

y Alissa Woodward

NOTE: Screen shots and information presented in this article are based on a pre-release version of Odyssey and are subject to change before final release. This article is not a review.

Of all the genres of games available for the Mac, role-playing games (RPGs) have always seemed to be the worst off. The lackluster selection of commercial titles have forced most Mac gamers to resort to superior shareware offerings such as Realmz, but still gamers have clamored for the immense, highly interactive worlds of PC games such as Origin's Ultima series. At last, by way of MacSoft and Paranoid Productions, it would appear that Mac gamers have gotten their wish in Odyssey: The Legend of Nemesis. An epic RPG developed specifically for the Macintosh, Odyssey combines an involved, non-linear story-line, a highly interactive, immense world, and countless complex characters, features which have always been the hallmarks of great RPGs. Looking more than a little like Ultima V or VI with a dose of Interplay's classic Wasteland thrown in for good measure, Odyssey: The Legend of Nemesis may be the best role-playing game for the Mac yet.

It doesn't take long as you play Odyssey to realize what a breath of fresh air to the Mac RPG world the game truly is. By no means a mere hack and slash affair — though there is plenty of slashing and bashing for those who want it — Odyssey's story-line begins with an interesting twist. You, the hero or heroine, have already completed your valiant quest: you have located the magical staff which can rescue your homeland of Thrall from the famine which has plagued it for the past several seasons. However, during the return voyage to Thrall, your ship is caught up in a bizarre typhoon. You lose consciousness, only to wake up on a strange island, your possessions, your crew, your ship, and, most importantly, your staff nowhere in sight. So now there is a new quest before you: to regain your staff and return to your homeland before still more die of starvation.

But something is rotten on the archipelago you have washed up on, and before long you realize that recovering your staff won't be quite so easy as you'd hoped. As you wander the archipelago, the first thing you'll notice, and which will notice you, are the vicious monsters which roam the countryside, terrorizing the human islanders. Combat is well balanced and seamlessly integrated into the turn-based gameplay, allowing players to strategically attack or retreat from the enemies, depending on their needs. As you learn to fight off the creatures, moving from island to island in search of your staff, you notice that bizarre

situations seem to be the norm.

In something rare in role-playing games, *Odyssey* shows you situations instead of telling you about them, allowing you to figure out what needs doing, as opposed to instructing you exactly what to do. On the first island two townships hate each other passionately for no reason. On another, a strangely powerful cult of priests practice human sacrifice. On still another, all the people have such a desire to conform with each other that they all wear the same clothes and look virtually identical. On each of the nine islands in the game, the people are in need of an able-bodied adventurer such as yourself to help them; of course, when you help reunite two young lovers from the opposing towns on the first island, they will try to help you out in whatever way they can.

Part of what makes *Odyssey* so fascinating is how the story unfolds before the player, instead of being told to him or her. When you enter a town, you can simply walk up to people and ask them questions in the standard *Ultima* keyword-driven style. Of course, if you choose not to interact with the players they will still go about their daily lives: getting up in the morning, going to work, perhaps going to a tavern at night.

By talking to the character, the player learns that each of them has their own emotions and needs, and hence each has their own take on the goings-on of their particular island. Most are happy with the status-quo, but others wish for change, change which the player may or may not want to help them carry out. Further enhancing the story are countless books, diaries, and notes to be found, all containing key points in the story and all of which you read in the game itself. Of course, whether the player believes the contents of the note they found on the floor of the sewer is up to them. On the whole, the writing is significantly above average, and the developers estimate that there are several hundred pages of conversations and notes for the player to find and read.

Another nice thing about *Odyssey* is its non-linearity, and the fact that the player doesn't have to explore all of the game to complete it. This adds immeasurably to the game's replay value, frequently a problem point in adventure games. After the first island, which must be explored before the player can proceed to the next via undersea tunnel, the player is free to explore the other seven islands in any order she chooses: if there seems to be nothing the player can do on one, he can go on to the next, perhaps to return later. In addition, for almost every solution to an island's troubles, there seem to be numerous alternate ways the player can affect change, each resulting in different ramifications for life on that island. The developers say that to complete the game, there are numerous different tasks the player can complete, with different endings dependent on the player's choices. The world of *Odyssey* is immense, but thankfully is not overbearing, since the player can explore as much or as little as they desire.

s with all RPGs, the player will find countless items to help them in their adventures as they wander the archipelago. The weapons found vary from the deadly serious — such as the hammer aptly titled the Niagian Life Ender — to the more whimsical and useless — such as the Spleen Slicer, good for chopping an opponent's spleen but little else.

In addition to the armor, weapons, and miscellaneous goodies the player will find, they will also acquire — and come to rely on quite heavily — psionic abilities. These come in the form of scrolls of incomprehensible writing, but once the player acquires psionic ability — learned early in the game — the player can translate the gibberish into psionic abilities which use up a given number of psionic points per use. These are grouped into categories depending on their use — Cryomancy, Pyromancy, Orgomancy and so forth — and most psionics come with a description of their functionality written on them. Some, however, the player will have to figure out how to use, the key to many of the problems the player will encounter. There are numerous merchants scattered about the towns in Odyssey and they will happily buy your most valuable items — at a fraction of their worth — but will seldom have the particularly powerful items: those the player will have to search out in the dangerous caverns.

Odyssey was developed expressly for the Macintosh and uses a pleasantly intuitive Macintosh interface. The game runs in three resizable windows, allowing players with larger monitors to effectively use their screens to their full extent, without hurting users of smaller monitors. The inventory uses a particularly nice interface, mimicking the Finder's folder structure while presorting the countless items players will find. Equipping weapons and armor can be as simple as double clicking, or those who prefer can use the interesting drag-and-drop functionality Odyssey provides. A view of the player's character at the top of the inventory allows the user to actually drag items onto the player, dressing him/her as one would a paper doll.

By using a top-down view with small characters, Odyssey allows players to get a good look at the environs that surrounds them and any monsters that may be attacking. For their relatively small size, the fully animated characters in the game have an amazing amount of character and personality, reflecting what type of person they are. When the player talks to a given character, the game zooms in on that character giving the player an up close view of the characters faces, all of which are similarly well crafted.

Further enhancing the look and feel of the game, Odyssey features superlative stereo sound effects and a wonderful musical soundtrack. Instead of having music composed for the game, the developers decided to use pieces in the classical solo piano repertoire. As the

player wanders the caverns and surfaces of the archipelago, she will be accompanied by Bach, Rachmaninov, and Chopin, to name a few, each piece selected to match the mood of a given location. In all, the game features 18 different tracks of music, close to two hours worth, and the soundtrack is among the best I have ever heard in a computer game.

To Macintosh RPG fans who have gone long unloved and uncared for by the Mac gaming market, *Odyssey : The Legend of Nemesis* looks like it will provide the light at the end of the tunnel. MacSoft plans on releasing the product just in time for Christmas, and by combining a wonderful, non-linear, truly interactive story with finely crafted artwork and an excellent soundtrack *Odyssey* looks like the perfect holiday present to the Mac gaming community.