SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

I.1 What is this FAQ thing?

The Ultima Ascension FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) has the answers to many questions that the fans have asked in about the latest game in the Ultima role-playing series, Ultima:Ascension (also known as Ultima 9/U9/U:A/UA/Ascension).

Most of the answers in this FAQ have come from Origin's official U:A Discussion Boards (where fans may ask and receive responses from members of the game's development team).   Some information has come from sources other than the official discussion boards, but the source is always someone involved with U:A's development.

You will find the following sections in this FAQ:

Gameplay - Things like combat, magic, characters, monsters, and what you can and cannot do in U:A.

Technical - System requirements, questions about what hardware the game supports, and some opinions from the development team about what you will need to get the most out of U:A.

Plot - Some general information about U:A's story.

Miscellaneous - Other information of interest regarding U:A, it's development, and it's availability.

I.2 Disclaimer

The development team's motto:
"Nothing is certain until the product ships!"

Ascension is still in development and nothing about it is set in stone.   Features and details about the game could possibly change by the time it is released.

Although all of the information presented in this FAQ can be considered official, please keep in mind that much of the information is what the team plans and intends to include in U:A, not all of which may come to pass.

I.3 Credits

The following folks made contributions to this FAQ:

Dirk Jacobs (Darkheart) who created a program to gather answers from the dev team in the Q&A forum.   He also helped in editing the Gameplay and parts of the Miscellaneous sections.

Alex Beckers (Pariah) who edited the Miscellaneous and Plot sections.

Robin Sharma (Durham Dragon, aka the guy writing this) who supervised the compilation of the FAQ, edited the Technical section, and wrote the Introduction.

Lawrence Deneault (Sith Dragon) whose work on the unofficial FAQ is much appreciated.   We'll miss your website Sith!

The U:A development team who have taken the time to answer our questions despite being worked like dogs!   :)

Carly Staehlin-Taylor (Lady Moi) who is responsible for the existence of the U:A Q&A forum and for the communication between the dev team and the fans.

And of course all of the fans at the Official U:A Forums, Ultima newsgroups, and discussion boards like Horizons, without whom there would be no questions.

I.4 Need more information?

Hopefully, if you have a question about U:A, you can find the answer in this FAQ.

If not, feel free to ask your question at the official U:A Q&A Discussion Forum (at http://boards.owo.com).

You can also send feedback about the game's design to Richard Garriott at lordbritish@origin.ea.com.

If you have a question about something else related to U:A which couldn't be answered at the Q&A forum, you can try emailing Carly Staehlin-Taylor (Lady Moi) at ctaylor@origin.ea.com or Matt Orlich at morlich@origin.ea.com

SECTION P: PLOT

P.1 What will the plot of U:A involve?

The powerful being known as the Guardian (from Ultima 7 & 8) established himself in Britannia while you, the Avatar, were trapped on a world called Pagan (the setting of Ultima 8).   There are 8 dark columns throughout the land of Britannia, presumably created by the Guardian, which are causing destruction and manipulating the citizens towards an un-virtuous mindset.   Your job of course will be to set things right.

Ultima:Ascension will be the last Ultima to feature the Avatar and will tie up a lot of loose ends from the entire Ultima series of games.   If you're a veteran of the series you'll recognize a lot of familiar characters, places, and items from previous games.   But you don't need to have played any of the previous games to understand the plot of Ascension; it's a standalone game.

P.2 I'm hoping the story for U:A won't be too light hearted.   How heavy will U:A be on jokes and humorous conversations?

The story of Ascension is serious, although there will be characters, and events that are humorous.   We feel we have a good mix, that will not get in the way of the game, just add to the experience.

The script written by Kim (Krizan) is amazing, and I'm sure everyone will see the depth she has brought to the story and characters.

Rest assured, Ascension is not a comedy.

P.3 Will U:A have an incredible, amazing, memorable ending, or it will just...end?   That is to say will we really feel like the story and the fate of the characters and the land of Britannia have been resolved?

Difficult questions...but without giving too much away...the story ending will be stunning... you should have a sense that the major characters have come to fruition or actualized, the plot arc should be resolved, and the questions answered.

As for the cinematics...well, I didn't want to...but for you guys I went and had a look at the low res versions of the ending.   (Darn you all).   The finals aren't in yet...in any case...they will be stunning...some of the animation is just breathtaking...some of the effects are really incredible.   I don't want to tell you how long it lasts though...seems like that gives too much away.   Just to leave it open ended... :)

P.4 U7 had about 150 citizens, not counting guards.   What is the total population of U:A?   Will the towns feel like they are populated?

Currently the world has over 175 NPC's who all have unique conversations.   We are still adding more people to the world, and may have as many as 200-250.   This does include guards, although unlike older Ultimas, most of the guards are not generic, all saying the same thing.   The cities will be full of people, some with more then others.

P.5 Are the dramatic scenes in U:A prerendered videos or are they shown in real-time using the game engine?

A good question that the Ultima: Ascension team seriously considered before arriving at a solution.   We examined the aesthetic and technical challenges inherit in each approach.

Here's the short answer.   A majority of narrative cinematics have been developed as pre-rendered flics.   There are some moments within gameplay where control is taken from the player and a linear sequence of events plays out (therefore both techniques are used).   Several points led us in the direction of using pre-rendered flics:

o   while the UA game-engine is incredibly versatile, coding sufficient tools to choreograph a complex narrative scene was low in priority for our programming team.   These tools are readily available in off-the-shelf animation software like Lightwave and 3DSMax.

o   while our in-game characters are beautiful to look at, they can't convey the extremely subtle emotional subtext that we wanted in our flics -- a squint of suspicion, a start of surprise, etc.

o   while the world is rendered beautifully and the artwork beyond par, off-the-shelf software provides us with a broad range of control for lighting and special effects.

Now, all that said, I don't agree that low-poly models can't convey emotional subtext.   I've seen it done brilliantly in games like Final Fantasy VII.   I *do* agree they can't do it all by themselves.   An emotionally rich moment benefits from a good story, rich characterization, good music, sets, and voice-overs. I look forward to integrating linear story-telling and interactive gameplay within the game engine in future versions of Ultima and beyond.

P.6 How far in advance was the plot for U:A worked out?   Did you know what would happen in U:A back when you were creating the first Ultimas?

From Lord British (Executive Designer):
The first 3 Ultima's I did not even know there would be a next and their plots have been forced together later.   In the second trilogy, I at least started off with where the last one ended. With U7-9 I did at least plan a few of the basics around the Guardian, the main goals and where the game would take place, not much more.   And for Ultima's beyond IX, only a short wish list of technical issues I'd like to see us accomplish nothing yet about the plot.

P.7 Do we have to play the previous Ultima games to know what is going on in U:A?

We have made an extra effort to give new players, and those who have missed an Ultima or two, all the history of the world.   There will be no need to have any past Ultima experience, although the people who have played Ultimas before will see a lot of old friends, and be privy to in-jokes.

P.8 Sometimes in previous Ultima games, inconsistencies would come up when conversing with NPCs (for example you've done a quest for someone but they've forgotten that you did and still pretend they have a problem).   Will this be better handled in U:A?

We are going to do our best to keep plot holes and NPC holes out of the game.   We have some experts on the problem (Craig Bowlin, Chuck Zoch) who have worked with conversation systems on many games before.   We have already started going through the story, and each of the designers is taking extra time to wipe out problems.

P.8 Will the Avatar need to follow the virtues?   Will items like the Codex of Ultimate Wisdom and the Gargoyle Lenses be in the game?

Yes, the Avatar will need to follow the eight virtues.   Yes, the Codex will play an important part in the story.   And yes, the two lenses are also going to be important.   I don't want to give away too much more, but I hope that answers some of your questions.

P.9 What does Britannia's future hold beyond U:A?   Or would this give away too much?

Yup, to tell you about the future of Britannia would be to divulge plot elements that shouldn't be divulged.

SECTION G: GAMEPLAY

G.1 World Issues
G.2 Movement and Transportation
G.3 NPCs
G.4 Monsters
G.5 Combat
G.6 Magic
G.7 Skills and Abilities
G.8 Inventory and Items
G.9 Controls and Interface
G.10 Quests and Plot Issues

G.1 WORLD ISSUES

G.1.1 Will Ultima:Ascension feature seasons and changing weather?

Ultima:Ascension does support rain and fog to varying degrees.   The wind also changes with weather.   Sunny days have a light breeze; stormy weather has a heavy wind that kicks up.   The sky will smoothly transition from daylight to storm conditions.   There is lightning, both in terms of a sky image and in terms of the light source flashing the world.   Currently the sky smoothly transitions from day to sunset to night and back again in the morning.   And, because the weather is geographically located, when you pass through a moongate you'll get different weather at the other end.   No seasons though.

G.1.2 How detailed is the physics model used in Ascension?

Things DO fall at precisely 9.81 m/2^2 in our world.   Moments of inertia are supported in U:A's physics system; objects do have mass and a center of gravity, different from the geometric center.   Objects do react and rebound when they hit, and float or sink in water depending on their weight and volume.   Signs, hanging herbs, and other objects swing in the wind in our world.

G.1.3 Will Ultima:Ascension feature transparent water?

Yes, the water will be tranparent in the waterfalls, oceans,etc.   You should see some of the gorgeous waterfall areas our artists have created.

G.1.4 Can you give us an idea of how big Britannia is in U:A and how much it has changed since the Guardian has gained control?

The map has been constantly evolving since the start and is still changing, although the basic shape is finished.   The world has changed since Ultima 7, although the basic shape will be similar.

G.1.5 Will the Avatar leave footprints behind him if he walks in soggy stuff like snow or mud?

Cool idea, but we have no plans to implement footprints.

G.1.6 How is buoyancy handled?   If I'm wearing armour will this make it more difficult for me to swim?

Our physics does include buoyancy, but we don't utilize that for swimming.   We do feel it would be tedious to have to disrobe to swim.   This may change, but currently your armor has zero effect on your ability to swim.

G.2 MOVEMENT AND TRANSPORTATION

G.2.1 What means of transportation can we use to travel across Britannia?

I don't want to give away too much, but I will give you 2 methods...Ship travel, and Moongates.

G.2.2 Will we be able to tame dragons and use them as mounts?

Sorry, dragons will not be tameable!

G.3 NPCs

G.3.1 What's the total population of U:A?

Currently the world has over 175 NPC's who all have unique conversations.   We are still adding more people to the world, and may have as many as 200-250.   This does include guards, although unlike older Ultimas, most of the guards are not generic, all saying the same thing.   The cities will be full of people, some with more then others.

G.3.2 Will the unique NPCs have different faces?

We have over 100 unique looking faces / body types, and all of the main characters will not be used again (Avatar, Lord British, Iolo, etc...).   We will make changes to the others as time permits.

G.3.3 Will there be scripted sequences involving NPCs?

Yes, conversations operate much like scripted sequences, although you choose what the Avatar's responses are.   The characters perform some physical acting along with the voice. While the Avatar is speaking, you won't be able to necessarily control him--however, these situations won't last long, duration-wise.

G.3.4 Will conversations with NPCs be in text or full speech(with sound)?

It will be full speech with optional subtitles.

G.3.5 Will we be able to sell items to merchants?

Yes, you will be able to buy from and sell items to merchants.   And there will be no more wading through conversations to buy or sell items, merchants will just buy and sell.   For selling items to be important, money has to be important throughout the game.   We are working hard to keep money desirable throughout the game, and not something that is meaningless halfway through the game.

G.4 MONSTERS

G.4.1 How many types of monsters will there be?

We should have around thirty different monsters in the game, many (if not most) looking completely different. We will, of course, have some variations on the same type of monster (i.e. Goblin, Goblin Sargent).

G.4.2 Will there be any spiders in the game?

Spiders will be in the game (several different varieties), and no you won't be able to ride them.

G.5   COMBAT

G.5.1 What will combat be like in Ascension?

Combat will be real time, not turn based and you will need to use both the mouse and keyboard for combat.

G.5.2 Will there be an option where we can switch between having a turn based combat or real-time?

Although multiple modes of combat would be a cool idea, Ultima:Ascension is a real time combat game, and there are no plans to add turn based combat.

G.5.3 Can everyone in the game be killed?

Right now the plan is to allow everyone to be killed. Yes, Lord British can be killed, but not by normal means...

G.5.4 Will arrows hitting their target   stick in the opponent?

Arrows do "stick" in your opponent, but they fade out over time after their damage is done, making it impossible to re-use them.   Otherwise, during bow combat, an opponent with a lot of hit points would begin to resemble a porcupine.

G.6   MAGIC

G.6.1 What kind of magic system will be utilized in Ultima:Ascension?

You should expect to see a spellbook and ritual spell casting.   That doesn't mean that spellbook spells will be ritual spells.   They are separate types of spells.

G.6.2 How will the magic in U:A work?

There will be 8 circles of magic (with spells of increasing power in each circle) plus one circle of linear magic (very simple spells that don't cost any reagents or mana to cast).   Each circle will have one spell for each of the 5 elements introduced in Ultima 8: earth, air, fire, water and ether.   The spells will cost you something, however, like mana, and "on the fly" spells will be restricted by something of that nature.   Ritual magic will require the player to perform a specific sequence of activities in order to cast the spell.   You will also be able to create potions with magical effects.

G.6.3 Will we be able to buy reagents in shops or do we have to find them somewhere?

Reagents can be found or bought.   Some will be more common then others, and some will be much more difficult to find.   As with previous Ultimas, the reagents needed for spells are related to the functions of the spell.

G.6.4 Will I be able to aim certain spells at specific targets or do I have to just face them?

You will use the cursor to aim at your target.   Facing the target will be unnecessary.

G.6.5 Will the runic alphabet be reused?

Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes, Runic will not only be part of the game, it will be an essential part of the game.

G.6.6 Will there be any magical fields again?

Yes, there will be magic fields.

G.6.7 Will it be possible to attack over a crystal barrier spell?

Yes, some attacks will work over a crystal barrier.

G.6.8 Will the "Dance" spell be included again?

Some characters will dance...

G.6.9 Will there be a "Pickpocket" spell again?

Sorry, no pickpocket spell.

G.6.10 Will we be able to summon creatures?

Yes, you will be able to summon them.

G.6.11 Will there be a "Shrink" spell?

Shrink....you will have to wait and see!!!

G.7 SKILLS AND ABILITIES

G.7.1 Will there be any skills in U:A?

There will be a small skill set that is directly related to the game and to your character, and as your character progresses you will gain new skills and abilities.

G.7.2 What about those abilities?

As the game progresses, the Avatar will gain new abilities. These include additional combat moves, and magic.   It will be possible to finish the game without gaining every ability, although in some cases, it will be very difficult.

Here is an example of the use of these skills and abilties: you begin the game with the most basic sword skill of "thrust and parry", the further you progress your sword fighting skills, the more options you will have available to you.   If you are a master, you should be able to perform hacks, slashes.

G.8   INVENTORY AND ITEMS

G.8.1 Is it true that the game will stop when we look at our inventory?

Yes it's true that when you open your inventory the game will stop.   We would rather give the benefit to the player, and allow them to heal, change armor / weapons and get spells ready.   This may sound cruel to the monsters, but we think most players will appreciate it.

G.8.2 Will there be just one size for the backpack or will there be different backpacks of   various sizes?

The Avatar has only one backpack, although the number of slots in it has not been finalized. The world will have different sized containers.

G.8.3 What type of container management will there be in Ascension?

Thus far, only containers that are too small to hold items in the 3D world pop up a slotted gump. Anything that is big enough to hold real items will have a real volume and does hold items in the world. (EG. a bag or pouch pops up a gump, but a wardrobe or large chest does not, and instead animates open to reveal the contents which you can drag out with the cursor).

G.8.4 Will we be able to carry smaller containers (for instance pouches) in the backpack ?

Slots will only hold items (gold and arrows will not take up slots). Pouches will not fit into slots.

G.8.5 Will equipped items be visible on the Avatar's body?

Yes, weapons and shields equipped on the Avatar will be shown on his body.

G.8.6 Will torches be shown   and will they take up the weapon or shield hand?

The present plan is to have shields and torches shown in the Avatar's hands.

G.8.7 Will we be able to wear different types of armor and clothing and see it reflected on the Avatar's person? Why not give him a pair of pink flippers and cement pants?

Yes, you will be able to wear different types of armor and have it reflect on the Avatar. No pink flippers or cement pants yet, though... :)

G.8.8 Will we be able to wear layers of clothes and armor?

Currently, there is only one "layer" per "body part" that can be equipped. For instance, the Avatar's "torso, waist and neck" can either be "naked", "equipped with the platemail chestplate", "equipped with the ringmail chestpiece", etc.

G.8.9 Will we be able to mix/match armor?

Yes, absolutely! You can mix/match any piece of armor.

G.8.10 How many "body sections" will there be for armor and clothes?

Here are the "body sections" that are currently used:
- Head
- Main body (neck, torso, waist)
- Upper legs (left/right thigh)
- Lower legs (left/right shin, left/right foot)
- Upper arms (left/right biceps)
- Lower arms (left/right forearm, left/right hand)

Left and right go together: if you pick up some gauntlets and put them on, both left and right forearms/hands are covered.

G.8.11 Will we be able to stack items?

Items are stackable, although some items are too heavy to pick up.

G.8.12 How does food affect the Avatar?

Food will heal you.   The world has various types of food, that will heal the Avatar in various amounts.   And you will be able to eat bread that the Avatar bakes!

G.8.13 Will alcohol affect the Avatar?

The player can drink various things from wine to potions, each having different effects.   As for being drunk, we are talking about that now...

G.8.14 Will there be key rings or will we end up with 3000 separate keys?

There will be no key rings, but keys are one use items, so you should not end up having tons to deal with.

G.8.15 How will those "one use" keys work in Ultima:Ascension?

When you use a key, it goes away, never to be used again.   The door that the key is used on will now be unlocked forever.

G.9 CONTROLS AND INTERFACE

G.9.1 Will there be user configurable keys?

We are planning to have the interface completely customizable.   Right now all keys can be reassigned, and we are looking at how to play without the mouse.   We plan to offer several default configurations for people used to playing Ultima 7/8, Quake, Tomb Raider, etc...   Everyone has a different idea of the perfect controls, and we want to make them all work in the game.

G.9.1.1 Will we be able to customize the mouse controls in U:A also?

Currently, yes.

G.9.2 Will there be an option to play the game from the first-person perspective?

We have 1st and 3rd person perspective functioning in the game.   We will most likely keep both in the game, although being in 1st person causes a lot of problems with combat, and interaction in the world.   We are looking into solutions, although the game was designed for 3rd person, not 1st.

G.9.3 Will the camera adjust itself if the view is blocked by something?

Yes, the camera will move in closer to the Avatar if blocked by a door closing behind you, or when you go into buildings, or anything else that might block the camera.   The camera won't get left behind.

G.9.4 Will we be able to adjust and lock the position of the camera?

Yes, you can lock the pitch (up-down angle) of the camera.

G.9.5 Will we be able to zoom out through walls so that we can take a look into the next room?

The camera won't let you see through walls or into rooms you're not supposed to.   It stops when it's blocked by walls and objects, so you will only see what you are supposed to see.

G.9.6 How far can we zoom out with the camera?

Right now, you can zoom out incredibly far and still have the game run.   At E3, you could zoom the camera out so far that the entire demo map was visible from above, and the game was still running .

G.9.7 Will we have a limited range when dragging an object or using an object with another?

Yes, there is a limited range to the Avatar's reach.

G.9.8 Will there be a mana and a life bar in U:A so you know when you are running out of mana and when   you will die?

Yes, there will be a Life Meter, and a Mana Meter, which can be switched on or off.

G.9.9 Will there be automatic note-taking in Ascension?

The Avatar will have a journal that keeps track of important information, events, and maps.   Although some people think this makes the game too easy, others like the idea of knowing what has happened, and what quests are still unfinished.

G.9.10   How does the compass work in U:A?

The compass sits in the lower left corner of the screen.   It can be turned on, or off.   Presently it can not be moved.

G.9.11 In some screenshots for U:A, we can see a large 'toolbar' at the bottom of the screen with slots labeled for the function keys, along with the compass and health/mana meters.   Is there a way to turn this off (it takes up a lot of the screen)?

The 'toolbar' currently has 3 states:
1) Show everything (compass, meters, the 12 quick slots)
2) Show just the compass and meters
3) Show nothing.

I generally play with setting (2), but if you have the toolbar semi-full with stuff, it helps to play with setting (1). We are trying to make it as unobtrusive yet still functional/quick/easy as possible.

G.10 QUESTS AND PLOT ISSUES

G.10.1 Will there be any side quests or do we have to follow the main plot?

There will be many side quests in U:A, some plot related, and some not..   The exact number is not known right now.   The game does follow a story, although the player will have plenty of time to explore the world, adventure around, and go on some side quests.

G.10.2 Will exploring and wandering around in U:A be rewarded?

Not to worry, although Ascension has a story driven plot, the player will have plenty of areas to explore.   We are working hard to maximize the world with lots of cool areas to adventure through, and many non-plot related quests.

G.10.3 Will Ultima:Ascension keep track of good and evil deeds?   If so, will they affect the way NPCs interact with the avatar?

The game will be keeping track of the good and evil deeds and it will affect the way the game treats you, so even if no one sees it, it will have an adverse effect.

G.10.4 What happens when the Avatar dies during the course of the game?   Will he be resurrected?

When the Avatar dies, the game will end, and the player will be given the option to load a saved game, start a new game, or exit the game.

T.1 SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

T.1 System Requirements
T.2 Video Issues
T.3 Audio Issues
T.4 Other Technical Issues

T.1.0 What are the system requirements for U:A?

The following specifications are the current target but may change by the time U:A is released.

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* Minimum Requirements *
CPU: Pentium 200 with 3D accelerator (Pentium II 300 CPU without)
RAM: 32Mb
3D: 4Mb or better
SOUND: 16 bit sound card

Note: Though a 3D accelerator is not required if you have Pentium II level CPU, it is highly recommended to increase performance and visual quality.   U:A will support both Glide and Direct3D.

* Recommended System *
CPU: Pentium II 300
RAM: 64Mb
3D: 3D accelerator at the level of a Voodoo2, Banshee, RivaTNT, etc.
SOUND: 16 bit sound card (U:A has support for Directsound3D and EAX)

T.1.1 Will a P233 be able to run U:A?   Will the game be able to take advantage of all of the RAM I have on my system (whether it's 32Mb, 64Mb, 128Mb, 256Mb, etc.)?

I'll try to answer this as best as I can.   First, a P233 should run the game fine, if you have enough RAM and a fast 3D accelerator.   "Enough RAM" means 64MB recommended, but 32MB will probably be playable with some pauses.   We've found that the more RAM, the better, so 128MB
systems actually play faster than 64MB systems.

Exactly which models constitute a "fast enough" 3D accelerator has yet to be determined--our Direct3D support isn't far enough along for us to be able to tell yet.

T.1.2 I've got a PII 266 w/128 MB RAM, and an 8Mb Voodoo2 card.   How will U:A preform on my PC?

You're above minimum specs in all aspects.   Ascension should run well on your system.   Remember, though, that a game of this complexity and genre won't run like a 3D action engine.   Our target frame rate is 20 fps minimum, which is very smooth.

T.1.3 I have a P133 and 32Mb RAM and a Voodoo 3D accelerator.   Can I still play U:A?

I won't beat around the bush here.   A P133 won't cut it.   You won't be happy at all playing the game with that platform.   Your RAM is OK, but you need a faster CPU!

T.1.4 What PC components will most affect U:A's performance?   CPU, RAM, video card?

First, start with a min-spec machine (PII 200MHz, 32MB RAM, Voodoo1).

Here's what I'd add, and in what order:

Biggest speed factor: CPU speed.   300 will probably be recommended, and it does run quite well; 450 rocks!

Second biggest: Memory.   64MB recommended, but 128MB is really good....and you can improve performance even more with more memory on top of that.

Third: 3D card (3Dfx or D3D).   AGP preferred for D3D.   12MB Voodoo2 is quite good.   No hard numbers available for our D3D version yet...wait until closer to ship date to upgrade your video, and don't bother until you've addressed the first two items.

T.2 VIDEO ISSUES

T.2.1   Will there be support for AMD's 3Dnow instruction set in U:A?

We have some K6 dev systems now.   Looks like it won't be hard to attempt adding some support--I have no idea what kind of performance gains we'll get though.   But I do know that we're going to try it out (if it can be fit into the development schedule).

T.2.2 Will U:A have multi-texturing which video cards like Riva TNT and Voodoo2 can do?

We have no plans to implement multi-texturing.

T.2.3 Will U:A run well without a 3D video accelerator?

We will support software-only, but an accelerator is highly recommended to fully enjoy the game's visuals.

T.2.4 Will the Voodoo Rush video cards be supported?

Voodoo Rush will be supported.

T.2.5 Is there any difference in visual appearance between the 3Dfx Glide and Direct3D versions of U:A?

D3D is still expected to look just like Glide.   Existing screen shots should look the same under either Glide or D3D.

T.2.6 I'm not sure if my 3D card has fog as one of it's features.   Does fog have to be done by the video card or can it be done by the software?

I'm not the expert on our team on D3D.   However, it's my understanding that not all cards support hardware fog.   I don't know if your card is one of those or not, but I do know that we don't plan to support fog in software.   Often, you can access your card's capabilities through a DirectX icon in Control Panel, or through your Display Properties dialog.   Also, if other games on your system display fog, it's
probably done in hardware.

T.2.7 Will the ATI All-In-Wonder video card be able to run U:A well?

There are a lot of cards that U:A will work just fine with, and if you have one of these, you'll be set, video-wise. These include, but are not limited to, Voodoo2, Voodoo Banshee, and TNT and other power-house D3D cards, especially AGP cards.

However, there are other important factors to consider when spec'ing out your system: CPU speed and RAM.   The faster the CPU, the more you'll enjoy the game.   Our recommended platform will probably end up being around a

P300.   But, if you have a P400, you'll get that much more out of the engine.   Also, RAM is very important.   The more RAM you have, the faster the game runs.   Same guidelines apply here--our min spec RAM will probably be 32MB, with 64MB being "recommended".   But, if you have 128MB, you'll get even better performance.   The point is, the video card isn't necessarily the limiting factor in your system...

T.3 AUDIO ISSUES

T.3.1 I've always loved the music of Ultima, some of the greatest I've ever heard. But now, when comparing it to other games, with full CD audio orchestrals, it sounds a bit dated. Will U:A be CD audio or the same MIDI it's been using?

Since we cannot guarantee the quality of sound that MIDI music gives our players (various sound cards give different results), we're going with streaming digital audio for music and any long SFX.   Currently, the music is played as compressed 22kHz, 16 bit, stereo, and it sounds really good - and everybody will be guaranteed to get the same high quality sounds the Audio Engineers / Musicians are producing.   A live orchestra is being used to create the music.

T.3.2 I've generally found for myself that most recordings done in 22kHz sound much flatter than those done in 44.1kHz.   Is there a trick that you use that allows it a rich flavor without the high frequencies?

How "good" it sounds is subjective... I've listened to the scores the musicians created for the E3 demo, and they sound fine to me...   Yes, 44.1kHz will definitely sound better, but there are tradeoffs... Since the data is streaming digital, you have to read twice as much for each "chunk" to get the same length of audio output.   Since it's compressed, you also have to decompress more.   The raw data on CD/disk also takes up significantly more space.

It's a quality <> size/performance tradeoff, and since our quality is already "good", the choice is easy.   (That doesn't mean we can't support 44.1kHz if the need arises, though - a few lines of audio code could be modified and voila!)

T.3.3 Will U:A use Creative Labs' EAX (Environmental Audio Extensions)?

Like Wilford Brimley (sp?) said in those beloved Quaker Oats commercials from years ago, "It's in there."

T.3.4 Will A3D 1.0/2.0 and DirectSound3D be supported?

U:A uses/supports:
- DirectSound
- DirectSound3D
- EAX

We do NOT support A3D.   As far as I know, A3D 1.0 gives no benefits over   DS3D except for buffer management.   A3D 2.0 adds WaveTracing (Aureal's method of doing reverberation, in competition with Creative Lab's EAX).   However, using WaveTracing requires that you pass your world geometry to the Vortex2 processor, and it's probably too late in development to modify our engine to support that technology.   EA now officially supports / endorses EAX, and it's very easy to implement in a game, so we went that route.

T.3.5 So how is it going to sound to someone with an A3D soundcard?   Are we going to miss out on much without EAX?

It should still sound good and immersive (you'll still get DirectSound3D).   To offset the lack of EAX support in non-CL products, our Audio Engineers are pre-processing some environmental effects with reverb and whatnot.   We will play them as 2D sounds (EAX only works with 3D sounds, so playing them 2D will ensure they sound the same on every system, with or without EAX) and they should help the game's ambiance quite a bit.

We might also use a second set of pre-processed audio samples for those sounds which would benefit the most - things like footsteps or events that you hear often.   If we detect that you don't have EAX, we could play sounds from that special set of SFX;   if you do have EAX, we would just play the "normal"/non-processed FX and let EAX do it's thing.

T.3.5.1 Any chance of supporting A3D 2.0 so that people who own cards that support it can hear the reverb effects?   How about a patch to add support?

The decision to implement EAX was made before the A3D 2.0 SDK was out of beta, and our production schedule reflects this.   EAX may not provide as mathematically "correct" a representation as WaveTracing, but it can be tailored to give good effects (we'll have to wait and see how EAX 2.0 does things).   If we have time to revisit the issue before we ship, who knows, maybe we'll put support in.   There is also a chance that A3D 2.0 cards will be able to support EAX through driver upgrades.   As always, "Nothing's final 'til it ships."

T.3.6 Is the speed of sound modeled in U:A?   Will there be a proper delay between the sound originating and our ears hearing it?

DirectSound3D already includes support for Doppler; however, I think it's more of a frequency modification trick in DS3D, rather than a true model of speed/delay/etc.   (Just my guess, I haven't really experimented with Doppler on things like fireballs or fast moving objects yet).   So... as far as I have been able to discern, the audio delay mentioned above (due to distance) is not taken into account.

T.3.7 Will the AWE64 sound card play 3D sound effects also?

The AWE64 will sound fine in 3D.   We use DirectSound3D, which "places" sound in 3D space, so as you turn the camera & move around the world, the sounds move too.

The only 3D enhancement that the AWE64 doesn't support is the EAX technology, which gives sounds environmental characteristics (like echo).

T.3.8 Is it possible to attach a sound to a particular place or time of day?   For instance, can you specify that wolves should howl at night in the forest?

We have the ability to specify what time interval a sound can play.   For the E3 demo, we had some trees where birds would chirp during the day, and crickets would play at night.   It was quite cool.   The wolves could be easily done.   :)

T.3.9 What type of audio compression are you using for the digital speech and sound effects in U:A?

Currently, all audio in the game can be uncompressed .WAVs (if we decide we want particular things to sound perfect, avoiding quality loss that compression introduces), or compressed with a variant of XA compression that gets about a 3.7:1 compression ratio (and still sounds very good).   Whether we use a different codec for speech is probably a minor issue - it wouldn't take that long for me to write a new audio streamer that uses it.

T.3.10 Will using Creative Labs' Sound Blaster Live as opposed to Sound Blaster Live Value make any difference in the sound quality of U:A?

You might want to check out Creative's web page for the best info on the differences.   To my knowledge, the Value edition has these differences from the full version:

- It does NOT have the "Digital I/O" daugthercard.   Thus, it has no S/PDIF connectors for digital in/out, and no mini-DIN connectors for MIDI

- It has a different software bundle

As far as I know, they both *sound* the same and use the same drivers. They should produce identical results for Ultima: Ascension.

T.3.11 The MP3 audio format compresses very well and is very high quality. Have you considered using it in U:A?

You are correct in that MP3 is an excellent compression scheme and has very good sound quality. However, using MP3 would have a severe performance penalty. To use MP3, you'd either have to (1) decompress on-the-fly, which would drastically impact frame rate and other game functions, or (2) decompress at level-load time, store the audio in memory, and playback the uncompressed data, a technique which would require large amounts of memory. In our case, that memory is better used by object/terrain meshes and/or data caches so you can see more on the screen at once, get better performance, smoother gameplay, etc...

T.4 OTHER TECHNICAL ISSUES

T.4.1 I hear they are running U:A on Windows NT 4.0 right now. Will the game support Windows NT?

It works with NT 4.0, although you don't get full 3D sound support with that configuration. NT 5.0 is a different story, and I understand that future service packs for NT 4.0 will allow full sound & D3D support as well.

Clarification: By a "different story", I meant that NT 5.0 provides full sound & D3D support, by virtue of its supporting DX6!

T.4.1.1 Apart from Win32, there are several other platforms out there, at least one of which (Linux) is rapidly gaining in popularity. Are there any plans for porting Ascension, or, at least, it's successor?

Back when Origin was making games on the Apple II, we decided to pass on making games for IBM computers. The thinking then was that the Apple II was a far superior system and that everyone would realize this. They didn't, and Origin almost went under as a result. From then on, Origin has always made games for the largest installed base (currently Windows 95/98). Although we think Linux is an awesome operating system (many of us run it at home, myself included) it does not currently have a large enough installed base to for us to make a profit off of a port. On the other hand, we were impressed with the large response to the iMac launch and we are talking to Apple about porting over to their system. So, we are open to porting our games to other operating systems as long as it's profitable.

T.4.1.2 Will U:A come out for Playstation, Dreamcast, or N64 console systems?

Currently, we have no plans to develop U:A for those platforms.

T.4.2 Would a first person view allow U:A to operate faster?

Yes, first person view is a bit faster for a number of reasons. The game is capable of supporting this camera mode, and I think we should allow it as an option, although I wouldn't want to play the game continually in first person (it's just not my game-play style preference).

T.4.3 I've heard reports that U:A ran sluggishly at E3 (1998). Any chance on seeing some average frames per second figures (with machine specs) based on the engine in it's current form?

Yes, our performance at E3 was sub-optimal. But it was for reasons beyond just frame rate. If you stood in one place & looked around, the frame rate typically (on a P300) was around 25 - 30 FPS. But, as you'd move through the world, the frame rate would drop to as low as 10. Now, 10 FPS isn't completely unplayable, although it's unpleasant. What really hurt in that version of the engine was the changes in speed--going from fast to slow. Also, there were portions of the world that would cause the engine to pause for at least 1/2 second while a new section of the world loaded, and that hurt most of all.

Notice I said "that version of the engine"--we're well aware of our deficiencies at E3 and are attacking those portions of the code with gusto right now...

Our engine isn't level-based.   It loads the world in, in chunks, while you move around, so you can circumscribe the entire world continuously.   But, this introduces interesting performance issues, which we're working hard to address!

We've done major surgery on a number of subsystems & major systems, though.   If we were to use the E3 demo as a baseline performance metric, our current performance boost due to the new optimizations is approximately 2xE3! And climbing.

T.4.4 In some screenshots, the sky looks upsized and bilinear filtered.   Especially at higher screen resolutions it would be nice to have a sharper looking sky.   Also there appeared to be bugs in the E3 (1998) demo such as lighting problems and vanishing objects.   Was the clipping plane also placed very close to the camera?

About the lighting bug: Yup.   It was a bug.   Yup.   It's still there.   But it will, of course, be fixed before ship. About the clipping plane: Yup, it was too close at E3.   About vanishing objects: Yup, that's another of our bugs at E3; it was rare, but did happen at times.   Again, it will be fixed soon.

About the sky: The screen shots probably aren't giving the sky enough credit.   It looks killer on our screens!   We will require a lower-res version for 8-bit mode (128x128 textures), but will utilize 256x256 textures in 16-bit mode. By the way, those 256x256 textures eat up a lot of texture RAM; nothing chews up texture RAM more than our sky.

T.4.5 Will we still be able to play U:A on future hardware which might run much faster?

We have a speed limiter in the game, which won't let you run faster than 100 FPS, so future hardware won't be a problem.

T.4.6 Any thoughts about supporting the 'wheel' control on a lot of the newer models of mouse (for scrolling through lists or setting walking speed)?

I have one of those new mice with a wheel in the center, and I like it quite a bit.   It would be great to support the wheel in some way, although I'm not exactly sure how we would want to use it.   I'll keep you informed on what happens.

T.4.7 Can U:A emulate the 'isometric' perspective of previous Ultima games?

In an isometric game, when your character turns left or right, the character's body rotates and the camera sees you in profile.

In Ascension, the camera's pitch (the up-down angle) can be locked in an overhead position and zoomed in and out, but the Avatar will always face forward and moving the mouse left and right will cause the surroundings to rotate (rather than the Avatar's body).

The Avatar will have some head movement and body movement as you move the camera, but for all intents and purposes, saying he is facing forward during normal movement is pretty accurate.

T.4.8 Will U:A be able to show shadows cast from creatures and objects?

Like I've said before, we had no schedule time for shadows.   But we put them in anyway.

We used a simple implementation, not the full-bore 3D-projection implementation that we secretly wanted--but hey, they work amazingly well.

SECTION M: MISCELLANEOUS

M.1 Development Issues
M.2 Music and Voices
M.3 Add-ons, Merchandise, Packaging
M.4 Miscellaneous Details

M.1 DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

M.1.1 Was Ultima:Ascension with the original overhead view ever near completion or ready for shipment?

Ultima: Ascension has never, at any time, been closer to shipping than it is now.

M.1.2 How did the U:A engine evolve?

It started out as a straight delta off of the U8 code, as a 2D top-down game, about 3 1/2 years ago.   It was, after some time, changed to a top-down 3D game.   The code went through multiple morphs, as the design went through multiple iterations, and eventually emerged as a fully 3D, 6-degree-of-freedom-camera game.   While it took a couple of days to add a moveable camera to the original code, there was much more work involved in completing the conversion of the engine to a 6-degree-of-freedom paradigm.

M.1.3 What will be the best control interface for U:A?   Mouse, keyboard, joystick?

A mouse.   All keys can be reassigned, though.

M.1.4 Will the mouths of the NPCs synch up with their words?

During the hi-res cutscenes, yes.   In-game, there are a variety of gestures and animations the NPCs can use, but not subtle facial motions.

M.1.5 Will there be multiple savegame slots available, or just one?

Multiple.

M.1.6 Why was it so hard to have a party of NPCs that stayed with you throughout the game?

There were issues with how you interact with the party members, how to make the party members feel really alive and interactive, how to make the party members pathfind intelligently, how to draw all the polygons on the screen and keep the game moving quickly enough, how to make the party members engage in combat intelligently, etc. Then there were all the other issues the team was dealing with regarding the game in general.   In the face of all the obstacles at that time, this feature seemed just too daunting.

The design team was worried about how 'alive' the party would seem.   The solutions to the technical problems led to this arrangement where you wouldn't see the members (they'd follow behind), you wouldn't interact with them, and they'd automatically attack.   Suddenly, this feature looked lifeless.   What good was it doing anyone?

M.1.7 With regard to NPCs and monsters, is the design team focusing more on scripted events, or on the NPC/monster AI?

We use both AI and scripting to create creature and NPC behavior in our game.   Most creatures and NPC's have specific AI based on certain needs or perceived threats (i.e. mice will go after cheese and monsters will automatically attack creatures that are unlike themselves), but we have a very powerful scripting system that allows us to give specific characters and creatures specific behaviors and actions.   So, when you play Ascension, you will encounter creatures that are operating on basic motivations and you will encounter tightly scripted scenarios where creatures have unique actions.

M.1.8 So what sort of scripting language are you using?

The system we are using is home made, and allows the designers to have control of the NPC's / Monsters without having any C++ or Java experience.   On the other hand, we also have the ability to have the programming department hard code anything else we might come up with.   We are lucky to have such a powerful system at our disposal.

M.1.9 I was curious what programming language is used to develop the U:A game engine, and what kind of process do you typically go through when developing the game?

Since Ultima 7, we've been using C++ to develop the game engine (the U6 engine was in C).   Some assembly language is also used, but not as much now as in the old days.   There is typically an initial research and planning stage when we design the core systems of the game engine and the editor, and then use that as the basis for further development.   Sometimes the previous game engine is used to prototype what we want the new one to look like, but it varies from one project to the next.

M.1.10 How much time is Origin slating for U:A to go through the QA process?

The easy answer is that it will be in test until no bugs remain.   In reality, we have a 4 month test cycle planned, and that will get larger or smaller depending   on how things go.   This is our plan for now.   As we get closer to shipping, we will have a better idea.   Origin is committed to making sure Ultima: Ascension meets the highest standard of excellence.   An experienced group of Origin testers is checking every aspect of the game to make sure that the game meets the quality and playability standards that our customers expect.

M.1.11 Is the dev team actually taking suggestions from the fans into consideration?

All your input does make a difference, and the team appreciates the time you take to share your thoughts. In some cases, the suggestions only require a slight modification of the existing system, or are already in place... in some cases, the suggestions are thought to be quite good, but are unable to be implemented at this stage of development. However, that doesn't mean you should stop making suggestions.

M.1.12 What is the typical development week like?   I hope the team is not too hard for extra long hours since this increases the chances of making mistakes.   Will you have enough time to work out all the bugs?

(From U:A's lead programmer Bill "CapnBill" Randolph):

"My typical week: I get up at 5:50, get ready for work, & am in by 7am.   These days, we work through lunch, and I leave at about 7pm (or sometimes 8, sometimes 6), so I can get some time with my family.   Fridays, I cut out a little early (but don't tell our lead--hey, I'm the lead!)   And, these days, I work one weekend-day every week, either Saturday or Sunday.

Others on the team get in around 9, and stay til around 9pm, so their schedules are comparable, just phase-shifted relative to mine.

We really hear you about making mistakes, and crunching 'til we drop.   We're not into that--but we have some tough deadlines ahead, so we are working hard.   We're fixing a lot of bugs along the way, though.   The designers have to have a playable game while we write code, and any bugs that are stopping them get fixed as they crop up.

We're planning for months of Q/A; I believe we'll have a top-quality product!"

M.1.13 How are objects passing through the clipping plane rendered?   Do they just pop into existence all at once, or will we see the partial structures of large objects being built polygon by polygon as the plane passes through it?

Currently, polygons are clipped to the near & far clipping plane, such that they stop drawing exactly where they intersect the planes.   So, objects appear to come into view polygon-by-polygon.   It's a strange effect, not too realistic, and we're doing lots of various things to hide that.   The most obvious is pushing that plane out as far as

possible.   Also, we use distance haze & fog to hide the effect.   Finally, we allow terrain to draw out further than the objects.   Having land behind the objects tends to make their "phasing into reality" less noticable.   And, we have other ideas.... :)

M.1.14 Will you have mirrors or other reflective surfaces in U:A?

We currently have no plans for mirrors, but have discussed several approaches amongst ourselves.   But, you shouldn't count on it.

M.2 SOUND AND VOICES

M.2.1 Will the song 'Stones' be used in the game?
Yes, 'Stones' will be in the game.   We are looking into who will sing it.   At some point in the game, the Avatar may even have to play it.

M.2.2 Will the Avatar have full speech?
There will be full speech for the Avatar's lines. The Avatar will be able to choose from several responses in any given conversation.

M.2.3 Will we be able to give the Avatar a personalized name?

Although a personalized name is pretty cool, within the context of the game, we think that being called "Avatar" is perfect.   In the game, you are The Avatar - which is both a persona and a title.   And although it might be possible to make the computer say your name, it would not sound like the actors we are using for all the speech.   It would seen strange to hear an NPC talk in one voice, and say your name in another.

M.2.4 Will there be music played continously in Ascension?

No, music will be tied to events and desired moods in the game.

M.3 ADD-ONS, MERCHANDISE, AND AVAILABILITY

M.3.0 When will U:A be released?

There is no specific release date at this time.   Currently we are targeting Autumn 1999, but this could change.

M.3.1 Will there be any Ultima:Ascension merchandise like t-shirts or posters?

As soon as the logo has been finalized, t-shirts could become a reality.   What about other items like hats?   Anyone interested in those?

M.3.2 Will we get get some sort of wearable memorabilia of Ultima:Ascension for pre-ordering it?

That's a pretty good idea, but that has to be decided by the sales and marketing department.

M.3.3 Will there be any add-ons for Ultima:Ascension?

Although the programmers are making the U:A engine somewhat generic, so that more can be done with it than just playing U:A in Britain, there are no plans for an add-on at the moment.

M.3.4 Will Ultima:Ascension ship with an scenario editor to allow us to make new quests, spells etc.?

At this time there are no plans to distribute the editor, although this is something we can look into once we have finished the game.

M.3.5 Will the game ship with a map of Britannia?

Yes! The game will ship with a cloth map.

M.3.6 Will the introductory trailer that was included in the Ultima Collection appear in the final game?

No.   What was included in the Ultima Collection was a teaser, specially created for the collection.   The introduction in the final game will be different, and even cooler.

M.3.7 With how many CDs will Ultima:Ascension ship and when do we have to change them?

At this time we do not know when the CD changes will take place.   We will do our best to make the switches as convenient as possible.   Currently it looks like the game can fit on two CDs, and we will likely have one CD be installed entirely to hard disk while the second one remains in the CD-ROM drive during play.

M.3.8 Will there be a soundtrack CD?

If there is enough interest from the fans, this could happen.

M.3.9 Is the game going to be called "Ultima IX: Ascension", or just "Ascension", or what?

In Origin, as in most companies, there is a separation between development and marketing. In the past, Lord British has wavered on his position of having the IX or not.   At this point, he is in favor of putting the IX back in. However, even he must convince the publishing group.   In companies everyone has their job, and marketing gets the final call here.   Lord British is, however, a very persuasive person.

M.3.10 Will U9 be released on PC-DVD format?

Not decided yet...this has been discussed for Ascension--time will tell, however.

M.4 MISCELLANEOUS DETAILS

M.4.1 I think a demo would really help us get a sense of how U:A will run on our PCs.   Is there going to be a demo soon?

I agree it would be helpful to you at this stage.   However, the engine is continually undergoing refinements to performance--we make trade-offs between memory requirements & speed every day.   So, I'm not sure a technology demo would be definitive, and may actually be misleading at this point.   Stay tuned.

M.4.2 Are there any thoughts on making a movie taking place in the Ultima fiction?

The Ultima property has been liscensed before for creating a movie, however nothing has ever happened yet. Part of that is because Richard Garriott takes the Ultima property very seriously and will not allow anyone not completely serious and completely talented to get a hold of it.   So the possibility is there, but it would have to be done really well.

M.4.3 Have you   ever thought of using the picture of the avatar with the black hair as an Anti-Avatar?

That's a neat suggestion, especially if we were planning to have an Anti-Avatar.   Presently we have no plans to use that image, although you never know.

M.4.4 What is going to happen after Ascension?

What will happen next?   We ask this question all the time.   Right now, our team's goal is to finish Ascension. Lord British Productions has several teams, and when the time is right, our next titles will be announced.   Will there be an Ultima X, XI, and XII?   We can't say right now, but Ultima has been the longest running series of RPG's, and I'll bet it will stay that way for a long time to come.

M.4.5 Is there going to be some sort of party when the game is released?

I'm sure that when the Ascension ships, the development team is going to have a HUGE party.   The fans will have to wait for us to recover before we can start work on any patches!   (Not that we'll NEED any, of course!)