

SCOOP!

Your First Look At...

TIR NA

NOG



Game *Tir na Nog*
Developer A Jovial Crew
UK Publisher Psygnosis
Projected Price £39.99
How Complete? 75%

The return of a gaming legend

CELTIC LEGENDS ARE STUFFED with tales of Cuchulainn, a war hero who lived fast, killed hard and died young. *Tir na Nog* tells a fictionalised story which begins at the point where the other stories end – at the death of Cuchulainn. *Tir na Nog* is The Otherworld, or Land Of Youth, a secret world inhabited by the bitter and evil Sidhe. It's into this world that the now-dead Cuchulainn must venture in an attempt to re-unite the four parts of the broken Seal of Calum, and so once again imprison The Great Enemy and bring peace to the universe.

The story of *Tir na Nog* originally formed the basis for a highly acclaimed adventure game on the ZX Spectrum in 1984. At the time it was hailed as a graphical masterpiece, an adventure of unparalleled atmosphere and depth, and the closest thing yet to a fully playable interactive movie. The original team of Greg Follis and Roy Carter are still together, and have been working for the last two years on a PC

Almost a decade ago, the Celtic tales of *Tir na Nog* were recounted in a classic piece of ZX Spectrum gaming. Now the original programmers are hard at work bringing the legend to life on the PC. **BY MARK RAMSHAW**

interpretation of one of the Spectrum's finest hours. But why bring it back?

Greg Follis: "There was a huge body of documentation which was never used (it was a 48k Spectrum, after all). There was so much stuff left, just waiting to be used, so a new implementation of the story was a natural idea."

But is updating a Spectrum game to the PC a legitimate exercise? "Well, re-using an idea works in the film and music world," points out Greg. "It's a rewrite, rather than a retread or a revamp. After all, people didn't put Shakespeare's plays on once and

then forget about them, did they?"

But how much of the *Tir na Nog* story is rooted in legend? "The actual story that's in there about the Great Seal is 100% fictional," explains Greg. "However, the character Cuchulainn, some of the incidents and associations are legend. But even the fictional parts are true to Celtic mythology. I think there's a depth to it, a feeling that there's more there than you're actually seeing. I guess that's because of the mythology angle."

The Land Of Youth is brought to life with over 200 richly detailed and populated locations, through



(Above) Cuchulainn looks out over the mystical land of *Tir na Nog*. Somewhere out there the fragments of Calum's Seal await.
(Left) The mighty Cuchulainn in all his glory. Not only does he fill a pretty impressive portion of the screen, but he's also beautifully animated.

which strides Cuchulainn, a Celtic legend and gaming hero of impressive proportions. The screenshots show just how much of the screen he occupies, but they can't convey the wonderful way he strides around, scales in and out of the screen, and remains active and animated throughout the game, all in a very distinctive graphic style. This semi-photorealistic style is used throughout, giving the game a totally individual atmosphere.

Greg Follis explains how the game's unique style is achieved. "I produced most of the scenes using collage techniques. I take photographs, then draw or paint on them, scan them in then do it all over again. A lot of the animation is done by videoing then taking drawings of the snap frames, as opposed to putting it through a video digitiser. It gives you a different sort of animation. The results are idiosyncratic, I must admit. *Tir na Nog* is certainly different."

Control is all handled with the mouse, with location-sensitive movement styles. Some screens scroll horizontally or vertically, for instance, while others are static with Cuchulainn moving around in 3D. The idea

is obviously to give a movie feel without any of the problems associated with interactive movie games.

What *Tir na Nog* retains from the Spectrum original is the plot, the basic characters and locations, and the use of an excellently animated main character. But *Tir na Nog* isn't a simple port by any means. The actual game execution is totally new. Whereas the original followed a basic adventure format, with much roaming around empty lanes, a few bits of combat and little else, PC *Tir na Nog* is crammed full of useful,

dangerous and intriguing locations, and forsakes much of the combat for a much more puzzle-based format.

As in the original there are the malevolent Sidhe, along with giants, dragons, wights and other bizarre creatures of legend. Fans of the original will instantly recognise certain elements, but all the puzzles are new, so old-timers won't have any advantage when it comes to getting past Nathair the dragon when trying to recover the Cauldron, for instance.

At its heart, *Tir na Nog* is very much a "Use Object A to Solve Problem B and advance to location C" sort of game. But the various locations, plots and sub-plots are woven together so much and so well that the whole thing begins to feel far more organic than you'd expect. Much of the actual character and object manipulation has yet to be put in place, but the version we saw looked very promising. If Follis and Carter can push PC adventuring forward as much as they did with the original a decade ago, then *Tir na Nog* could become a real gaming milestone, silencing re-write sceptics in the process.

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F.Y.I.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

In a nutshell Another '80s classic gets resurrected, redesigned and re-dressed for the PC market. This time it's the turn of the beautiful *Tir na Nog*, one of the best titles ever to grace the Spectrum. Once again a large amount of puzzle-solving is wrapped up in a huge number of locations, all depicted with stylised semi-realistic visuals.

What's so special? It's being programmed by Greg Follis and Roy Carter, the guys responsible for the original game, and so carries an instant pedigree. Plus, although rooted in fantasy, the use of Celtic mythology makes for a more interesting and gritty affair than most Tolkien-esque tales.

Why should I care? It's just possible that it could give the PC world the same kind of kick up the arse it gave the Spectrum market all those years ago. The basic ideas may be old, but they don't feel dated. And the implementation promises to make it feel more adventure than most graphic adventures, and more movie-like (in a very surreal sort of way) than any of the pre-rendered interactive movie efforts.

And when's it coming out? April/May.



(Above/above-right/right) This trio of shots shows perfectly the idiosyncratic graphical style of Psygnosis' *Tir na Nog*. Photography, scanning, overpainting and all manner of montage effects are used to give the game a photo-realistic, yet fantastical, air. All the in-game art is handled by game designer Greg Follis. "If we do another game, I think we'll expand the team to bring in other artists and designers," explains Greg. "Working on *Tir na Nog* has been fun, but it's a helluva lot of work for just myself and programmer Roy Carter."



(Above) A member of the programming team makes a guest appearance, thanks to another deft bit of scanning and montage work.
(Right) A point-and-click cursor is used to guide Cuchulainn around the land of *Tir na Nog*. He automatically works out how to reach a point on the screen, so no navigation is necessary.

