F-19 Stealth Fighter Review

In 1986, I received my first DOS-based computer, and the second game I got for it was Sublogic’s Flight Simulator 2. Over the next two years, I played the hell out of that and Sublogic’s Jet, for example, and I thought I’d seen everything a flight sim could be. Then, in February 1989, I purchased F-19 Stealth Fighter for my birthday, and my concept of what a flight sim could be was irrevocably changed forever.

F-19 Stealth Fighter was my first combat flight simulator, and my first MicroProse game, and to say I was blown away would be an understatement. From the evocative box art to the astounding manual to the stellar gameplay (which still holds up to this day, I feel), F-19 was a sim I played for YEARS. I was so addicted to it one morning in high school I got up early, loaded a mission, didn’t finish it in time, turned off the monitor, and left the PC running all day (an IBM PS/2 by this point), so that I could continue the moment I got home. It’s that good.

Now, let’s dive into what makes this sim so iconic, starting with the box itself:

**The Box**

As mentioned earlier, the box for F-19 is simple and evocative, with brilliant art that catches the eye. Inside the box is one of MicroProse's most superb manuals. It is an absolute joy to read and one of their largest, if I recall. The box also includes two keyboard overlays (remember those?), both 3 ½ and 5 ¼ inch floppies, a mail-in card for a backup disk, two two-sided maps covering the game’s four theaters and a technical supplement folding card.

A final treat is the catalog for other MicroProse titles, such as Pirates!, Red Storm Rising, and this game’s predecessor, Project Stealth Fighter. Overall, it’s a very full box, making for a very beefy package.

**The Plane**

When the game was in development, the F-19 wasn’t confirmed in any way. It originally came out as a model, as mentioned in Tom Clancy’s “Red Storm Rising,” but again, this was just fantastical thinking. How funny was it that the actual stealth fighter, the F-117A, actually debuted at the same time as the release of F-19 Stealth Fighter.

In the game, the F-19 has four internal weapons bays and a machine gun, making it a large aircraft. It wasn’t meant to be fast or maneuverable, so while it HAD a cannon for dogfighting and some mild strafing, if you ended up dogfighting in an F-19, you’d already lost. This was due to the internally placed engine ports not generating much power.

The upside to all this is that if you do your job well and remain undetected, the plane is very flyable with only a keyboard, making the game even more accessible than other flight sims. The game also gave you quite a bit of information inside the cockpit, thanks to two multi-function displays. These could show fuel usage, weapons status, and two useful maps to track enemies and radar pings. Overall, this is a delightful aircraft for both experienced and novice pilots.

**The Presentation**

While it may look and sound dated now as I write this in 2024, it was mindblowing back when this game came out. Sure, the PC speaker sound effects wouldn’t win any awards, but to my knowledge, no sim had successfully created such a “world” around the player, and what a world it was.

The game comes with several theaters (Lybia, Persian Gulf, North Cape, and Central Europe), each with little flourishes to make it distinct, such as windmills in Central Europe. For 1988 graphics, the terrain was different and colorful, giving a sense of scale and speed.

It was so easy to get lost in these little worlds you would fly in as you watched planes fly this way and that, radar installations searching for you, cities going about their business, and more. These worlds were littered with as much detail as they could cram into a late-80s-era PC, and it was immediately engaging. Overall, the techniques used to generate these worlds you flew in, and the graphics used to represent them, were ahead of their time and still hold up today.

**The Gameplay**

F-19 and its sequel are some of the only combat flight sims that focus almost entirely on stealth. The only other sim that comes close might be MegaFortress. Sure, there are other games with stealth elements, but none were as focused as this series (in which, again, I include its sequel, F-117A, as well).

There are several ways to play this game and approach it. I recommend this game and its sequel to pilots new to combat flight sims because you can configure your experience easily. You can switch the theater, flight model, mission type (air-to-air or air-to-ground), and how challenging your opponents will be. There are also air-to-air and air-to-gound training missions that are infinitely repeatable.

Once you’ve set up your mission parameters, the game generates a mission for you. There’s no campaign in this game; your overall goal is to survive 99 missions so you can retire. You can also decline missions with no penalty if you want something other than what the game generates.

Each mission has a primary and a secondary target, and depending on the war scenario you previously chose, these can vary wildly. In a cold war scenario, you can land at a secret airfield for your primary mission and photograph something for your secondary. As these missions are generated anew each time, repetition is only a problem after you’ve played the game for a long time.

Flying in the game world is a mix of speed and direction. Flying slower will make you more difficult to detect, and flying in between mountain ranges will make it more difficult for ground radar installations to see you. This also helps you sneak up on unsuspecting enemies, vital in air-to-air missions, especially those against the big IL-76 Russan AWACS aircraft.

The game also gives you many tools to ply your trade, from a camera to air-to-ground missiles and bombs and several air-to-air missiles. Choosing your payload wisely will give you everything you need to accomplish your mission.

**Its Sequel/Remake, F-117A Nighthawk Stealth Fighter 2.0**

Three years after F-19 came out, MicroProse issued a remake, F-117A Nighthawk Stealth Fighter 2.0. It had much nicer graphics, more than double the amount of theaters (nine versus four, some from F-15 Strike Eagle II), a revised cockpit and two stealth fighters to fly. We’ll talk about this game more in its own separate review, but overall this remake/sequel improved upon the original in many ways, though truthfully I feel F-19 is still worth playing on its own.

**Conclusion**

I’ve barely scratched the surface of what F-19 Stealth Fighter has to offer. From the varied missions to the interactive, living worlds you fly through, this is a stellar simulation that’s only bested (not in every way, but many) by its own sequel. This game was a smash back in its day, and it remains beloved today due to its fun and fairly unique approach to flight sims. This game is definitely one to play if you haven’t already.