, character types and so on, in the style of a scribe to the aforementioned Sir Cabirus, an adventurer who ventured into the Stygian Abyss (the Underworld's official name) many moons ago with a guard

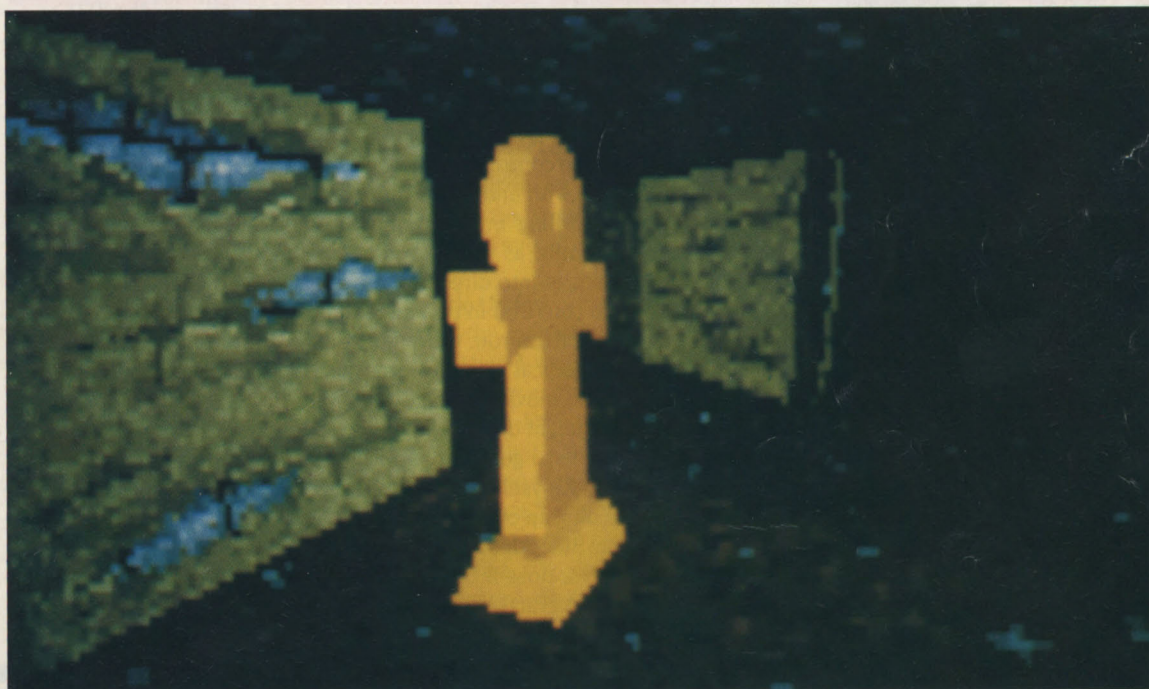


Not all movement takes place on land. Should you fall, jump or run into any water, you'll have to swim around until you find some land again.



Thanks to a handy auto-mapping system, the days of pencil and paper are gone. You can jot down notes to remind you of any special areas.

Underworld:



As you adventure in the Underworld, you gain experience and your character subsequently rises in skill levels. To take advantage of this fact you have to visit a shrine and chant a mantra.

idea of uniting several 'surface' tribes and creating a (for want of a better term) 'master race' under the ground. Oh, you also get a hand drawn map of level one to accompany this tome and a little cloth pouch full of 'magic' runes, just to add to that feeling of 'being there' (yes, I know it looks silly throwing little pieces of tin at a screen and shouting "Magic Arrow", but it's all atmosphere, luvvy, okay?).

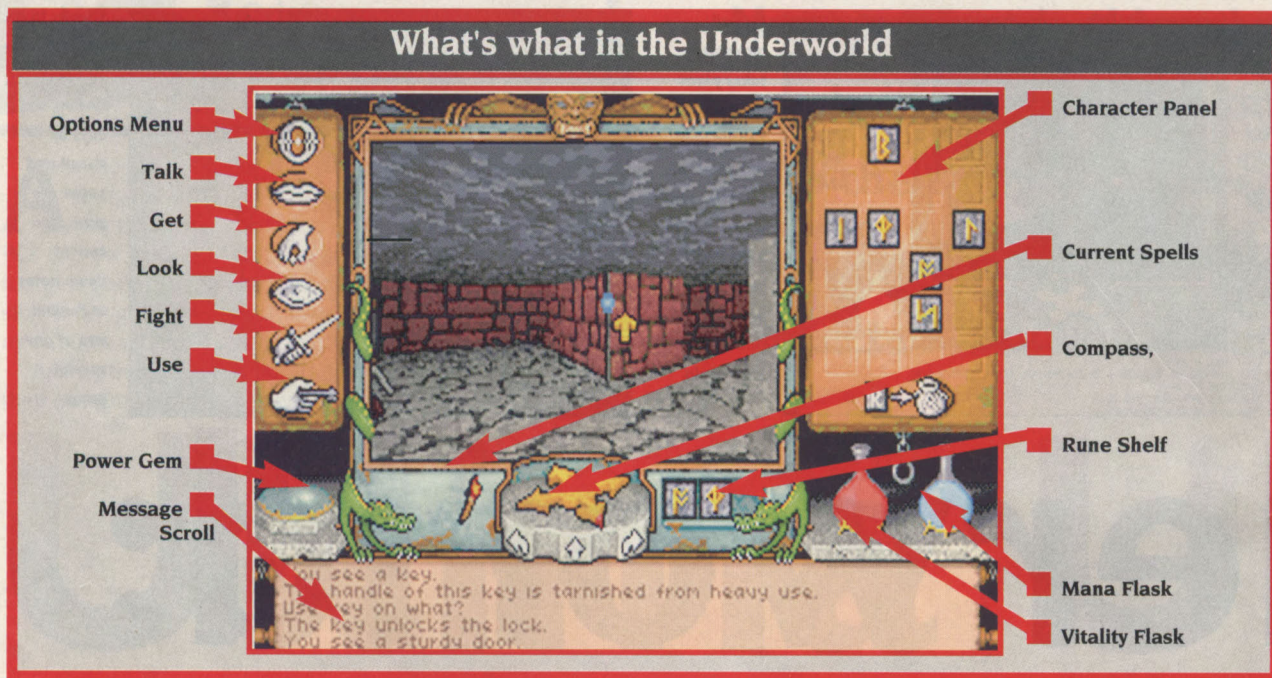
On the whole the manuals do a pretty good job of guiding the player around the game, but as was the case with the previous Ultima titles (not to mention a good number of other RPGs) most of the information is just padding and I can't see anyone really bothering to pause the game before fighting a giant rat just to look up its description in the manual and find out whether it has any weak spots. The only really useful function the in-game manuals serve is to remind you which runes equal which spells.

Before we begin

Once the game is installed and you've finally managed to eliminate the 'Sorry you do not have enough memory' messages, you are in for a real treat. I played this version with all the trimmings and believe me, it's worth it. Underworld starts with an unintentionally hilarious intro sequence, depicting the kidnapping of Baron Almiric's lovely daughter by hideous fiends and your arrival on the scene just in time to be blamed for it all.

I say hilarious because of the speech. I had to listen to it two or three times before I fully grasped what was going on because for the first couple of times I was falling about laughing at the badly-dubbed Dick Van Dyke cockney accents that all those lovable Americans think we sound like (you know, "Awl-right Guv'noor, oop the happle un stairs!"). At least Kevin Costner didn't even bother to insult our intelligence ...

Still, it's nicely done and sounds pretty impressive through a decent pair of speakers. It's a shame that the speech couldn't



have been kept up throughout the game though, in conversation with characters and in the dream sequences. It may have taken another speech accessory pack to do it, but anyone that's managed to find a machine big enough to run it with limited speech would surely have enough power to support one more optional extra.

Sadly, the introduction doesn't really do the game justice and gives the appearance of being developed completely separately from the rest of the game (and knowing the size of Origin, it wouldn't surprise me if it was). It built up a very different image of what I was expecting once the dungeon doors had slammed shut behind me. Thankfully, what I was expecting fell way short of what I actually got.

Running before you can walk

Things were initially very dark, but very detailed. Although I'd promised myself that I'd stick to the walk-through in the player's guide, the urge just to wander off and marvel at the graphics was too strong and I soon found myself walking, running, jumping, activating pull-chains, opening doors and picking up objects. The guide has you spending at least 20 minutes in the

first corridor, getting used to each of the icons and learning how to interact with objects but I doubt anyone could restrain themselves for this length of time when there's this much sexy technology just waiting to be moved around the screen.

The controls are clever, very clever. They were easy to get to grips with and it was quite amazing how quickly I got used to controlling my every movement in the subterranean world. Basically, as you move the cursor around the view window it changes into direction arrows. Click on the left mouse button and you're off in that direction. The further from the centre you move the arrow, the faster you move, starting with a very slow, methodical step to a breakneck sprint down a corridor. While you're moving, pushing the right button causes you to jump, the height dependent on the speed. As I said, it was incredibly simple to get to grips with and after a few minutes practice I found myself moving from a gentle trot to a quick dash to a small leap over a gap without ever taking my finger off the button. Smooth doesn't even begin to describe it ...

Nor does it begin to describe the graphics. It didn't sink in at first exactly how fast and smooth everything was moving and how little the machine stopped to update the screen, usually

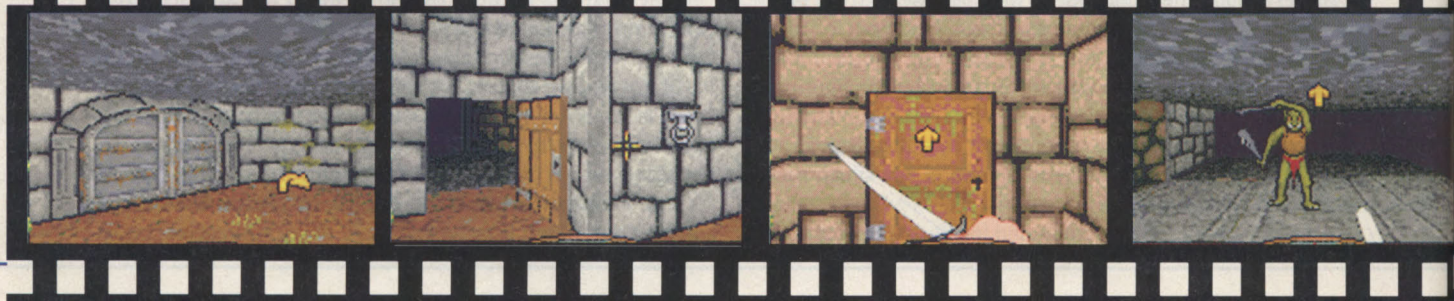
PC review TWO MINUTES OF SUBTERRANEAN ADVENTURE ...

As the huge doors slam shut behind you, your first task is to find a weapon. All that's lying around is a blunt daggers. Any port in a storm ...

You venture along the initial corridor until you come to a closed door and a chain on the wall. A quick pull reveals a room filled with bones and blood.

Doors to the north and south won't budge without a key or a quick battering with a cudgel. The north door weakens enough to push it open.

As you reach a bridge of sorts, you are attacked by a goblin. Dodging his rocks you close the gap and start hitting with your blunt dagger.



only occurring when I'd stopped moving to get my bearings (although this was probably coincidence more than clever programming). It's not all 100% smooth 3D though. In fact most of the animated objects to be found in the Stygian Abyss is made of two dimensional bitmap graphics (similar to the graphics seen in Empire's Pacific Islands – see review in issue 7).

This strange mix wasn't always pleasing and I often found the two styles contrasting drastically, depending on the situation. A solitary bat flying around the rafters looked very basic, almost amateurish, while a room full of goblins going about their business looked fine. Objects that could be carried around fared much better, drawn to look as in tune with the surface they were resting on as possible. Granted, it's still early days for this new technology and no doubt whatever Origin decides to do with this system next will be immeasurably better, but I can't help thinking that if it doesn't look very good, maybe it'd be better left out.

Size is important

Underworld scores much bigger points during its exploration stages than it does with the combat. The map that comes with the game is designed to guide you around level one, allowing you to get used to the controls, the characters and the ambience of the abyss without having to worry about getting lost. I found it an invaluable aid when exploring the initial sections of the game, but when I eventually made it on to level two I was immediately at a loss at where to go next. I had become way too dependent on the map and because I knew Underworld was such a huge game, I found it almost impossible to decide whether to go left or right, to take the first turning on the left or the second or whether to go straight back up the stairs and remain on level one for the rest of the game (where at least I knew where I'd be going).

Origin's biggest problem is that it has made Underworld too big. No sooner had I managed to fill one of the map screens and annotated all of the important areas, when I was faced with a completely blank page and had to start all over again. It was a very daunting task just to start moving on level two. I think fear may also have had something to do with it. Once I'd run out of pre-generated map to look at, and when combined with the terrific atmosphere generated by the game, I was getting nervous when it came to just rounding the corners in case something was lurking (I shock easily in case you hadn't guessed). Still, faint hearts never wrote detailed reviews so ...

The question you have to ask yourself is are you a major fan

What about us low-end users?

If you find that your copy of Underworld seems to run fairly slowly (and let's face it, any game that describes a 20Mhz 386 machine as slow, needs some processing power), you have the option of turning down the detail level of the graphics. You can start with full detail...



... remove the detail from the roof



... remove the roof and the floor ...



... and remove the roof, floor and walls altogether, just leaving the bitmaps for the objects. This certainly speeds the game up, but it does tend to ruin the whole point that Origin is trying to make

of the Dungeon Master/Eye of the Beholder genre? If so then you're likely to do flips over Underworld. I hate to keep mentioning the graphics but they really are the focus of the whole game and when they provide the answer to all of the criticisms levelled at Eye and the gang (static flick screens) you can't help but be impressed. There will be other games that will make this look primitive, but not for a long while yet.

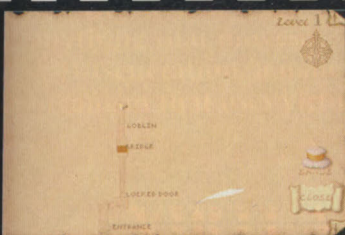
Judging it by today's standards Ultima Underworld doesn't have an equal. It really is the best of the bunch and everything else that comes along will no doubt be judged by it. It's a shame that it kind of overshadows the forthcoming release of Dungeon Master (nostalgics will probably be no less enthusiastic though), but it does highlight one area that all of these first-person perspective games have suffered from. DM, Eye,

Before you travel any further, it's wise to check your map. It might be worthwhile checking out the rest of the southern passages before you go on.

Bashing your way through the southern door in the previous chamber, you emerge in an altar of rebirth. The silver sapling allows you to 'save' your position.

Taking the corridor off of the first passage leads you to a path strewn with runes. You've heard of dark magic in here and these runes might just be the ticket.

Continuing along the corridor you eventually come across another human, scavenging for goods on a recent battle site. He tells you of a human enclosure to the north.





Monsters abound in the underground. You start off facing rats and slugs and fareing rather well. You end up facing skeletons that make your life sheer hell!


Eye II, Might and Magic III: they're all more or less the same game with slightly different plots. They all look more or less identical and play the same way, the only real differences being the control methods. Underworld is at least a little more creative than that, sketching out an entire underground community, goblins that are good guys as well as bad, races that in other game would attack on sight here give you the benefit of the doubt, allowing you to talk to them, get to know them and then (but only if you initiate hostilities) attacking you. The entire

Ultima series has always prospered on one thing, the strength of its storytelling.

It's easy to mock Richard Garriot for his Lord British monicker, but he can create believable worlds, characters and stories and this high level of realism has been carried across all of the Ultima games, no matter what their style of play is. Underworld benefits mostly in this area.

If a rip in the earth were to be found tomorrow by news crews, I'd expect it to look like this.

But as a game (and not a philosophical issue) I can't find any major faults to Ultima Underworld. It may not look like a Rembrandt when up close (it's more like a Picasso), but you spend so much time moving you hardly care a whit. The size may be daunting, but it's more of a challenge than a put-off. The controls are unbelievably easy when you get the hang of



HARDWARE

REQUIREMENTS

Let's start by running through the bare minimum requirements to play Underworld. You must have a 386SX or higher to achieve a decent speed, you must have a VGA card to see anything, you must have at least 640K of RAM (522K of which must be available at the DOS prompt) and you must have at least 480K of expanded memory. Oh, and 8Mbof hard disk space (plus a further 700K to save your games - it won't run without it).

This is the basic game, without sound effects, music or speech and probably not running with maximum detail on screen. For the full experience you'll need all of the above plus 557K of RAM free, a maximum of 1Mb of expanded memory, 13Mb of hard disk space (plus the extra 700K) and whatever sound boards you can cram into the back.

CGA <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	EGA <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	VGA <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Tandy <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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Eye of the Beholder

US Gold/SSI, £30.99

The first of its kind on the PC, Eye provided an audience hungry for Dungeon Master with a suitable meal. Basing itself around the ever-popular AD&D series, it featured excellent graphics, easy to use controls and a superb sense of atmosphere that was matched only by its offspring.



At the time of its release there was nothing to touch it, but in the wake of Underworld it pales dreadfully. After playing a game that features smooth 3D scrolling, I can't see anyone wanting to turn back and play a flick-screen affair. It's still a good game (as is the sequel) and SSI will no doubt continue the series ad infinitum, improving things as it goes and probably attempting a smooth-scroller of its own one day.

Might and Magic III

US Gold/New World Computing, £40.99

It had the potential to outdo Eye of the Beholder, it had the looks to outshine Eye of the Beholder and it had the size to outplay Eye of the Beholder, but New World's magnum opus turned out to be a flawed masterpiece. Bugged to pieces and shoddy programming meant that the trilogy ended with a whimper rather than a bang.



Don't be fooled by box artwork or marketing blurb, if you see MM3 and Underworld side by side on the shelf, go for the Origin game every time.

The Worlds of Ultima series

Origin, £35.99 each (approx.)

While Underworld represents a new theme for the RPG masters, the Worlds series was an old theme given a new twist. Forget the Wing Commanders, this is what Origin does best. RPGs are at the very core of Origin's being, from the earliest Ultima through Autoduel and Bad Blood to the Worlds of Ultima series. If you thought Ultima VI was good, take a look at either The Savage Empire or Martian Dreams. Atmosphere oozes, playability flows and quality shines throughout.



Thanks to all the character interaction and the storytelling, Underworld plays very much like an Ultima game viewed from head-on. If you fancy a change from all the first-person perspectives on offer, the Worlds of Ultima (and in fact most of the Ultimas) offer the perfect distraction.

Dungeon Master

FTL, £TBA

It's still not arrived, but the game that started them all is currently scheduled for a May release. Dungeon Master is a classic in every sense of the word. It introduced a grateful world to the delights on offer from RPGs and opened the whole genre to a completely new audience that had always been put off by the number-crunching feel previous games had offered. It's still overshadowed by Underworld, but when it comes out (provided the translation from the other home computers hasn't gone badly) it should be snapped up by anyone with an ounce of sense.



them and the whole system is very clever indeed. It's probably not the hardest game you'll ever play and despite the realism, it's easy to live without it, but I can see anyone that does venture into the abyss having a whale of a time. I have heard reports of people already claiming to have completed it, but I suspect these are the kind of people that can play the average arcade game with their feet and still clock it. For the rest of us mere mortals it's a wonderful game and an experience not to be missed.

PAUL PRESLEY