eview: Zone of Avoidance

by Jon A. Blum

Type: 3D Space Arcade Game
Publisher: Casady & Greene (408/484-9228)
Retail Price: $49.95
Mail Order: $35.00
Requires: Mac Plus or greater, hard drive, 4MB RAM, System 6.05 or greater.
Protection: Master disk key

“Alone on the border of a vast Zone of Avoidance. Your job — defend an enormous, circling space station in orbit above an unknown planet. No one around for a million miles. That’s alone.”

I’m surprised I didn’t hear the familiar phrase “In space, no one can hear you scream.” As the passage from ZOA’s box reads, your mission is to protect an orbiting space station from an onslaught of hostile elements. I just wonder how that space station got into orbit around an unknown planet. OK, so the story line won’t win a Pulitzer. What did you expect, X-Wing?

ZOA is a fast-paced 3D shoot-’em-up involving a number of aggressive characters trying to knock chunks out of an orbiting platform and destroy its only means of defense. The space station under your protection bares remarkable resemblance to the images portrayed in the film “2001: A Space Odyssey.” In the center of the station is a docking bay from which you conduct launch and recovery operations. The station perpetually spins along the Z-axis like a clock on steroids. Continuously under siege by hostile space meanies, the station’s only defense is a fighter equipped with a small number of offensive and defensive weapons. In case you haven’t caught on yet, this is where you come in . . . .

he Mission. The first mission begins with the automatic launch of your space fighter from the center of the station. As you begin to earn your new space-legs, you immediately notice a number of tumbling asteroids speeding towards your station. Knocking out every single asteroid is essential in preventing damage to the station. Most objects are presented on radar as a set of length and vector lines that move in a 3D fashion as you maneuver the fighter. The purpose behind this arrangement is to supply range, altitude, and heading information simultaneously, using a strictly graphic format. Lining up the objects on radar takes a little practice, but it soon becomes natural. Most objects can simply be lined up visually for the kill, but more elusive targets will require use of the radar. Once an object is sighted and in range, a crosshair box will appear indicating it's time to fire. A blast from your laser cannon or a carefully aimed missile shot will then destroy the object, and in some cases, scatter residual matter off in separate directions. If the mission is completed successfully, a tetrahedron-shaped tractor beam will extend from the fighter bay, inviting you to enter. Once inside the grasp of the beam, you are automatically pulled inside the station for a perfect recovery. Fail to protect the station successfully, and the tractor beam will be disabled forcing you to perform a manual docking. That's right, fly by the seat of your pants time!

Weapons. After landing you're presented with statistics outlining the mission performance. A dialog box then appears prompting you to upgrade one of your fighter's systems. Those systems include: lasers, missiles, shields, and engines. Each system is upgradable in four stages and only one upgrade can be performed per mission. Lasers range from Basic to Super Deluxe, shields range from None to Deluxe, engines range from half to full power, and missiles range from no guidance to accurate guidance. Weapon power affects your ability to destroy targets with a minimum number of shots. For instance, a weak laser may require two shots to kill a given enemy, whereas a medium laser may only require one shot. Naturally, shield strength will dictate the number of hits you can sustain. Engine power is important in catching fast moving targets, or evading a chase.

Unless you want to be floating in space for eternity, you also need to monitor your fuel consumption. Engine speed and laser fire are both contributing factors in the rate of consumption. If you start to run low, free floating fuel cells can be found in orbit for a quick top-off. If you manage to run out of fuel, you're dead.

Space Marauders. The most basic enemy force is the Asteroid. They're hurled toward your base, and if they contact it they'll knock out a section causing the tractor beam to be disabled. If all the sections of the station are knocked out, you lose the game. Next comes

the Raider, a small fighter armed with lasers and bent on destroying your fighter. These fellows are slower than you, but are deployed in large numbers. The Cruiser is larger than the Raider and equipped with seeking missiles as well as lasers. The Marauder, like the Cruiser, has lasers and missiles, but also sports a small tractor beam capable of dismantling station segments. The fuel ship is not an actively hostile target, but it will defend itself by firing missile if you get within range. The most deadly enemy is the Command Ship. These machines have only one priority: to completely destroy your station with their tractor beams and missiles. The only way to counter the threat is to fly inside the belly of the beast, blow up its reactor core, and escape. As you advance through higher skill levels, the enemy becomes more aggressive and you'll see him in larger numbers. A nice feature in ZOA is the ability to start at any level. This spares expert players the drudgery of advancing through very easy levels.

Performance. ZOA uses a letterbox style viewport that can be set to 512 or 640 pixels across. The game runs in 1, 4 & 8 bit modes and will, according to Casady & Greene, support any machine from a Plus on up (including all PowerBooks), however C&G recommends an LC or better for “speed.” The option to run in B&W and two different screen sizes should help performance on slower platforms. The graphic elements in ZOA are basic, flat shaded 3D shapes very much like those used in Spectre. Lighting effects are simulated on the surfaces of objects as a local star rises and sets over the nearby planet. A star field also helps to reference your flight attitude. Although there’s nothing spectacular about the graphics, they are adequate.

Control. ZOA can be flown in two different modes: Point mode, and Yoke mode. Point mode is designed to be easy to fly, with a minimum learning curve for rookie pilots. In this mode, you simply point at your target path using the mouse. Role movement is also possible in this mode via the keyboard. Yoke mode is a more traditional control method very similar to the control style used in most flight simulators. You use the keyboard to pitch, roll, and yaw. Overall, the controls are responsive and take very little time to master. Coming in for a manual docking is tricky, but very rewarding if done right.

Conclusions. I found ZOA entertaining, but not necessarily thought-provoking in terms of strategy. The game is marketed as a “3D Space-flight simulation game.” Basically what you get is an arcade game. A shame really, because I liked the concept behind the game. It could be the basis for some really heavy-duty action if it was expanded and polished up a bit. For me, the novelty wore off in a few hours leaving me wishing for more weapons, better graphics, and some more interesting enemy AI and weapons. I particularly missed full-screen support, which is not much to ask at 640x480. My copy (1.0.3 reviewed) will not play sounds on a Quadra 840 AV. This is most likely Apple’s fault for failing to include backwards compatibility with their own sound chips. Hopefully ZOA will be updated shortly to address the problem.

Pros
- Smooth arcade action
- Works on all Macs including PowerBooks
- Higher skill levels are challenging
- Adjustable performance
- Ability to start at any skill level

Cons
- Too simplistic in nature
- Sounds won’t work on AV Macs
- Small ‘letterbox’ style view windows

- Copy protected