

Zork, The Great Underground Empire

Bob Liddil, POB 66, Peterborough NH 03458

*Deep within the inky underground
Lurk things only half whispered of
And twisty hidden passages
Which hide both treasure and death.
But who can deny the challenge
Offered to he who would trespass here,
For would not the lure of gold and glory
Be worth more to a man than breath?*

*From Song of Zork by
Freerover the Bard*

Adventure has evolved many times during its short history. From Crowther's and Wood's creation to the genius of Scott Adams to the wild antics of Greg Hasset, the journey has been exciting and entertaining for the fans of inventive computer puzzles. No single advance in the science of Adventure has been as bold and exciting as the introduction of Personal Software Inc's *Zork, The Great Underground Empire*.

The first thing that everyone will look for when *Zork* boots up is the blinking cursor, and the "I AM..." and "YOU SEE..." format that Scott Adams has popularized in his nine Adventures. That is not the case here. The screen layout is arranged in such a way as to move the

WHERE prompt (which gives your current location in the game) down to the bottom of the screen. I found this most useful after reading ten or twelve lines of detailed area description. Additionally, the number of turns elapsed, the number of points accumulated, and the location form an information display on the bottom line of the screen. Other game information scrolls upward as the game progresses, giving a very professional screen layout for the game.

If you happen not to have an unlimited amount of time to spend with your computer, *Zork* has a SAVE command that allows you to save your position in the game onto a blank, initialized floppy disk. While some cowards use it to retain their hard-earned position in the game before making some dangerous move, the true purpose of this command is to let you follow the game through to its ultimate end (which may take weeks), or as protection against losing your position due to, say, a brief power failure.

Zork comes on a write-protected single-density 5-inch disk with what appears to be its own operating system doing the booting and initialization. The disk defied examination by the most sophisticated methods available to me. I hope that Personal Software (which distributes *Zork*) will be able to foil the software pirates and traders for a while. The disk seems to be absolutely uncopyable.

Loading and preparing for play is simple enough. Merely insert the *Zork* disk into drive 0 and press the reset button of your computer. When the program is up and running, a pleasant block cursor greets you. You are now ready to play *Zork*.

Zork requires a 32 K-byte disk system (in this case, a Radio Shack TRS-80 Model I with 32 K bytes of memory and one disk drive) due to the eloquence of the descriptions and the large number of locations that are stored on the disk to be recalled at the appropriate times during the game. The advance copy I used had no instructions, so, in the beginning, I played a fairly straight game of Adventure.

I was eager to test *Zork's* biggest selling point, intelligent input (ie: its ability to accept free-form instructions). I typed "OPEN THE BAG AND GET THE LUNCH," in reference to a brown paper sack inside the house. The computer complied. There was water and food, so I typed "EAT THE LUNCH AND DRINK THE WATER," to which the computer responded with gratitude for satisfying its hunger and thirst.

I was hooked.

At a Glance

Name

Zork, The Great Underground Empire

Type

Adventure game

Manufacturer

Personal Software Inc
1330 Bordeaux Dr
Sunnyvale CA 94086
(408) 745-7841

Price

\$39.95

Format

5-inch floppy disk

Language

Z80 machine code

Computer

Radio Shack TRS-80 Model I with 32 K bytes of memory and one disk drive

Documentation

Printed instructions included

Audience

Anyone interested in Adventure or fantasy gaming

Backup Capability

None apparent

Exploring Zork

This Adventure begins in a beautiful forest near a large white house that is boarded up in an obvious attempt to keep explorers out. I managed to get into the house through the front once, but I was plunged into darkness and eaten by a monster called a *grue*. The game gave me the option of reincarnating myself, which I did (at a cost to myself of 10 points). I was revived in a forest.

Beyond the forest is a deep and beautiful canyon through which the River Frigid flows. This was the first time I had ever been at the end of the rainbow. No, I didn't see a pot of gold, but just because I didn't see it doesn't mean it wasn't there.

In these three locations (ie: house, forest, canyon), the descriptions were lavish, sparing no words in their bestowal of clues and information to the player. An ordinary jeweled treasure, in the form of a bird's egg, more than once sent me scurrying to the dictionary in search of the meanings of some of the words used to describe it.

There are many tools available to the explorer. I was able to obtain a lantern (light wards off grues), a length of rope, a nasty-looking knife, an elvish sword (which glows for reasons of its own), a refillable water bottle, a lunch, and garlic (which presumably repels Were-beings or Vampires, though I encountered none). Armed with these things, I entered the Underground Empire in search of gold and glory.

There was this pugnacious troll who popped up in the middle of a room description early in the game. Here, I got a chance to test the combat capabilities of the game. I

typed "ATTACK TROLL", to which the computer supplied a supplemental *<with hands>*. Look out! Remembering that the program accepts more complex input, and, having survived the first combat turn, I typed "ATTACK TROLL WITH SWORD." This gave more satisfactory results: the troll expired, his body obligingly turning to black smoke in the interest of litter-free dungeon delving.

A thief came along shortly thereafter and challenged my right to exist in *Zork*. I typed "THROW KNIFE". He caught it in his sack and dispatched me to the netherworld, all in one swift motion. I could still hear him laughing as I lay ruefully reincarnated on the forest floor. I was ten points lighter and my possessions were scattered to the four winds. Sadder but wiser, I reentered the lower levels after 20 minutes of rounding up those items that were absolutely needed.

More cautious now, I explored the passages and tunnels of *Zork* (level 1). There are no unwarranted locations here—unless you can count the presence of a dam with color-coded control buttons in a maintenance room. Gleeefully, I began pushing buttons, something I should know better than to do, as a veteran of the *Death Drednought* and *Strange Odyssey* Adventures. When the water level began rising, I was not concerned. Then I drowned.

The program was really getting testy with me by now. Grudgingly I was reincarnated by the Patron Deity who guards the souls of all Adventurers. Empty-handed once more, I resumed my journey. I retraced my steps to the Loud Room, where whatever you say is echoed. Then, after 768 turns and an afternoon of unparalleled enjoyment, my luck ran out. I became Grue Munchies, part of the balanced diet of silly dungeon players allotted to those carnivorous native dark dwellers of *Zork*.

On other occasions, I have been expelled from *Zork* on multiple charges of being a reckless Adventurer. Nonetheless, armed with the dubious rank of Amateur Explorer and my knowledge of the highest levels, I am looking forward to the time when I will plunge once more into the troll-, thief-, and grue-laden depths of the Underground Empire.

Zork, as peer to the Microsoft *Adventure* and heir apparent to the throngs of Adventure cultists who wait breathlessly for each new offering, is equal to the awesome task it has been given. That the program is entertaining, eloquent, witty, and precisely written is almost beside the point. Unlike the kingdoms of the Adventures for machines with 16 K bytes of memory and far from the classic counter-earthiness of the Colossal Cave in the original *Adventure*, *Zork* can be felt and touched—*experienced*, if you will—through the care and attention to detail the authors have rendered.

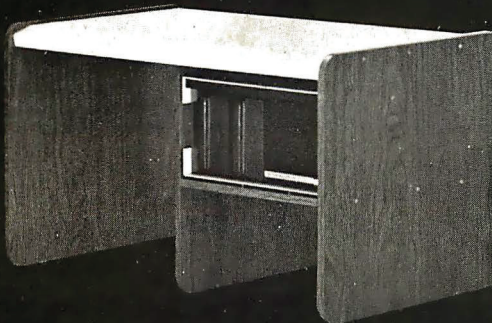
I've been to *Zork* today. Tomorrow, I will take a friend. Together we will unwrap the cloaks of mystery surrounding this most excellent and memorable work of computerized fiction. And when we have extracted from this land every drop of adventuring that can be obtained, we will likely not be kept waiting. A sequel is nearing completion, even as this is being written.

Somebody, please, let me know when it's done. ■

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