

ORIGIN IN THE UNDERWORLD

Brian Walker
previews the
underworld of
Ultima

The only question is: what kept you? This enquiry refers to the vast number of dungeon games about to be unleashed on an entirely unsuspecting public. FTL's seminal **Dungeon Master** proved that there was a large number of people out there who liked nothing better than poking around in dungeons, and yet it was several years before **Eye of the Beholder** launched the second wave.

Now, of course, everyone and his cat has got a dungeon game. Electronic Arts' **The Black Crypt** is due any day now, while **Eye of the Beholder II** looks to set new standards in the oubliette. Another likely contender is Origin's **Ultima Underworld**, which combines the 3D technology of the company's **Wing Commander** with the detailed world of **Ultima**. Unusually for Origin the game was produced by an outside developer – Blue Sky Productions, whose Paul Neurath created **Space Rogue** for Origin prior to founding Blue Sky.

Being there

The world of Britannia is seen here from a more personal viewpoint and thus allows first person 3D perspective through the eyes of the heroic Avatar. Origin describes the **Underworld**, somewhat optimistically, as the 'first virtual game'. Short of installing your head in the monitor and attempting to play from there it's some way from that, but the graphics do convey the sense of 'being there'.

The plot involves the kidnapping of Baron Almiric's



sexy daughter, the guilt for which is placed firmly on the Avatar. The only way innocence can be proved is to enter Britannia's infamous Stygian Abyss and rescue the hapless damsel.

But the task is not as straightforward as it seems. It seems that the evil mage who kidnapped the wench, apart from a being a fully fledged fiend in his own right, is under the control of a nasty from another dimension! Both the mage and the lass are mere pawns in the game of this other from another planet who threatens the very existence of Britannia. The player's task then is: save the girl, save the world, and kill the creepy crawlies along the way.

Underworld uses the ubiquitous WIMP interface with a keyboard option – pointing, clicking, and dragging makes saving the world that much easier.

The combat system in the game is fast and furious as befits a real-time system. Weaponry includes everything from sword to mace to bow. Players with a hand weapon decide what part of their opponent's anatomy they want to assault by positioning the mouse pointer on the appropriate part of the target and pressing the mouse button. Then they must decide whether they want a quick, relatively weak attack, or a slower but more powerful attack.

Missile weapons include bows and slings. Players sight their weapons, leading their targets and allowing for 3D trajectory, before firing. Arrows, bolts, sling stones and gods know what fly through the air towards the by now nervous opponent.

No such game is, of course, complete without a bit of magic, or in this case, subterranean magic. Player cast compose and cast spells by mastering the runic language and speaking the appropriate words.

Runestones imbued with the essence of the magic syllables are grasped in the hand before invoking a spell. These ancient stones are collected during the course of the adventure and placed in a magic bag.

Players can select from over 40 spells. Casting iron flesh, for example, will turn one's skin into a sharp blade. Sheet lightning will electrify any lurking lurkers. The graphical representation of these spells is very sharp indeed. When fireball is evoked, a gout of flame appears, while during tremor, stones fall from the ceiling.

Unlike many CRPGs, no mapping is required in



Underworld. Instead a sophisticated automapping feature is provided to keep the player on the straight and narrow. Comments may even be inserted on the map thus allowing the player to remember where each important character or landmark is to be found.

Underworld 'director' Paul Neurath explains some of the design philosophy behind the game: 'Ultima games prior to **Ultima VI** had 3D dungeons, but in

Ultima VI they were replaced by overhead views. There were two reasons for this. First, Richard Garriot (Lord British) wanted the game to have a single, consistent view. Since the bulk of the game was already seen from a overhead perspective, its dungeons were adapted to that standard.

'Second, when **Ultima IV** was programmed, the technology did not exist to support 3D dungeons detailed enough to do justice to an **Ultima** world. That's where we came in.'

But will **Underworld** be a familiar place to regular **Ultima** players? 'Ultima fans should feel right at home,' explains Paul. 'The action takes place in a dungeon made famous in earlier **Ultimas**, so you'll fight **Ultima** creatures, cast **Ultima** spells and talk with descendants of characters from **Ultima IV**. You'll also follow a serpentine rich in the tradition of past **Ultimas**.

'The most obvious difference is that there is no top-down view in **Ultima Underworld**. It's all first person which is just right for dungeon games. You can really capture the claustrophobic you-are-there feeling. There's no way of knowing what's lurking around the next corner or what might be swooping down on you from overhead.' □

Ultima Underworld will be released for the IBM PC in the first quarter of '92 by Origin Systems.



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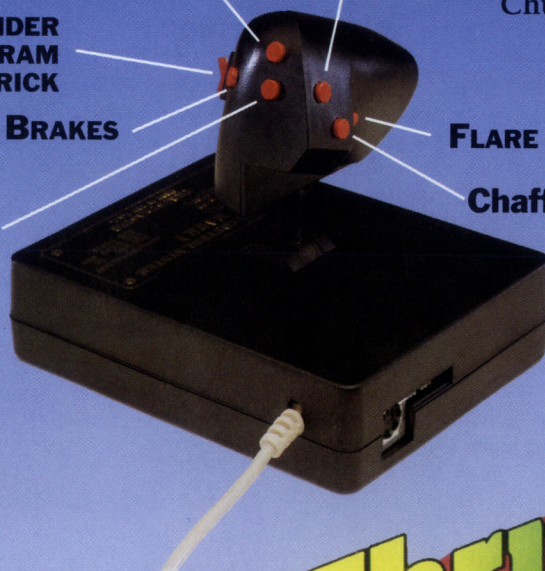
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