

WING COMMANDER 3: HEART OF THE TIGER

The original Wing Commander ushered in a whole new era of gaming on the PC. Its realistic graphics, third-dimensional space flight combat system, realized science fiction universe and characters gave gamers something they had never before seen in such glory. The game evolved during the floppy disk era with not only sequels, but add-on disks that enabled speech, new missions, even technical updates. Wing Commander also pushed the envelope of what most users considered to be computing power and, in consequence, pushed the processing necessities to the limit as well.

The end result (thus far) is Wing Commander 3, which actually needs a rather expensive Pentium to run comfortably and in full glory. Or, alternatively, a \$300 3DO system, for which you will be treated to an even more refined version of the game--added scenes, intense Dolby Surround sound, cleaner video, less wait and a more arcade-like feel.

For those familiar with Origin's first 3DO outing, Super Wing Commander, or the PC versions, you'll know what wonders are contained in WC3. This is a state of the art space combat simulation, virtually incomparable to any other game of its genre. Wing Commander 3 is also one of the best games I've seen in a while--and that's no small compliment.

For those unfamiliar, Wing Commander 3 thrusts you into the cockpit of the future in an interstellar battle for dominance against the vile, cat-like alien race known as the Kilrathi. The game is all about dogfighting in space and gives the player a complete 720 degrees of movement. Enemies can come at you from any direction and, to top it off, you have a computer-controlled wingman (sometimes more than one) to help you out. You'll fly all manners of missions throughout the game--from simple checkpoint scouting and search and destroy, to babysitting Confederation capital ships and destroying Kilrathi capital ships and bases. The game has a total of fifty missions, but your performance dictates how many of them you'll fly.

In Super Wing Commander, the cinematic sequences were brilliantly brought to life through the use of computer-generated graphics and excellent voice acting. Wing Commander 3 goes a step further and combines killer computer graphics with live action star power. You take the role of Colonel Christopher Blair (played by Mark Hamill), an ace fighter assigned to the TCS Victory. Also on

board are the likes of Malcolm McDowell, John Rhys-Davies ("Raiders of the Lost Ark), Tom Wilson ("Biff" from the "Back to the Future" series), and many others. In fact, the game spans a whopping 4 CDs due to something like 3 1/2 hours of full motion video. Conveniently enough, WC3 automatically remembers which disk you are on, so you can boot directly from that particular CD.

Of course, star power doesn't mean much unless there's a solid game to back it up. With years of innovation and game engine tinkering, Wing Commander 3 has an almost breathtaking game to back up its great presentation. Dogfighting has never been so visceral as it is here. The game play is much faster and more responsive than its predecessor, and the scrolling and scaling is much smoother. Indeed, the 3D environment that WC3 throws you into feels very real.

Control, especially with the flightstick, has been greatly refined since Super WC and the flightstick was made for this game. With the stick in your hands, sound through a good source and darkness all around, WC3 is one of the closest experiences to virtual reality that I have ever experienced. It just plays that well.

One huge improvement over Super WC is the option to turn off the cockpit, leaving only vital displays and open space before you. This gives you the full screen to view the fight, instead of the claustrophobic viewpoint that Super WC confined the player to. Also, much improved flightstick top hat control enables simplistic targeting changes, auto pilot and decoy release. In direct comparison to Super Wing Commander, WC3 has virtually no slow down or flickering (except when you are right on top of a capital ship)--two flaws that were at times rampant in SWC.

WC3's ships are all made from textured polygons. This allows for faster, smoother scrolling, and gives the ships a truly realistic 3D existence. The graphics look much more cleaner, sharper and well-defined than SWC. Pixilation, while still present at close distance, is not as noticeably distracting.

WC3 also keeps the mission difficulties at a much more manageable level than SWC did. If, however, you find some mission just too tough, then there is even an invulnerability setting in the controls menu. There are definitely some very hairy missions, but overall the game is very easy to win without the need for cheating.

As with past WCs, game and storyline progression depends upon your success rate with missions, but WC3 goes further and actually allows some degree of character interaction while out of the cockpit. At certain points in the game, you must pick from two

different responses during a conversation. That, in turn, will divert the game's progression to some extent.

Admittedly, in action, a lot of these dialogue choices seemed more gimmicky than anything else (especially the romance aspect, which I found to be handled ridiculously given the grim direction the story had taken), but it's an interesting attempt, nevertheless. Unfortunately, the live action characters aboard the Victory just didn't seem as interesting, or appealing as the computer-generated characters aboard SWC's Tiger's Claw were.

WC3 has totally done away with the mission debriefings and the mission objective briefings tended to be much shorter. Also, since you are already an ace, there are no promotions, no helpful advice from fellow flyers, and no shifting around to different units. I did like the fact that the player has almost total freedom of ship, wingman and armament selection, though.

While Super Wing Commander had a far reaching, heroic, all-odd-against-you kind of storyline, it was nothing compared to the veracity of Wing Commander 3's plot. This time around, you aren't just out to save a single sector of space, but to completely end the war. Indeed, the ultimate goal is to destroy the very foundation of the Kilrathi's social structure--the Kilrathi home world, Kilrah. And for once, the good guys have their own little Death Star-like planetkiller (two of them, actually).

The cinema sequences which lay the story out are definitely top notch. The story unfolds very much like a movie, in a sometimes thrilling, sometimes humorous, and sometimes tragic and horrific way. Kudos to Origin and Electronic Arts for providing high production values.

One thing that was disappointing was the fact that ground missions come up at several points during the game, but are handled through non-interactive (though thrilling) cinema sequences. Much as I would have liked to have seen some deep space action in Shock Wave, I wish WC3 had contained some playable planetside missions. Reportedly, however, this flaw will be addressed in Wing Commander 4, which is scheduled for a winter release on PC.

Wing Commander 3 is not a game for everyone. The complete freedom of movement allowed is very different from games like Shock Wave or Total Eclipse. Additionally, the complexity of control and motion require a greater level of strategy and attention. I thoroughly enjoyed this adventure through Wing Commander's universe, and will for some time to come. Multiple choices and mission success rates allow for some degree of variation from game to game, prolonging play life. Dogfights always have a degree of

randomness as well, since the actions of both your enemies and fellow wingmen vary each time you play.

The continued merging of Hollywood and Silicon Valley is what most will view Wing Commander 3 as, but the fact remains that with or without star power and expensive movie-like sequences, WC3 is simply a great game. It looks and sounds great, plays wonderfully, and is unbelievably addictive. Much improved over Super Wing Commander, Wing Commander 3 should rocket up to the top of many a gamer's most played list, including mine.