

review: Dark Forces

by Ivan

Type: Arcade/Action

Publisher: LucasArts (800/867-0413)

Retail Price: \$79.95

Street Price: \$48.00

Requires: Sys 7.1 or higher, '040 or higher, CD-ROM drive, 8 MB RAM, 256 color 640x480 monitor, 5 MB space on HD

Protection: None

Power Mac Native: Yes

It's hard not to get excited when talking about Dark Forces, the Doom-like game set in the Star Wars universe, so let me start off by paraphrasing Tuncer's earlier preview of DF by asking, "Is it cool?" The answer is, "Yes, it's cool!" In fact, DF has the best kick-butt, take-no-prisoners action since Marathon, with a wide range of weapons & opponents, and some amazingly complex levels resulting in more than just your average shoot-em-up.

Your Mission. As Rebel-sympathizing mercenary Kyle Katarn, your first mission takes place just prior to the events of the historic first Star Wars movie, where you must break into an Imperial compound and steal the plans to the first Death Star. Easy, huh? You bet. (For those of you who played the demo and found it too easy, rest assured that the game gets much more challenging.) After successfully completing your first mission, the storyline breaks away from the movie trilogy, with succeeding missions pitting you against the Empire's rumored weapon-in-development, the Dark Troopers. Your job is to discover whatever information you can learn about the mysterious Dark Troopers, track them down, and eventually confront them, all while the fate of the Rebel Alliance hangs in the balance.

The Game. The heart of Dark Forces is a sophisticated 3D engine (actually two — more on that later), that not only lets you run and shoot, but also lets you duck, crawl, jump, and swim. These additional levels of movement help to make Dark Forces an even more immersive experience than its predecessors. Further, DF's levels are multi-tiered, allowing for things like floating platforms, overhanging walkways, and opponents who can fire at you from way overhead. The complex levels also include some pretty intense puzzle aspects,

and you can expect to spend quite a bit of time just figuring them out. Making things even more challenging are some of the environmental elements such as ice that you actually slide on and flowing rivers of liquid that carry you along in their wake. The environments are also strengthened by DF's superior lighting effects.

In fact, one of DF's greatest strengths is the wide variety of virtual environments it offers. Though you'll spend a lot of time in Imperial fortresses, you'll also get to visit many other exotic locations (travel brochure mode on!). Admire the pungent sewers of Anoaat City, where you'll take a ride in a slippery flume ride (one of the more innovative features of DF)...just watch out for those hungry sewer monsters! Be sure to bring plenty of flashes for your tour through the hell-like conditions of the Gromas Mines. Don't forget your Ice Cleats for those slippery ice-coated cliffs (no joke!) surrounding the Imperial Robotics Facility. And be sure to bring along your repulsor boots (oops! no such thing) when you visit the vertical city of Nar Shadda, reminiscent of the Cloud City of Bespin (don't fall — it's a long way down!).

With all these complicated maps, another of DF's appreciated features, which also sets it apart from its predecessors, is live mapping, which allows you to view a map of the level you're on while you're still playing, overlaying the map on the action. This way, you can view the map without leaving yourself vulnerable to attack. You also have the option of viewing the map separately on your PDA, which pauses the action and allows for a more contemplative study of your position. The PDA also gives you access to the status of your current weapons, inventory, and mission goals completed (as well as percent of secrets found — which, believe me, are tough to find).

DF's action controls are about what you'd expect: forward, back, left, right, fire, etc. Jump and crouch account for two additional keys, but DF lacks the "look right" and "look left" features that other games have had (and which I've never found very useful). One nice little gift for all you Marathon players is that DF's keyboard definition screen is almost identical to Marathon's, so you can set up your Marathon keyboard preferences in just a few seconds and be up and running without a hitch.

As you'd expect, DF features opponents from the Star Wars universe, which are all very well rendered, appearing much more three-dimensional than Marathon's rather flat characters. Stormtroopers, Imperial Officers, and Imperial Commandos guard the various imperial installations, along with a scattering of Probe & Interrogation 'droids, and mechanized gun turrets. The human opponents are fairly easy, but will gang up on you if you give them the chance.

Later you'll meet a variety of unpleasant aliens, including Trandoshans (who fire a really nasty gun), the Gran (who toss thermal grenades), Gamorrean guards (ax-wielding, pig-like critters), Dianoga (the sewer monsters — probably the most entertaining critters in the game), Jabba's Dragons (which you're forced to take on mano-a-monster, fists only)...and, of course, the Dark Troopers (both beta and release models). The opponents are well defined, and each have specific strengths and weaknesses, so while most of 'em are pretty tough, experience will show you how to dispatch them most efficiently.

My one complaint about DF's opponents is that most of them aren't too bright, which they usually make up for through brute strength or overwhelming numbers. Also, after playing Marathon for six months, I got really used to having a motion detector, and not having one in DF definitely gives the opponents the advantage of surprise, which does make things a bit more challenging.

Of course, without a motion detector, your best chance at spotting hidden opponents is hearing when they fire at you. This is one area where DF comes up a little weak. Though DF claims to use 3D panning stereo sound, I understand that it actually circumvents the Sound Manager, and ends up under-emphasizing any 3D sound effects. With that exception, sounds are used pretty nicely in DF. I got an especially big kick out of the various Imperial personnel shouting things like "Hey! You're not permitted here!" and "Stop, Rebel scum!" (Nobody calls me scum and gets away with it!) When fighting in some environments, such as the sewers among the Dianoga, it's crucial to listen to ambient sounds (and doubly unfortunate that the stereo panning doesn't work).

As for the game's music, it's serviceable, and at first I got a kick out of hearing my actions accompanied by the heroic themes taken straight from the films. I found it a bit tinny though, and eventually intrusive, so turned it off after the first 20 minutes of play (but, to be fair, I do that with most games).

Finally, besides the main 3D engine which uses texture maps to simulate the environment, the programmers have also built in a secondary polygonal 3D engine to handle stuff like spacecraft and 'droids. This has the effect of making spacecraft look a lot more real. The guys at LucasArts didn't have to do this — it's not really intrinsic to the game — but boy, does it look good! It's just another indication of the level of quality LucasArts was aiming for (and achieved).

he Game's not Over Yet! One cool thing worth mentioning is that the boys at LucasArts made DF's levels modular in nature for easy editing, and there are already a couple of editors available for the PC version. To LucasArts' double credit, the PC & Mac DF files are compatible! Though I'm not aware of a Mac level editor yet, there are a handful of PC levels that can be played on the Mac, and you can bet your sweet patoot there'll be a Mac editor along any day, resulting in the same proliferation of new levels that we've seen for Marathon.

Technical Requirements. DF runs flawlessly on my 8100: I can't recall a single crash in several days of play. On the very unfortunate downside, Dark Forces requires an '040 or PowerMac processor, and a lot of RAM, so all you folks with '030s probably aren't going to get much out of it. Even '040 users may find DF running slowly with full sounds and resolution turned on. Fortunately, there are a variety of options to help cut down on processor time, including running at low-res, shrinking the active window from 640x480 way down to 384x200, setting sounds from 16-bit to 8-bit, etc. As for installation, DF comes with 3 options, which put 5, 12, or 34 MB on your HD, respectively. Except for a longer lag in loading levels, I didn't notice a really significant speed difference between them.

Bottom Line. If you're into heavy arcade action and you have the required hardware, there's very little not to like about Dark Forces, and of course if you're a raving Star Wars fan, then this is an absolute must-have. Great art and animation, tough opponents, widely varied environments, complex levels, two sophisticated 3D engines, and an open-ended architecture make this a ground breaking game which we'll all be playing until The Next Big Thing comes along.

Pros

- Set in the Star Wars universe!

- Great graphics & animation
- Wide variety of environments

Cons

- High hardware requirements
- Slightly weak plot
- Some cut scenes & the PDA still show signs of PC low-res
- Ineffective stereo panning