

# The Battalion

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## Computer Age

### Video games addicting to 'wizards' of all ages

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Columnist for United Press International

There are times in the night when my wizards disappear and my priests are out of spells, that I wonder if there are any other 46-year-old men hooked on computer adventure games.

Personal computers can do many wonderful things, but none more marvelous than running these sophisticated, complicated, involved and excruciatingly difficult games.

They come in two basic forms — with and without graphics. The all-text adventures are available for virtually every computer on the market. Those with graphics are written for a much smaller group of machines, primarily the Apple II series.

They are expensive — if you pay list price it can run as high as \$60 for one game. But in terms of mileage, they are dirt cheap. A player my age, with most of his ganglia already fried by less entertaining pursuits like making a living, will take months, if not years, to complete one.

I'm currently running three graphics adventure games — Wizardry, Ultima III and a new one on the market called Questron. All are based more or less on the game Dungeon and Dragons; Wizardry, the oldest of them, is quite similar to D&D.

In all three games, you create your own characters, name them and to some degree determine their strengths and weaknesses. Wizardry takes place entirely in a vast, 10-level dungeon; Ultima III and Questron also have large surface areas to be explored. But in all three, painstaking maps have to be made or your characters will become hopelessly lost.

The strongest theme running

through these games is economics; your players start out impoverished and relatively weak. Only through killing monsters can they grow stronger and richer, and it takes strength and wealth to win. So a large part of the game is 9-to-5 monster whomping; this can get a little dull after your characters reach the point where they are more than a match for the garden-variety monsters.

All action is controlled from the keyboard; no joysticks or other equipment used in arcade-type games is necessary. You direct your adventurers in their explorations, and command their every move in an encounter.

Wizardry is the smoothest running of the games; Ultima III — written by an astronaut's son who uses the name Lord British — is relatively smooth. Questron, a recent entry on the market, is full of distressing grammatical and spelling errors, but has the most involved and enchanting background story of the three; it's a very good game that will surely get better in subsequent versions.

All of these games have some provision for saving your position at any time, and it should be done before every critical junction in the action. Apparently a great many players never do this, and the result is a flourishing little side industry in programs that essentially allow you to cheat.

In the early going your characters are going to die quite often, and it's no great problem then. But as time goes on you nurse them to great strength, power and wealth, and become increasingly identified with them. To suddenly find them wiped out by a demon of unimaginable power, or teleported into solid rock by a booby-trapped treasure chest, is total disaster if you haven't been regularly backing them up to another disk.

The cheat programs allow you to resurrect any character, even if you have been notified that he is "Lost Forever." They also allow you to indulge in plain and simple cheating by creating a character with strengths that would take many hours of play to develop in the normal way.

The complications of these games are enormous. You have to keep track of each character's equipment, food supplies and health. Wizardry has virtually complete instructions; only the final puzzle necessary to complete the game is unmentioned. But in Ultima III, the voluminous instructions make no mention of the complicated routines that must be followed to increase your crew's strength and magic power; you are expected to figure those things out for yourself by interrogation of various non-hostile individuals your characters meet in the course of their wanderings.

The all-text games are entirely different. The best are marketed by a firm called Infocom, and are stunning in their sophistication. The games cover science fiction, fantasy and murder mystery themes in which the computer serves as your simulacrum. It tells you, in extremely literate, colorful and often wryly humorous prose, what it sees, hears and feels. You, in turn, tell it what to do next.

Early all-text adventure games were relatively primitive; the computer could act only on two-word commands, a noun and a verb — "get axe" or "drop parrot."

But the Infocom games understand complete sentences embodying any number of separate commands; the latest of the adventures are said to have a vocabulary of 1,000 words.

## Picking the programs before the computer

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NEW YORK — A computer is a dumb machine that is useless — until you buy a program for it. But it will continue to be a dumb, useless, machine if you buy the wrong program.

Those knowledgeable about computers think it is more important to decide on the kind of software, or programming, you need before picking a machine that runs it.

That can be much more difficult than it appears on the surface. "There are more than 40,000 software packages on the market," said Alfred Glossbrenner, author of "How to Buy Software." "So don't take anything for granted."

"There are about 1,000 accounting packages on the market," explained Cliff Bradley, a computer salesman in Brooklyn.

"I try to keep up, but I only know about three or four of them really well. Can you imagine the scope of the problem for a new user?" Bradley said.

Glossbrenner, whose book has taken on cult status, said the lack of any kind of standardization compounds the problem of finding the right software.

Just because a program is called a word processor, it doesn't mean it will work like any other word processor.

"If you were buying a car, you could expect it to have a steering wheel, brakes and a motor. That's not what you can expect when you buy a software package."

Glossbrenner said.

The problem seems insurmountable but some common sense things can be done to minimize the trauma of wading through the morass of 40,000 programs.

One thing to do is to get as much information as possible. Another is to ask someone who has used the program to show you how they use it.

Glossbrenner suggests you compare reviews from several computer magazines.

In the beginning, buy only through a good dealer.

Insist on a complete demonstration of the program. Be prepared to work on real problems. If you are buying a word processing program, arrange to do the kind of writing you will be doing normally.

The fastest way to find out if a program will be a help on a hindrance is to do real work.

"Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country," rarely gets typed in real life (this is the first time outside a typing test I've ever been able to use the phrase).

A welcome trend among some software distributors is the marketing of demonstration disks. These are copies of the program that sell for a modest fee, usually \$20 or less.

The demo disk has all the features of the full-fledged program but imposes a limit on how much work you can actually do.

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