y Ross Scott Rubin

he costliest game ever for Power Macintoshes and compatibles has arrived.

Possibly the second most-hyped game in PC history, Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger, is the third installment of Origin's best-selling space flight saga. Spanning four CD-ROMs, WCIII follows the familiar battles between humanity and the Kilrathi: tall creatures who have the hearts of Klingons from Star Trek and the face of Mustafa from The Lion King.

Known for its $4 million production budget and big-name stars like Mark Hamill (as the your character Col. Christopher Blair) and Malcom McDowell, WCIII is rife with video, most of which is acted very well. The costumes and scenery are at least on par with The Daedalus Encounter, another well-done sci-fi CD-ROM game. Hardly an action occurs outside the space sequences that isn't accompanied by footage from hopping into the ship of your choice (you can choose from five) to taking the elevator up a flight. It gets to be a bit tiresome.

The interactive parts of the game are important and do affect its outcome, though. Through the course of the adventure, you make hundreds of decisions that have an impact on other parts of the game. Tick off the mechanic and your ship may pay for it.

Quadras Need Not Apply
While the game requires a PowerPC with an L2 cache, 23 MB on your hard disk for a

minimum install (60 for full) and as much RAM as you can spare (including 5.7 MB just to hear music), be prepared for some compromises. Overall, the sets and fighting scenes are graphically impressive, but Origin's video compression makes a notable sacrifice of quality for the sake of size and speed. Characters look blocky and splotchy. Leaving the Victory base ship in which you're based looks like a slide show. And launch sequences entail a delay at their end while even double-speed CD-ROMs scramble to load one of the 50 missions.

The graphics in Wing Commander's action sequences, though, are crisp and the cockpit and space graphics shine at 640 X 480. How fast the action moves will depend on many factors, but turning on all options, including the Star War-like music, will tax a midrange PowerMac such as the 8100/80. Those with lesser hardware can opt for a smaller screen size, no music, or partial or no texture-mapping.

Lion Entertainment's port is a fine one from the interface standpoint. WCIII can cause some funny monitor permutations after quitting, but it's generally a well-behaved application.

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For Wing Commander III, Origin must have had a hard time deciding whether to produce a movie or space flight simulator because it decided to do both. The result is an engaging storyline with quality acting interspersed with flight action. A variety of camera angles including front (with optional cockpit), left, right, aft, and chase keep you in the action.

Learning WCIII is more difficult than your typical shooter but not as hard as some of the more sophisticated flight simulators. While there's a fair number of keyboard controls to keep you occupied, the cockpit dials are fairly simple while offering you good status and

some control over guns and other options. In a world of arcade games and simulators, WCIII is definitely in the former camp although some missions will require some strategy and forethought.

You can communicate with your "wingman" (hence the name) dispatching them and calling them back to the fold. Beginners will probably find their wingman saving their hide in the early rounds but you'll have to be more of an ace in the later missions. Learning the ropes is eased somewhat by a space flight simulator where you can practice.

While Its Hot
While Wing Commander III became a benchmark on the PC side, its rule of the roost will soon be eclipsed on the Mac side by Wing Commander IV (a demo is already available for PCs.) Also starring Mark Hamill, it is rumored to be available in the Spring and on twice the number of CDs. Hopefully, Origin has been able to take advantage of some of the higher-quality video codecs that have been developed since WCIII.

But the technical limitations shouldn't prevent you from enjoying the most elaborate CD-ROM set ever developed for the PowerMac. If your hardware is up to it, Wing Commander III's blend of quality acting, Hollywood feel, and furious space action make this a landmark Macintosh game.

Pros
• High resolution sets
• Good acting and professional production
• Easy to control space craft
• Interactivity prevents it from being the same game twice

Cons
• Gratuitous and low-quality video
• Requires beefy PowerPC for smooth gameplay with all options enabled