

Ultima Ascension--Plot Summary

In the ninth edition of Ultima, otherwise known as Ultima Ascension, the player awakes in his own home in real time. As he begins playing and passes through a magical gate, he finds that he has been incarnated as the heroic Avatar in the land of Britannia--a time-bent, enchanted, but often troubled world ruled by the benevolent Lord British. Inexplicably, eight huge columns have sprung from the ground and are slowly ripping their way through the land and concurrently agitating the seas, disorienting the moons, and emitting eight anti-virtues that inspire dark sentiments in the people of Britannia.

Understandably, Lord British is deeply troubled, and though he himself had originally joined the fractured peoples of Britannia into a prosperous whole, he has been unable to act in the face of evil. Historically he has come to rely on the person he knighted as Avatar, originally a mere Stranger who proved himself through countless acts of courage. And while Lord British has also in the past had the assistance of loyal companions, this time many of these friends are not responding to his distress. He agonizes that even his loyal Avatar seems slow to appear, though when he does, Lord British entrusts him with the salvation of Britannia.

As the Avatar prepares to solve the riddle of the columns and dismantle the evil loosed in Britannia, he is once again aware that this is the handiwork of his arch-enemy, the Guardian. It seems that Britannia, in spite of the Avatar's protection and service, has not been able to sustain peace and prosperity, but has been vulnerable to the forces of evil, particularly those of the Guardian who wishes to conquer it once and for all. As the Avatar accepts the task at hand, the spirit Hawkwind tells him that this will be his last visit to Britannia. The Avatar, having come back to Britannia repeatedly for the purpose of saving it, wishes to teach it to become a self-sufficient system for good that is resistant to evil. Having undertaken this noble task eight times previously, the Avatar is no longer the boy enthralled with the challenge of battle, but a man with a maturing perspective. If in the future Britannia is to survive without him, it must prepare itself for forthcoming battles and prosper independently and beyond direct help. Britannia must not remain in a position of helpless stasis, but must ripen into an empire capable of defending its borders, protecting its people, and ridding itself of those who would harm it. Likewise, the Avatar must face the challenge of ascending as a being, of becoming actualized morally, ethically, and spiritually. He is ready to attain closure with Britannia and call to an end to his perpetual adventuring there.

The Avatar learns that he must find the Codex, or holy book of past, present, and future, for it will impart unto him vital information. He must also journey to the Shrine of Compassion and there the physical mechanism will be revealed which will allow him to dismantle the columns. But his ultimate success will be contingent on matters spiritual but tangible. The Avatar will be tested in regard to the three primary virtues of truth, love, and courage, as well as the eight auxiliary virtues of honesty, compassion, valor, justice, sacrifice, honor, spirituality, humility. He'll be faced with the eight anti-virtues of deceitfulness, hatred, dastardliness, wrongfulness, covetousness, shame, evil, pride. He will visit cities which embody virtues: Moonglow, Britain, Valoria, Yew, Minoc, Trinsic, Skara Brea, New Magencia. He may be imperiled in dungeons of Deceit, Despise, Dastard, Wrong, Covet, Shame, Abyss, and Hythloth. He may or may not encounter his former companions: Mariah, Lolo, Geoffrey, Jann, Julia, Dupre, Shamino, and Katrina. And in performing his tasks he will use magical runes, which in some cases have been transformed into evil-emitting glyphs.

The Avatar will encounter a new companion, a pirate/thief named Raven, who at first will seem nothing more than a cunning new opponent. Though the Avatar's original interest in Raven will be to find help in accomplishing his tasks, he will gradually come to see her as an accomplice, romantic interest, and spiritual ally. Together the Avatar and Raven will inspire one another to new heights of actualization.

The Avatar will also be faced with Blackthorn, the Guardian's greasy lackey who confidently believes that he will most easily defeat the Avatar and inherit Britannia. Instead, Lord British will finally be roused from his paralysis and will defeat Blackthorn.

After successfully performing all of his tasks, the Avatar finally faces the Guardian who toys with him sadistically and threatens to rape and kill Raven. When Raven responds with horror and disgust, he savagely kills Samhayne right in front of her, thereby infuriating the Avatar.

The Guardian, sure that victory is upon him, finally reveals his intense jealousy of the Avatar; in fact, this is

the thing that caused him to so passionately oppose the Avatar. But upon securing the Codex, the Avatar reads that he and Guardian will die together in a bloody embrace as reunited twins. This is unfathomable to the Avatar; how could he and the Guardian be twins? But Hawkwind tells Avatar that to perform his final task, to undo the evil force and destroy the Guardian for good, the Avatar himself must die with the Guardian, and in doing so he will actualize and transcend his destiny. The Avatar knows that he has been called to his final sacrifice.

When the Raven and the Avatar learn that he must die they are filled with agony and despair. Raven especially is devastated as the Avatar is the first person she has really loved and now she must lose him. Yet she herself has become heroic, and when the Avatar tells her that his sacrifice will save all of Britannia and allow her to live, she realizes that his love for her is true and real. "To stay here with you would be to kill you," he says. Raven has transcended her destiny as pirate/thief and is willing to die for love, and she asks to remain with him, but he will not let it be. The Avatar tells Raven that in dying for her and Britannia, "I will be free."

The Avatar and the Guardian literally struggle to the death, thereby undoing the Armageddon force and absorbing it. All goes black and silent. Then the ghosts of the Avatar and the Guardian join together in Oz-like illusion man dueling with himself, with the angels and demons of his nature, the good and the bad, the chaos and the order, the selfishness and heroism. The Codex lies open. It says, "You, Avatar, and You, Guardian, are One—Aspects of the Same." Like night and day, like winter and summer, they are natural forces that flow into one another.

Through the deaths of the Avatar and the Guardian, their opposite energies are loosed in the world in a balanced form—the Avatar's selfless heroism and ethics and the Guardian's selfish solipsism and quest for pleasure join to form a healthy whole that is embodied in an advanced new ideology—that of Ethical Hedonism. Ethical Hedonism is the marriage of ethics checked by healthy desire for fulfillment and pleasure, and pleasure which in turn is checked by a healthy regard for the health of others and society. Thereby, the severed forces are reunited.

To ascend is to rise upward, to succeed, and to achieve a position of domination. The word is usually used when referring to the triumphant climb to the throne or the rising to a better place after a long and arduous struggle. In *Ultima Ascension*, characters and player are challenged to ascend, to transcend, to live out potential, to quench a destructive forces and allow those that are constructive to flourish.

The Avatar's Character Profile

The Avatar, while seemingly the prototypical Aryan hero, is a being whose age and limitations do not adhere to those of the typical human. His suspended or accelerated aging, his ability to slip from earth to explore other worlds, and his role as hero and savior of Britannia make him a creature not altogether human, but perhaps uber-human.

The Avatar first journeyed from earth and discovered the world of Britannia as a teenager or very young man; he was referred to as "the Stranger." Once in Britannia, he was enthralled with the opportunity to fight evil, to kill all adversaries. He simply enjoyed fighting and didn't trouble himself overmuch with the subtleties of good and evil, for he simply believed that he fought for good and believed in a simplistic scheme of rather clear-cut options. As a result of his valor and energy, he was eventually dubbed "Avatar" and this special honor conferred and charged upon him a sacred responsibility to uphold the best interests of Britannia, to aid its benevolent ruler, Lord British, and to fight evil.

As the Avatar returns to Britannia for the ninth time, he finds it in a state of abject emergency, but this time he approaches his task, not as a boy, but as a mature man aware of the more subtle issues facing him and Britannia. For one, the Avatar feels a sense of sorrow and frustration that, in spite of the fact that he repeatedly returns to this land to slay literal and figurative dragons, the people of Britannia, and especially Lord British, are vulnerable and helpless in the face of threats. Therefore, the Avatar wishes to teach the people of Britannia to sustain a system for perpetual good, one in which they can prosper and quickly weed out

destructive forces.

In teaching Britannia to strengthen and purify itself, to become self-sufficient, the Avatar himself begins to evolve and actualize, specifically to grow spiritually. Interestingly, the Avatar sees that the people of Britannia suffer because of weakness in ethics and morals; he realizes that virtue is not merely a romantic abstract, but a practical force for success, as it is the light and lubricant which allows a social system to function smoothly. As the Avatar goes about teaching the threatened Britanniains, he himself is tested.

The source of Britannia's troubles and the Avatar's challenge is a creature named the Guardian. The Guardian has taken it upon himself to oppose the Avatar in all things. If the Avatar is an instrument for good and for the protection of Britannia, then the Guardian takes pleasure in seeking to destroy Britannia and be an instrument for all things bad.

While the Avatar is an instrument for good, he also experiences human emotions. As well as feeling frustrated and sorrowful in regard to Britannia's troubles and helplessness, he feels impatience with its people, impatience with the passive Lord British, a certain one-dimensionality in his inability to do bad for a good end. He is also rootless in that, though he is not a citizen of Britannia, he must repeatedly leave his home on earth to act as savior in what is essentially a foreign land. The Avatar must learn not to be rash or impatient. He must learn to view himself as an equal in a world of unique beings, rather than a commandant. He must learn that the world exists, not as a canvas for his ego (however heroic) and temper (however justified).

A key instrument in the Avatar's actualization is Raven, a female pirate/thief. She (and other characters) act as reflections of the Avatar's thoughts and feelings, often spelling out the moral and ethical dilemmas he faces in his efforts to set things right in Britannia. Yet with Raven the Avatar develops a special bond and affection, one that is more personal. She becomes, not an instrument he uses to further his ends, but a being he cares for and a catalyst for his growth. Likewise, as a result of knowing the Avatar, Raven will evolve and blossom into a heroic, moral woman. Ultimately, the Avatar's love for Raven will inspire him to make the ultimate sacrifice for Britannia.

As the Avatar faces difficult challenges, he will gradually become stronger, more powerful, more clever, but still he finds that he cannot simply kill the Guardian. He discovers that the Guardian exists as a split-off aspect of himself, a discarded corner of his own psyche that festered into the essentially jealous creature that now seeks to destroy the one who discarded him. The Avatar and Guardian exist as the opposite sides of the same being; to kill one would be to kill both. For this reason, the Avatar is faced with the ultimate sacrifice to destroy the evil which threatens Britannia (brought about by the Guardian) and to thwart the eventual Armageddon, the Avatar must destroy both himself and the Guardian. In this he offers the ultimate sacrifice.

Before this final sacrifice, the Avatar must wrestle with the magnitude of his position—he feels great despair at the thought of dying and of parting with Raven, and he fears that his sacrifice will be for naught. But his love of Britannia and especially his love of Raven embolden him. Raven is deeply torn—she doesn't want the Avatar to die. But the Avatar knows that if he lives, the Guardian's columns will soon bring about an Armageddon that will destroy Britannia and Raven along with it (for Raven cannot slip between the worlds as the Avatar can). The Avatar says, "I don't want to leave you Raven, and if I would live, it would be for you. But I must kill the Guardian and I must myself die—it is the only way I can save you. If I die, I give you life. You must let me go." Finally, Raven agrees, saying, "Your love has allowed me to find honor in my soul. Though you must die, your love will echo within me. You live within me. Farewell Avatar."

Thus, having passed the tests that lead to the ultimate transcendence, the Avatar ascends as a being. He gives his life for something bigger than himself. Never will he need to return to Britannia, for he has solved the fracture. Through his battles and lessons the Britanniains have risen as a people and are capable of sustaining a moral and ethical system in which they can prosper. The Guardian, the source of evil in Britannia, is dead. And the Avatar has discovered and destroyed the rift within his own soul; he no longer exists as an instrument for good, but has ascended through sacrifice. The Stranger comes back into wholeness—a being who displays all the traits of a human—the light and dark, the heroic and the self-serving.

Blackthorn's Character Profile

Blackthorn is the venomous, goateed lackey for the Guardian. He was originally a citizen of Britannia who was justly punished by Lord British, but, like a petulant child, feels wronged. As a result, he has set out to thwart Lord British by whatever means necessary. The Guardian recognized him as an easy convert to his ends and brought Blackthorn into his supposed confidence so as to use him as his right hand goon.

It has been easy for the Guardian to convince Blackthorn that he will be rewarded with his own world over which he can play god. Blackthorn is a being of limited scope and intelligence. His childish inability to take responsibility for his actions and accept punishment from Lord British reveal his pathetic, myopic sense of entitlement. He is completely confident that he will crush Lord British, help the Guardian defeat the Avatar, and toy for eternity with his own world.

Blackthorn is a classic narcissist. He exhibits a grandiose sense of self-importance, exaggerates his achievements, feels entitled to special treatment, is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success and power, thinks himself brilliant though reality would indicate otherwise, lacks empathy for others, and is highly envious of what others have. Ironically, this overblown display of ego is actually a disguise for deep self-loathing.

Blackthorn, in his stupidity, is a source of much information for the Avatar. When Blackthorn meets the Avatar he is pleased because he imagines that he will personally destroy him and looks forward to this as what he imagines will be "a delicious event." Blackthorn confirms that the Guardian is behind the appearance of the columns and disharmony in nature which will lead to the destruction of Britannia. He is cruel to Raven, stabbing her hand with her own dagger. Finally, Blackthorn taunts Lord British, saying that the good king is old, weak, and will easily be defeated. At last Lord British, in a burst of long-suppressed strength, kills Blackthorn.

Lord British's Character Profile

Lord British is the older male who rules Britannia and functions as a sort of icon. He achieved this position by forging one united kingdom from many fractured city-states, cares deeply about this land and people, but is currently overwhelmed by the problems at hand. Unlike the Avatar, he has made Britannia his permanent home and is not split between worlds. Unfortunately, though, and in spite of his good intentions, his governorship has been passive, and he repeatedly relies on the Avatar, whom he personally knighted, to rid the land of evil. Like a loving but preoccupied father, he loves those in his care but can't keep up with their new-fangled activities and problems, and they cease to rely on him. The evil present in his land is unlike anything he has ever seen or expected to see, and he simply does not know how to handle it. His reaction, or non-reaction, has become a kind of paralysis.

In the first moments of "Ascension," Lord British expresses his profound concern for Britannia. He has become aware of the fact that strange columns have sprouted from the ground and are pulling the moons out of orbit as well as throwing them on a collision course. This will surely spell protracted misery and eventual Armageddon for Britannia. Lord British's companions, his usual body of wise advisors to whom he has historically delegated tasks, are dead or nowhere to be found. Even his faithful Avatar seems to be taking his sweet time in arriving. Still, Lord British, though sorely tested, believes that good must triumph over evil.

Lord British wishes for peace and unity. He is prudent, orderly, and does not give in to reckless abandon. He finds discord crushing, has difficulty expressing anger, can be inflexible, self-absorbed, and needs the love of his people. He has difficulty discarding those who are worthless. He believes in goodness, is the embodiment of goodness, and this has paralyzed him as he cannot arouse within himself a sense of righteous indignation or passion to act violently against those who are bad. This is his central weakness.

Interestingly, these very peace-loving qualities are what drew him to the Stranger in the early days. While the aggressive, violent side of Lord British's nature lie dormant, he found himself fascinated by the Stranger. The Stranger was emboldened by the challenge of fighting evil, excited by it, and enjoyed it with boyish fervor. Lord British lacked this combativeness, but sensed that he needed it. For this reason he drew the Stranger into his circle and knighted him Avatar.

The Avatar encourages Lord British to take action for the sake of his people. Finally, Lord British overcomes his paralysis and unleashes righteous anger. His impotence as a ruler falls away and he is able to fight Blackthorn valiantly, killing him. His sense of power unleashed at long last, Lord British once again has faith in himself and will ably protect Britannia should troubles arise in the future. The Avatar's purpose is finished. Lord British can discharge him to his final sacrifice the Avatar is dispatched in the name of righteousness, kills the Guardian in the process, and both the Avatar and Britannia ascend.

Raven's Character Profile

Raven is a female pirate/thief. Orphaned in childhood, she came to live by her wits and learned to steal to survive. One night when still a girl, she slipped around a shipyard looking for food and eventually fell asleep within a coiled rope on board one of the ships. As the boat sailed out to sea the next morning, Raven awoke as the seamen uncoiled the rope in which she hid. Upon finding her, these hard-bitten pirates considered simply throwing her overboard to drown, but Raven begged for her life, offering to work and cook on the ship. The pirates showed mercy and let her live, and soon found that she was a very hard worker. Raven eventually met Samhayne, king of the pirates, and he became a kind of father to her; though he was a man who thrived in a dirty business, he was nonetheless loyal to his people and always plays straight with her. Samhayne admires Raven's independence, loyalty, cunning, and sense of wanderlust, and allowed her to become a pirate. She eventually became owner of her own boat.

Raven does not generally trust people, is very cautious in her dealings with them, and is exceedingly perceptive and self-defending. She refuses to conform to legitimate Britannian society and is bold, tough, and loves challenge. Raven can be a hell-raiser if necessary, is courageous, and has sown wild oats. Throughout her fairly young life she has had people turn on her, abandon her, disappoint her, and she doesn't expect to be impressed with anyone. As a result of her experiences, Raven is cynical and self-centered, though her real nature, which has lain dormant up until she meets the Avatar, is good.

Upon meeting the Avatar, Raven is unimpressed and untrusting. She tells him that she has no reason to believe that he is the real Avatar, and demands that he give her proof of his identity. Slowly, though, as she witnesses his virtuous deeds, his steadiness, his goodness, morality, and ethics—ideals she believed were unachievable romantic abstractions—her skepticism melts away. When she brings him to Samhayne and he betrays the Avatar, Raven is very angry and then goes out of her way to aid the Avatar, even allowing him to use her boat.

Likewise, the Avatar is not quick to trust Raven. For one, she is a pirate and a thief. For another, she is sometimes secretive and tricky. Slowly, though, they begin to rely on one another. The Avatar's trust is revealed dramatically when he allows her to tie him and brand him, which allows him to take on new powers. In return, the Avatar comes to Raven's rescue at great risk to himself when she is convicted in the corrupt Court of Wrong. After freeing her from prison, the Avatar proves to the people that Raven was innocent of charges. These acts of loyalty seal the trust between the Avatar and Raven.

Gradually, Raven comes to question her chosen path. In helping the Avatar and performing deeds for greater good rather than mere base survival, she comes to regret her life of thievery and selfish solitude. She then begins returning stolen goods, learning to form relationships, and most importantly, learning to trust that good does exist in the world. She comes to this point in which she is able to love selflessly, and the individual for whom she reserves special emotion is the Avatar. She comes to care for him deeply and passionately.

Likewise, Raven becomes a key figure in the Avatar's journey toward growth and actualization. Until this point, the Avatar had been an instrument for good rather than a being capable of personal love and sacrifice. As he teaches Raven the finer points of ethics and morals, she in turn teaches him to reflect on the meaning of his actions and sacrifice; she acts as a mirror and reflection for his unspoken thoughts, his doubts, his fears.

Raven's growth from criminal with a heart of gold to truly heroic woman inspires the Avatar's final sacrifice. Because he loves her he cannot allow her to suffer and die at the hand of the Guardian. But to kill the Guardian is to kill himself.

Raven is devastated at the realization that the Avatar must die to kill the Guardian and save Britannia. She frantically appeals to him, saying, "Might your sacrifice be for naught?! Might this be a ruse?! An empty act?!" But the Avatar's love for Raven is so great that he knows he must go through with the final extinguishing of the Guardian. And Raven, in her final act of actualization, loves the Avatar enough to give him up to his final purpose. "Your life will echo within me," she says to him, "You will live within me."

The Guardian-Character Profile

The Guardian is the Avatar's mortal enemy, antagonist, opponent, nemesis. He exists in response to the Avatar, for he attempts to thwart and destroy everything the Avatar is. He is a dark and shadowy being, a male monster, amorphous, intelligent, and without weakness except in that he is the embodiment of a reaction and his existence has little organic meaning outside of that reaction.

The Guardian was once an aspect of the Stranger, though he was discarded when the Stranger was knighted Avatar. The Avatar's fame and glory wounded the Guardian at every turn. In its jealousy and pain, this discarded aspect festered and grew to huge, threatening proportions, its sole purpose to destroy the Avatar. In hating the Avatar the Guardian is obsessed with him, bound to him, and in a sense has a passion and respect for him that allows the Guardian to spend his existence in mortal combat.

The Avatar is not aware until he reads the Codex that the Guardian is an aspect of his former self and that to destroy it, he must also destroy himself. Thus, the evil deeds of the Guardian are really his own deeds, or the opposite side of his own deeds. When he discovers this strange truth he is horrified, but at the same time, this reality solves many riddles. For example, he realizes why throughout the game he is sometimes mistaken for the Guardian. This also explains why, because he was mistaken for the Avatar and believed to be performing a good deed, the Guardian was allowed to roam Britannia and set up the destructive columns.

The Guardian's emotions center around anti-principles. In response to the Avatar's search for truth, the Guardian lies and seeks to deceive. In response to the Avatar's quest for love, the Guardian experiences wrath, anger, and hate. In response to the Avatar's courage, the Guardian is cowardly in that he hides in the shadows, sneakily plotting and undoing all good things. The Guardian attempts to use cruelty for the purpose of establishing dominance, humiliates others, is amused by the suffering of others, lies to inflict pain, and restricts the autonomy of others. He is sadistic in that he enjoys causing misery and wreaking havoc. He arrogantly believes that he is unstoppable. But his weakness lies in that he is essentially a jealous reaction, a wounded ego; there is no real proactivity within him, and as he cannot fathom the Avatar's ability to die for a greater good, he vastly underestimates the Avatar.

When the Avatar comes to the Guardian at Terfin, the Guardian believes that he will do away with this irritant once and for all. First, though, he tortures the Avatar by threatening Raven. Then he tortures Raven by killing Samhayne directly in front of her. But the Guardian believes that ruthlessness and covetousness are strengths, and he cannot imagine that virtue would actually allow one to win any kind of battle. For that reason, the Avatar's transcendence of his mortal needs and desires will allow him to best the Guardian and, in the final moments of his life, the Guardian will reveal his true self—the weak, hurt creature who magnified himself to monstrous proportions as a result of his jealousy of the Avatar's fame and power.