



Token chick alert. Raven provides the game's 'love interest'.

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# ULTIMA

**After repeated delays, *Ascension* has made it to the UK. Has Origin finally cleaned up the most bug-ridden RPG ever to (dis)grace a PC? Yes and no, says *Chris Anderson***

## TECH SPECS

**MINIMUM SYSTEM** Processor P266 Memory 64Mb RAM **ALSO REQUIRES** 3D card  
**WE SAY** Don't make me laugh, no please, don't. Get yourself a Pentium III and 128Mb RAM, unless you want to be playing this in low-res jerk-o-vision. While you're at it get a Voodoo 2 or better if you don't already have one.

The trials and tribulations surrounding the release of *Ascension* in the US last November have been well documented in this magazine. The game was so bugged when it was released in the US that it has taken Origin five months (and three major patches) to clean it up and get it ready for release in Europe.

The good news is the UK version of *Ascension* is much more stable than the patched US version (don't be fooled by the reviews you may have read in other UK games mags which were based on a version of the game you will never see, and were a work of fiction as a result). It is still far from perfect (see the Bugwatch boxout for exact details of the bugs Origin

couldn't sort out), but at least it is finally playable – more than can be said for the US version, which is still in a mess if reports on the Internet are to be believed. Finally, we can take a good long look at the game which ends the trilogy of trilogies, the game that so many *Ultima* fans have waited so long for, the game that ends a series which has been a landmark in PC gaming for so many years, and after five long years in development, it had better be good. Unfortunately...

## TOMB RAIDER ANYONE?

*Ultima Ascension* is not an RPG by any stretch of the imagination. It is what is known in the industry as an 'action adventure'. Depending on how you look at it, this may not necessarily be a bad

thing, but it certainly wasn't what *Ultima* fans were expecting from a game of this importance, being the last game of the series as we know it. If leaping about in dungeons and flicking switches is your thing, this is the game for you. On the other hand, if you're expecting *Ascension* to be 'Planescape: Torment in 3D' you will be sorely disappointed. There are some token RPG elements in the game, but if you blink you will surely miss them. Even the character generation process at the beginning is largely pointless.

Character generation is done through the standard *Ultima* routine of answering a gypsy's questions and arriving at a virtue that determines your class for the duration of the game, but the class you choose makes little or no difference to the gameplay. Whether you choose to be a fighter or a magic user is entirely up to you, but the difference between the two will exist quite literally in your mind. To the rest of the world you will still appear to be a multiclass jack of all trades, donning whatever weapons and armour you see fit and casting whatever spells take your fancy. After the incredibly complex and satisfying character development system Origin

created for the excellent *Ultima Online*, *Ascension* comes across as being painfully shallow. Long-standing *Ultima* fans will play this game and think 'how could they do this to the *Ultima* series?'. Conversely, new gamers brought up on a diet of *Quake* and *Tomb Raider* clones may well take this simplistic 'RPG for babies' to their

**“*Ascension* looks less like the epic finale we hoped for and more like a cynical cash-in at the expense of the legion of *Ultima* fans”**

hearts. Regardless of this, one thing you could always count on with *Ultima* games is a constantly evolving and engrossing plot, which immerses you fully in Britannia and its environs and colourful characters. Oh dear... another disappointment looms.

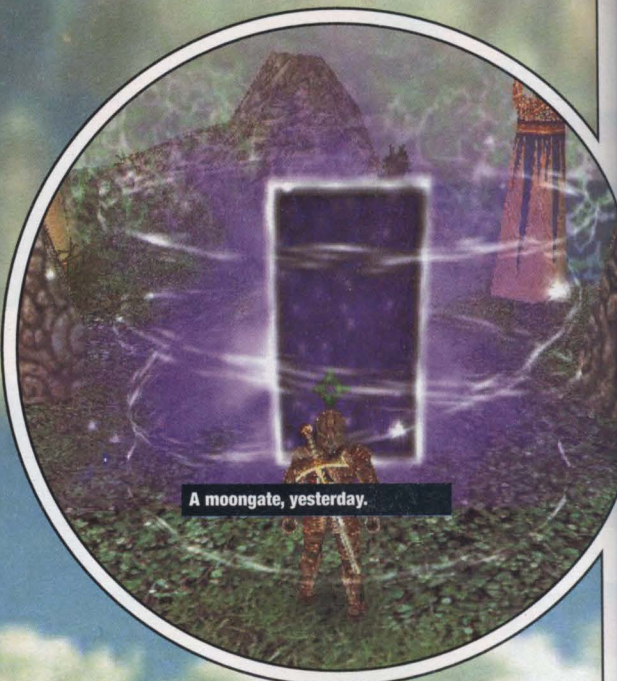
## KEEP IT SIMPLE

It wasn't enough for Origin to take the greatest RPG series of all time and turn it into a simplistic dungeon romp. The programmers evidently decided that a plot of any complexity would simply be too much for the new generation of gamers to take, so they quite literally did away with any semblance of a plot or storyline whatsoever. By way of example,

the object of the game is thus: the shrines of Britannia have become corrupt. You must restore them all by going into a dungeon close to each shrine, killing some monsters, flicking a few switches, leaping about a lot, and in doing so restoring the shrines in question one by one. That, literally, is *Ultima Ascension* in a

nutshell. If that sounds a little too repetitive and tedious for your taste, you should try actually doing it. I played *Ascension* for many, many hours and I had a distinct feeling of déjà vu after 'completing' a shrine and then journeying to the next town only to discover that I had to repeat the whole process.

Admittedly there are many sub-quests which presumably are meant to provide brief respite from the endless shrine-fixing nonsense, but they are all boring and pointless in the extreme, without exception. If you are the sort of person who can be bothered hunting round the place for a water valve and returning it to the character who asked you

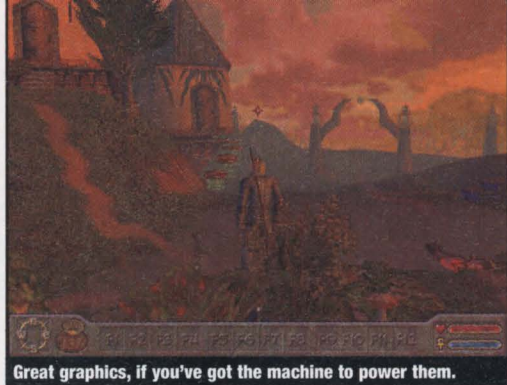


A moongate, yesterday.

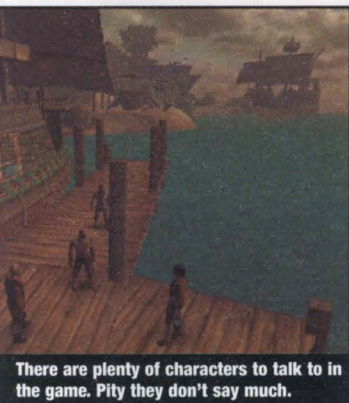




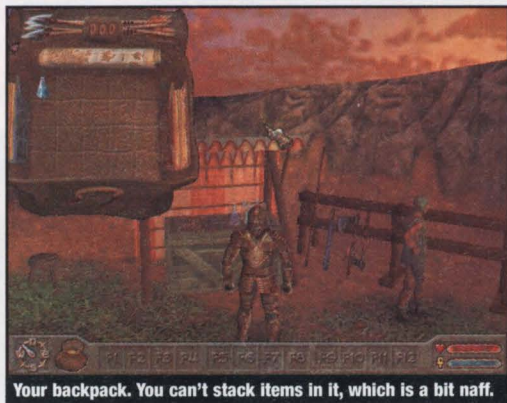
Combat is laughable. Here we see the 'magic system' in action.



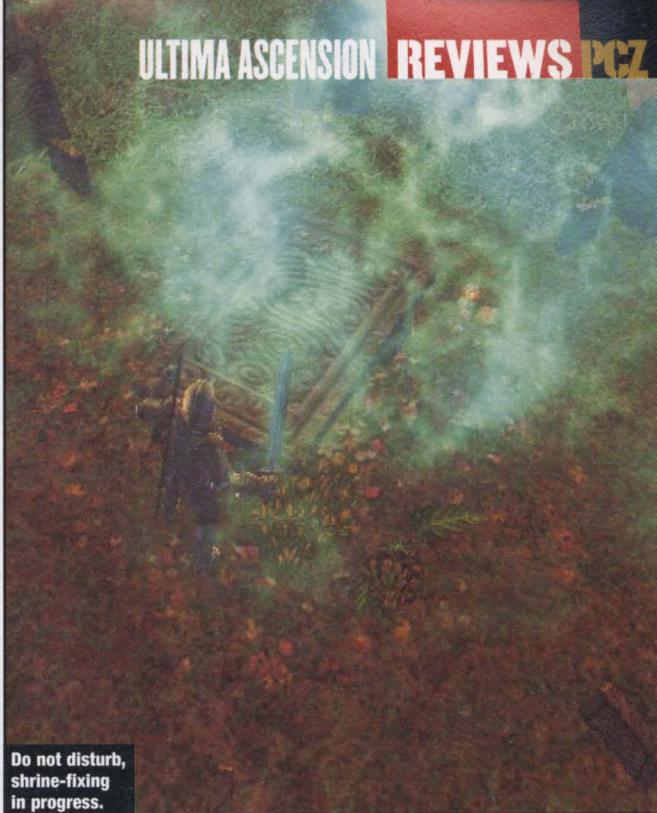
Great graphics, if you've got the machine to power them.



There are plenty of characters to talk to in the game. Pity they don't say much.



Your backpack. You can't stack items in it, which is a bit naff.



Do not disturb, shrine-fixing in progress.

# ASCENSION

for it, you will be rewarded with a 'thank you' from the citizen in question. That's it. No treasure, no secret items, and no gold to reward you for your efforts. As a result you are unlikely to venture out on the next pointless quest when the opportunity is presented.

There are other problems too. Conversations with characters in Britannia are totally uninspiring. The character voice-overs (which incidentally are abysmal) dictate that the text is identical, so complex conversational routes are a no-no. Couple this with a highly comical combat system (frantic mouse-clicking as you wave your weapon about randomly is the order of the day), and a spellbook with lots of spells which is nice but not necessary, except when you need to heal yourself or cast light spells in the dark, and suddenly *Ultima Ascension* is beginning to look less like the epic finale we all hoped for and more like a cynical cash-in at the expense of the vast legion of *Ultima* fans.

## SO, IT'S CRAP THEN?

Not quite. Ironically, *Ultima* fans are likely to extract more entertainment from this game than the action adventure fans the product is aimed at. There is

much to be said for walking round a 3D Britannia for the first time. The towns in the game may be ludicrously small compared to their counterparts in *Ultima Online*, but I defy you not to feel a surge of nostalgia as you walk into Britannia and see it in all its 3D glory. The dungeon sections are perfectly acceptable and even engrossing in places, though you are led by the hand through most of them. And the graphics are breathtaking in places. We have said time and time again that graphics are not important, but we lied. *Ascension* has incredible graphics and a wonderful atmosphere. The familiar lands of Britannia come to life before your very eyes, and for many *Ultima* fans this alone will be enough.

The same cannot be said for non-*Ultima* converts, unless they are big *Tomb Raider* fans in which case they will find *Ascension* perfectly playable, but nothing special. Incidentally, spare a thought for your American gaming counterparts, who unwittingly paid good money to playtest this title for Origin so that you would get a game that was playable straight from the box. And don't forget to read the Bugwatch boxout (right), very important information lies therein. [PCZ]

## IN PERSPECTIVE

*Ultima Ascension* is nowhere near as involving as *Ultima VII* which looks dated now, but has a complex, believable world with characters that are both amusing and engrossing. *UA* may be a pitiful representation of the *Ultima* series, but *UVII* is the definitive one. *Planescape: Torment* is the new king of RPGs, and makes *UA* look both shallow and vacuous by comparison, which is handy, because that's exactly what it is.

Planescape: Torment

UVII parts 1 and 2

Ultima Ascension

## PCZ VERDICT

UPPERS Great graphics • Britannia in 3D • Atmospheric

DOWNERS Bugs • Linear gameplay • Needs a ninja PC to run it

**52** Atmospheric and nostalgic, but hopelessly shallow

## BUGWATCH

*UA* is finished, but not perfect, oh no...

When Origin released this in the US, it effectively put alpha code into a box and sold it to unsuspecting gamers all over the US. Over the last few months, while the American public has been trying to play the game, Origin has been busy completing it. Ha ha ha ha ha. Highly amusing? No. The software available in the UK is the game it should have released in the first place. Amazingly, it is still unfinished even now. Shopkeepers still float about 3ft above their chairs. Savegames still get corrupted for no apparent reason. Sound effects get 'stuck' and repeat themselves, sometimes they work again if you leave them a minute, sometimes they simply hang your machine. As for the frame-rate, don't get me started. On an Athlon 600 with 256Mb RAM and a Voodoo 3 card, the game still jerked. You *will* need a killer machine to get this thing to run acceptably. D3D support is still suspect, particularly on TNT2 cards (and notoriously on a GeForce). If you *really* want to play *Ascension*, buy a Voodoo 2 card or better, if you don't already have one. Despite all this, the game is playable for the first time since its release. *Ascension* has been cleaned up considerably during the course of the three huge patches it has had since November, but it is no easy ride. And don't expect any new patches either. Origin closed the official *Ultima Ascension* website and announced there would be no more patches after patch 3, which was nice – in one fell swoop disowning all the people who had bought the game and moving on to other projects. My advice to you is very simple: if you really want to buy this game, you go right ahead and buy it, but buy it from somewhere that has a no-quibble, money-back policy, so if you have too many problems you can send it back from whence it came. You have been warned.