y Tuncer Deniz

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

With more that a million copies sold worldwide, the original Rebel Assault is still one of the best-selling CD-ROM games ever. While the PC version did extremely well on the IBM-compatible platform, Mac users were turned off by the low-res graphics, horrible game control, and difficult gameplay. Those who were expecting an X-Wing like space simulator were often disappointed. Still others liked the simple shoot'em-up style. Rebel Assault was one of those games you could sit down in front of your computer and play almost immediately without having to read the manual. In the end, its simplicity won over a lot of (mainly PC) gamers, despite its shortcomings.

Although LucasArts was surprised and disappointed with the slow sales of Rebel Assault Mac, the company soon began to understand why. Mac users were a different bunch. They didn't like low-res graphics and especially games that felt like a "PC port." The first thing they did was to hire Aaron Giles, a talented Mac programmer who knew what Mac users wanted; a Macintosh interface, high-res graphics, support for all joysticks, etc. With that formula in mind, Giles went on to port the highly successful Dark Forces and Full Throttle to the Mac and is now working on Rebel Assault II for the Mac.

If It Ain't Broke...
Since the first game produced an enormous amount of sales, LucasArts decided not to mess with a good thing. The gameplay is still the same with the action set in rendered backgrounds. If you've never played Rebel Assault, the gameplay is like being on a roller coaster (affectionately called "a game on rails") where you are on a predetermined course where your main goal is to control the gun fire. You do, however, have some limited control of your aircraft at times (mainly to dodge incoming objects like asteroids, walls, trees, etc.).

While the original Rebel Assault pretty much followed the plot of Star Wars, with the destruction of the Death Star at the end of the game, the sequel is an entirely new story. Once again, Rebel Assault II reprises the role of Rookie One, the game's hero (you). The game begins in the Dreighton Nebula, where Rookie One is scouting for the Rebels and investigating a series of disappearances around the nebula, which is the galactic equivalent

to the Bermuda Triangle. Legend has it that early hyperspace travelers often got trapped in the currents, eddies, and storms in the nebula. During the Clone Wars (the Clone Wars are the premise of the next series of Star Wars movies due out in 1997), two opposing combat fleets disappeared in the nebula. Now, pilots uneasily joke about the ghosts of those squadrons still roaming the nebula, eager to attack any vessel foolish enough to wander by.

When Rookie One responds to a distress call in the area, he is alarmed by the Imperial presence, which is quite odd since the region is thought to have very little strategic value. As the game progresses, you will discover that the Empire was in fact responsible for all the disappearances in the region. Rumor now has it that the Empire is developing a new secret weapon which could destroy the Rebel Alliance (Gee, where have I heard that before? Can you say, Dark Forces...). It's up to you to infiltrate the Empire, steal the almighty weapon so it can be studied.

..Don't Fix It
Vince Lee, the mastermind behind the Rebel Assault, is once again heading up the production on Rebel Assault II. Lee holds the unique distinction of being the first to film live action Star Wars without the involvement of George Lucas, who directed the original Star Wars and produced the two sequels. Unlike the first game, Rebel Assault II features professional actors rather than animated robot-like characters. The actors were first filmed against a blue screen with actual props and costumes from the movies. The actors and SGI rendered backgrounds were then composited on computers in post-production, along with computer-generated special effects, to create the final shots. All in all, the game maintains

the same look and feel of the Star Wars movie. Only now, you control the action.

The game will feature 15 exciting levels of action. The player will be able to pilot five different vehicles including the X-Wing, Y-Wing, B-Wing, speeder bikes, and yes, finally, the Millennium Falcon. Gameplay in Rebel II features much of the action-oriented shooting and flying of the first game, following three basic models: hand-to-hand combat, flight maneuvering, and cockpit combat. Cockpit combat pits Rookie One against enemy targets, all while avoiding collisions with ships, machinery and space debris. In flight segments, the player navigates Rookie Ones ship through foreign landscapes and exotic terrain. Along the way the player encounters onslaughts of Tie Fighters, minefields, vast Imperial military and industrial complexes and asteroid fields. On the ground, Rookie One must avoid stormtrooper fire by dodging behind shields.

Fix It Anyway
LucasArts has stepped up its efforts in Rebel II to correct some of the criticisms the original game was plagued with. Mainly, low-res graphics and poor game control. Rebel II now features high-resolution graphics (but in all likelihood you'll need a Power Macintosh to run it in high-res) and vastly improved controls.

Many Rebel I users complained about the lack of a save system in the original game. Players would have to write down a password after they completed a level. To get to the next level, you would have to type in the password. Although the passwords are still in Rebel II, the game will automatically keep track of where you are in the game based on what log-in name you use (much like the way Dark Forces works).

The Second Time Around
A few days before writing this preview, I stopped by a bookstore and a computer software store to check out the latest games. I immediately noticed that both stores had just received their shipments of Rebel Assault II for the PC and were demoing it on their computers. I was surprised by the number of adults and children who went up to the computers to try out the game. With the Star Wars music playing in the background, the sounds of the laser guns blasting through the speakers, and the view of the beautiful scenery flying by, it's easy to understand why a game like Rebel Assault has such mass-appeal (and why it sold a million copies). While the gameplay may be simplistic, the action is nonetheless fun and dramatic. Unlike many software publishers today, LucasArts knows what it takes to make a successful game. Rebel II no doubt has this formula for success.

Look for Rebel Assault II in stores in late December/early January. Look for an interactive demo in a future issue of IMG.