

Tie Fighter

Software Reviews

Crossroads

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Not long ago, the design team at LucasArts created an exceptional space flight simulator known as X-Wing. Fans could finally participate in the valiant struggle of the rebels and fly famous missions such as the Trench Run and the Battle of Yavin. Now Lucas Arts has out done itself in creating a new flight simulator which explores the dark side of the force. The much awaited sequel to X-Wing, Tie Fighter, finally hit the shelves after several months of delays. Though originally scheduled for release during Christmas of 1993, it was well worth the wait.



Simply put, the graphics improved tremendously. This goes for the animated cut-scenes, the polygon graphics, and the bitmaps. The ships are they more detailed; they feature spectacular Gouraud-smoothing and light-sourcing effects which add a tremendous sense of depth. With all the improvement in graphics, it is remarkable that game play doesn't suffers at all. Even with full shading, light-sourcing, and ship detail, the game seemed just as fast as X-wing - perhaps even a bit smoother. The attention to detail is obvious. For instance, when a torpedo hits, the target doesn't merely explode. The main explosion produces smaller pieces of debris which scatter away and themselves explode.

Unlike X-wing, projectile-capable craft can have different loading options for their missions. Though the game suggests which kind you take into battle, you are free to

choose just before you enter the mission. There are the traditional concussion missiles and proton torpedoes as well as the newer heavy rockets and heavy bombs. In later missions, you can access the advanced concussion missile and advanced proton torpedo. The advanced versions carry better warheads, track better, and move faster than their predecessors. Remarkably, advanced missiles almost always guarantee a severe hit even against the advanced tie. An approaching projectile can now be destroyed by laser fire. As X-Wing veterans will recall, it was easier to defeat a Star Destroyer with a fly-like A-wing than hit an incoming missile with laser fire. This makes close runs against targets harder as your missiles can be easily destroyed when you launch in a laser-heavy battle. On the other hand, protecting your own ships is easier because of this change. Now you can successfully stop a torpedo barrage in mid-flight. Sound improvement becomes evident early when the installation program tests the stereo capacity of the speakers for your computer setup. Because of this, you can tell from which side of your ship lasers were fired. Sounds coming from the battle around you are also appropriately placed, when you something happens on the left, you know it. There are more original voice samplings, as well as samplings from the Star Wars Trilogy. In a subtle yet effective feature, wingmen answer your commands differently. First, they don't always repeat the same answering message for the same command. Second, they answer as a group rather than each one sequentially. Also, your CO will continually tell you when your objective, both primary, secondary, and secret, are completed, when you might as well give up, and special instructions during battle. Most importantly, when a ship critical to your mission is being attacked he will inform you on its status.

Like the graphics and sound, the game play has been improved noticeably as well. Even with the detail settings on high, more ships can engage in battles without slowing down the game play or causing as much visible choppiness. The controls, for the most part, are the same as in X-Wing. There are, however, some interesting new controls used during game play and the overall game configuration which compliment the ship designs nicely.

Some missions in X-wing were team missions. Wingmen played critical roles. This is also the case with Tie Fighter. There are even a few new wingman commands. Just as in X-wing you can signal other craft with some of these keys besides wingmen. For instance, SHIFT-B is used to signal a transport or tug, if one is available, to reload or repair your ship when the mission requires it. Key is SHIFT-S which is used to call for reinforcements when things get too hectic for existing forces to handle, but don't be surprised if only one wave of backup ships are sent because reinforcements are usually exhausted after the first call for help.

Other new controls include the Z key, which gives you a zoomed view of the targeted ship with important statistics on it like shield strength, hull strength, the condition of the ship's systems, the cargo being carried, its target, and its destination. This is useful in very complex missions where certain ships play critical roles. The L key lists all received messages and when they came in during the mission. Finally, the map has an added 3-D feature which makes it much easier to determine exactly where ships are on the x, y, and z axes. The 2-D map is still available of course.

The new overall game controls include the option to choose the difficulty level of the missions. These generally controls the aggressiveness and skill of enemy pilots. Also, there is an automatic pilot backup switch which helps to eliminate the loss of hard earned points and rank. In case you are wondering, it takes about 2 direct hits with laser fire to turn your Tie Fighter or Tie Interceptor into swiss cheese and bring your mission to a screeching halt. I should know because I got careless, got blasted to pieces, and got sent to a prison planet on my very first mission and if not for the backup switch, I'd have had to do all the training again.

The game begins with you facing a man with a grim appearance behind an elevated podium. After you enter the password, the man orders, "` `Enter your name pilot!" If you try to enter without doing so, two storm-troopers lunge forward block your entrance. This action in itself is impressive because as the guards move to block the door, their weight shifts and the motion seems natural. The shiny floor even reflects their motion. This exemplifies how much detail was put into the game. Then, you are given several options:

1. You can go back to "` `Registration" to change your name or say hello to the grim looking fellow you saw mere moments ago.
2. You can enter the "` `training simulator" which allows you to run your paces through the imperial version of the "` `maze", which is a sort of 3-D obstacle course. You only have to make it through 4 levels as opposed to 8 in X-Wing in order to get your training certificate.
3. The "` `combat chamber" is where you fly 4 historic missions of increasing difficulty.
4. The "` `change battles" door allows you to change battles (of course) and review cut scenes of animation from each battle.
5. The Tech Room allows the pilot to study the ships, containers, and mines that will be seen at some point during the game.
6. The "` `Film Room" allows the pilot to review films recorded during missions and even fly the mission again in the simulator.

7. ``Continue Battle'' is where you go to continue fighting in a battle until all of the missions are done.

The ships that are flown by the player in the game are the Tie Fighter, Tie Bomber, Tie Interceptor, the Tie Advanced (The Avenger), and the Assault Gunboat. X-Wing players will be familiar with these through combat, so there's no point going into them now. Instead we'll concentrate on the new features. The game allows the existence of modified empire ships. Ships which originally did not carry projectile weapons sometimes appear as specially modified versions in your missions and can then carry any single set of projectile weapons available.

As the game progresses you'll notice that story-line deals with the development of new weapons. The rebels come up with the Mag Pulse gun which disables only the weapons system of the target. You never get to use the Mag Pulse weapon though the story-line does feature two missions in which Mag Pulse technology is captured from the Rebels. Presumably expansion disks will provide campaigns that utilize this weapon. The empire is simultaneously working on the (tractor) beam weapon. Activated, this system will engage a tractor beam on a target that is the center of your cross-hairs. This retards their motion and keeps them in the center. In the later series of missions you will fly a tie fitted with the beam weapon. There is a secret new ship introduced in the later campaigns: the Tie Defender. Imagine craft faster than the Advanced Tie. It has 4-way laser fire, ion canons, heavy shields, and the ability to launch projectiles. The Tie Defender also comes standard with the beam weapon.

Along with being able to fly six fighters, you also exposed to a plethora of new ships, mines, and containers. You will run into the predecessor of the X-Wing, the Z-95 Headhunter (a lowly craft that with a few laser shots are almost always destined to early oblivion). Other ships include the Corellian Transport, a modified version of which Han Solo flies in the movies, the Calamari Cruiser (heavy and light versions), the Tyderian Shuttle, the heavily armed Escort Shuttle, the Storm-trooper Transport, the Assault Transport. Frigates (Normal and modified), the Escort Carrier, the IPV-1 Patrol Craft, the Nebulon B Escort Frigate, the Corellian Corvette (standard and modified versions), Star Destroyers (Victory class and Imperial class), the Interdictor Cruiser, cargo ferry, modular conveyor, container transport, 4 different Space containers, 5 different types of mines (some of which fire concussion missiles when attacked), Space Tugs, Heavy Lifters, and Space Platforms.

Also like X-Wing, Tie Fighter is accompanied by ``Tie Fighter: The Official Strategy

Guide." This helpful book gives you clues on how to fly missions that may be difficult. It also gives interesting information on the different ships and alien races, as well as the history of the empire and emperor Palpatine. Finally, the book is setup so as to follow the adventures of Maarek Stele as he is drafted by the empire right out of the middle of a war between his home planet, Kuan, and Bordal, and works his way up through the ranks of the empire. The strategy guide is set up much like ``X-Wing: The Official Strategy Guide" insofar as it gives you useful information and follows the adventures of Keyan Farlander as he fights against the empire on behalf of the rebel cause. The price of the strategy guide will probably be around 18 dollars.

The game still lets you register your own pilots, yet does away with the insane need to maintain an actual wing of top ace pilots for use as your personal wingmen. As we all know, X-Wing wingmen had the intelligence of lawn chairs (no insult intended - lawn chairs are among the most intelligent of furniture). Now, you're assigned essentially anonymous wingmen who seem to be top-ace pilots. They are more intelligent and I haven't seen one yet accidentally run into a freighter, a common occurrence in X-wing.

Although Tie Fighter is a high quality game, there are a few problems and a few things I do not like. One problem is that on occasion a cut-scene (such as the introduction to the game) which consists of a lot of impressive animation sequences, locks up. Along with locking up, some times the game will reboot your computer if your ship is destroyed during a mission. This doesn't happen very often, but it's a nuisance and a frightening one at that. However, after all is said and done, the faults are completely outweighed by the superior nature of the game, and I'm sure we can expect patches to appear soon.

Overall, Tie Fighter is an impressive combination of game play, animation, sound, and story, which out does its predecessor (not an easy feat). I give Tie Fighter an overall rating of 9. I would have ranked it a perfect 10, but there are a few problems and no game is perfect, although some, like Tie Fighter, get awfully close. Tie Fighter can be found at a local retailer for around \$63.00, including the tax, and believe me, it's well worth the price.