

Star Trek is a curious entity that defies the boundaries of normal logic. For example, if a friend asked me whether the latest *Star Trek* film was any good, I could not simply give him an answer. Instead, I'd have to assess his knowledge of Trek lore and his interest in all things Trek. If he was a rabid fan, I might reply "Yes, it was great!" By that I would mean that the film contained interesting development of the series' main characters, a smattering of cameos by obscure Trek characters and races, and a plethora of in-jokes that only the Trek-phile could love.

On the other hand, if my friend was only lukewarm about Trek, I would probably tell him that the film was only average, for just such reasons: the character development would be lost on him, he wouldn't recognize the cameos, the in-jokes would go right over his head, and the pacifistic, hand-wringing behavior of the crew might annoy him to no end ("fire those photon torpedoes, you wimps! Show those Klingons who's boss.")

Star Trek Deep Space Nine: Harbinger has now come to the computer screen courtesy of Viacom New Media, and I'm pleased to say that this game isn't as impenetrable to the newcomer as many of the films. While the Trek veteran will undoubtedly have much more fun with this title, it's perfectly possible for a novice to stumble through with only a rudimentary knowledge of Trek.

Mission Briefing

You play the part of a diplomatic envoy who arrives at Deep Space Nine during a heap o' trouble. There's an unusual plasma storm that's shut down much of the station and caused many of its occupants to evacuate (conveniently, since it would be an immense task to create and populate the entire station). A new, inscrutable alien race has appeared, along with a plague of robotic drone-ships that's threatening the station. And oh yeah, I almost forgot: the chief diplomat who was supposed to deal with these aliens got mysteriously murdered, so now you've taken his place. You've got a lot of ground to cover.

You maneuver through the station from a first-person perspective, and everything is mouse controlled. Conversations are handled through menus, action sequences are all mouse-driven, and traveling is equally simple. Occasionally the multiplicity of viewpoints makes movement a confusing affair, but all in all the station is a simple place to figure out, and the station's computer can help you find your way around.

Action sequences can be adjusted to three different difficulty levels; I found that the easiest level was a bit too easy in most cases, but the medium level generally offers a good challenge. A nice feature automatically saves the game before an action sequence: I recommend enabling this option from the start. You can adjust difficulty levels before each sequence, so if you keep getting killed at medium difficulty you can always turn it back down a notch the next time you re-load. Kudos to the design team for this nice touch.

Fascinating, Captain

The plot is quite well thought-out – better, in fact, than several logically flawed episodes of *Star Trek: Voyager* I've had the displeasure of viewing. There's a lot to do, and while you may feel like you're being led by the nose quite a lot, especially when you must sit there and listen to endless dialogue, I think this rigid structure is important. After all, you can't just go freewheeling

around the station, indulging your amorous fantasies in Quark's lounge and mouthing off to the commanding officers. Actually, I'd enjoy a game that let you do these things, but I doubt it will ever happen. Quark's best holo-programs are conveniently inaccessible in *Harbinger*, and your menu of conversation responses is distinctly bland. In other words, you cannot ask Dax if she'll let you count her spots.

The characters and animations are quite well-done as a whole, though some of the backgrounds look a bit washed-out. The game designers opted to use 3D models of the crew instead of digitized video - perhaps from necessity - and I think I prefer it to video clips, despite the jerky awkwardness of the 3D automatons. 3D models make *Harbinger* feel more like a *game* than a movie, even when you're just sitting back and listening.

There are a few warts, of course. Some people will find the 3D characters distracting or silly, and others will want more freedom. My main complaint is actually with the lack of documentation. Not that the interface needs more explanation: it's clean. I just think that the manual (which provides less than 10 pages of information) should have provided more information on Deep Space Nine and its crew, so that the game would be a little more accessible to newcomers. Sure, novices will be able to solve the puzzles - they aren't too hard - but they will miss much of the flavor of the environment. Character and race profiles, and perhaps a bit more history, would have been a nice touch.

Also, the technical documentation fails to note that without Smartdrive (smartdrv.exe) loaded, things tend to get slow. After insufferable frame rates on early video clips, I reconfigured my autoexec.bat with a 2 meg Smartdrive cache and things suddenly got a whole lot smoother.

Complaints aside, this is a well-done graphic adventure that will appeal especially to novice adventurers and Trek fans. Many adventure games make you follow a very specific path but fail to inform you precisely what it is you're supposed to be doing. **Harbinger** avoids this problem, and does a good job of making you feel like you're on board Deep Space Nine. And you can't ask for much more than that... except a fully functional holo-suite, of course.