

UNSUNG HEROES

ULTIMA VII EXULT TEAM

AS TECHNOLOGY ADVANCES, CLASSIC PC GAMES ARE LOST DUE TO THE CONSTANTLY EVOLVING NATURE OF COMPUTER OPERATING SYSTEMS. IT'S NEVER EASY WATCHING YOUR FAVOURITE GAME FADE INTO OBSCURITY, BUT ULTIMA VII, ARGUABLY THE PINNACLE OF RICHARD GARRIOTT'S LEGENDARY RPG SERIES, IS ONE SUCH GAME. SO WHEN IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THE MEMORY OF ONE OF THEIR FAVOURITES WAS AT RISK, A GROUP OF TALENTED PROGRAMMERS DECIDED TO DEVELOP A PROGRAM THAT WOULD EFFECTIVELY ALLOW ULTIMA VII TO BE PLAYED ON NEWER MACHINES. WE CAUGHT UP WITH JEFF FREEDMAN, THE PROJECT'S FOUNDER, AND ASKED HIM A FEW PROBING QUESTIONS ABOUT EXULT TEAM AND THIS REMARKABLE PIECE OF SOFTWARE



games™: So how did the development of Exult start?

Jeff Freedman: Back in 1998 I came across a document written by Gary Thompson that described the *Ultima*

VII data files containing the map and the graphics. I thought it would be a fun project to follow his instructions and display the *Ultima VII* world in X-Windows on a Linux box. The result was a simple program that displayed Britannia in a window and let you browse around using the arrow keys.

I posted the project information online and it wasn't long after that the first contributors, Tristan Tarrant and Willem Palenstijn, volunteered to help, with Tristan providing configuration scripts and Willem porting the code to Windows. At that point, I didn't plan on doing much more since I had no idea what else would be needed to make a playable game. I could see that the data file 'usecode' contained all the text of the conversations, but I didn't know how to decode it.

Then, around 2000, three *Ultima VII* fans in Europe, Maxim Shatskih, Jakob Shonberg, and Wouter Dijkslag, discovered that the 'usecode' file was actually a script for the game and they decoded much of its format. This brought new life to the project since it meant we had a chance to create an alternate game engine for playing *Ultima VII* using the original data. It was also about this time that a multi-platform multimedia library called SDL became available, and we converted Exult to use it instead of our previous platform-specific Linux/Windows code. This meant that every piece of hardware supported by SDL – which is almost everything – has the potential for running Exult.

g™: What is the meaning of the

name 'Exult'?

JF: The 'x' is from X-Windows, and the 'ult' is from *Ultima*. I've always worked on a Unix and my main aim was to develop on that platform. At the time, X-Windows was the main way to display graphics.

g™: What has been the most demanding aspect of the process of producing Exult?

JF: I'd say it's getting the combat working. This is one area that isn't controlled by the 'usecode' script, so we had to implement it from scratch, often having to guess at how monsters and non-player characters should behave. And there's a seemingly endless list of things that can go wrong, such as weapons not working correctly or monsters heading in your direction, and not realising that you have since moved away.

g™: How many people are involved in the project?

JF: There are 14 project members, but only one person, Marzo, is actively developing. We recently admitted a new team member, Phillip George, who has ported to the PocketPC. Typically, I'd guess that three to five people were active at any one time when the project was in its earlier phases. Often, somebody would join to implement one major area such as



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the audio system or expansion pack support, and then become dormant when that feature was complete. My own involvement is currently fairly spotty, though I do fix bugs now and then. The nice thing about an open-

the original) and also shows you the scene where you saved each game. In addition there's our support for various high-quality screen scalers, which improve the game's appearance, as well as much nicer

"WHILE WE'VE RECEIVED CRITICISM, IT'S ALL BEEN CONSTRUCTIVE"

source project is that you can take a break, then work actively again later.

g™: And what has the response been like?

JF: It's been really positive. We received lots of fan mail when we achieved our goals of making *Black Gate* and *Serpent Isle* [*Ultima VII* expansion packs] completely playable. And while we've received plenty of criticism, it's all been constructive and has helped us improve the project. What I find especially encouraging is that some of our users are starting to use our map-editing and scripting tools, ExultStudio and UCC, to create their own worlds and plots. Several users have also contributed artwork to the project

g™: Have you made any improvements in Exult compared to the original *Ultima VII*?

JF: Yes, the major one being the improved save-restore screen that gives you an unlimited number of save games (compared to eight in

background music. And of course, there's the ability to play *Ultima VII* on almost any computer you can buy, even some handhelds.

g™: How does Pentagram – which many people assumed to be 'Exult for *Ultima VIII*' – fit into the grand scheme of things?

JF: Pentagram is a separate project developed by other members of the Exult team. Several months ago, they reached the point where *Ultima VIII: Pagan* was playable. I'm looking forward to trying it soon.

g™: Has Richard Garriott been in touch regarding Exult?

JF: He sent us a very nice message, which is on our letters page:

"Just so you know. On a personal level I am very excited to see you doing this. It's tough to see games fade out when the computers or operating systems required to play them go away."

Richard 'Lord British' Garriott
g™: You've stated that you do

not accept donations on your site. Could you elaborate on the reasons why?

JF: We've always been a little apprehensive about how Electronic Arts (which owns the copyright) would view our project, and so we wanted to be free from any suspicion that we were profiting from their property. So far, we've not heard a word from them.

g™: What's next for Exult? Is it perfect yet, and how do you intend to improve it?

JF: Most of the new development has been Marzo's work on his mods, along with ExultStudio and UCC [the script compiler] improvements to support his efforts. This work is also intended to make it possible to create new games using the Exult engine.

One interesting feature is support

for multiple maps. The *Ultima VII* world is already huge, but now we provide the ability to create additional maps just as large, as well as a mechanism for moving the player between them. We also continue to fix bugs and improve performance.

To download Exult, visit <http://exult.sourceforge.net>. Please note: you will need an original copy of the game.



▲ *Ultima VII* would be lost were it not for Exult Team.



▲ Exult allows you to tinker with various options within *Ultima VII*.