

PRIVATEER 2

THE DARKENING




ELECTRONIC ARTS





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Thanks to:

Andrea Griffiths from EA for her support on the project and the doughnuts she always brings with her when she comes to our office (top effort that), and Erin Roberts and his team for putting up with our silly questions.

Contents

Privateer 2: The Darkening

Over the following pages we'll be going behind the scenes with Electronic Arts and taking an in-depth look at the game which has just had five million dollars ploughed into its development. Inspired by EA's superb space combat sim *Privateer*, *The Darkening* is an absolutely massive game with *X-Wing*-style combat action and complex trading elements which are not entirely dissimilar to those seen in *Elite*. Unlike *Elite*, however, the game sports gorgeous hi-res graphics and the presentation of the whole thing is eye-poppingly slick.

We at Zone firmly believe *The Darkening* will become the game to be reckoned with in the space combat sim stakes. If you liked *Privateer* (or any of the *X-Wing* games for that matter) you'll be in your element with *The Darkening*, which offers more than both these titles put together. As if the action-packed combat sections weren't enough, the game also features an engrossing storyline which is brought to life in the form of an interactive movie by a very impressive cast which includes David Warner, John Hurt and Christopher Walken – in fact a hefty chunk of the money EA spent on the game (three and a half million dollars to be exact) went into producing the movie part of *The Darkening*. The end result, as you will soon discover, is very impressive indeed. It's not often you can say that a software house is justified in spending millions of dollars on a section in a game that has nothing to do with the actual gameplay, but in the case of *The Darkening*, we think that the money was very well spent.

Not only is all the acting top-notch, but *The Darkening's* storyline is indeed totally engrossing and the movie quality is first class. We interviewed the extremely talented chaps and chapesses working on the project and asked them all manner of spectacularly annoying questions. To their everlasting credit, the boys and girls at EA Manchester did themselves proud by responding to our enquiries intelligently, with a great deal of wit, and in a highly professional manner, unlike the Zone bods who were all hungover from an absolutely top party the night before, thanks to which we spent most of our time staring at the wall and asking for water. The upshot of all this is that we are now in a position to tell you everything you ever wanted to know about *The Darkening* but were afraid to ask. Enjoy!

4 Privateer: Then and Now

We take a look at how *Privateer 2: The Darkening* shapes up compared to its predecessor and talk to the team about how they feel the game has evolved since its conception.

6 In-flight Entertainment

This is what *The Darkening* is all about: hectic shoot 'em up action courtesy of EA's superb new game engine. Everything you could possibly want to know about the action at the heart of *The Darkening* experience explained in full.

11 EA Competition

Electronic Arts go absolutely mad and give away a completely fab combat jacket and ten copies of *The Darkening*. Enter this competition and if you win you can parade around your front room in the aforementioned jacket pretending to be Clive Owen. Cool, eh?

12 The Adventure Begins

The Darkening is an Origin game, and as such it comes complete with an on-going storyline brought to you in the form of an interactive movie. We talk to the team about the adventure that forms the back-bone of it all and perfectly sets the scene for all the space combat shenanigans that follow.

15 Sound Sense

Origin games are renowned for their superb soundtracks and ear-shattering sound effects – and *The Darkening's* no exception. The sound bods at EA took us behind the scenes and showed us how ridiculously talented they are by twiddling lots of knobs and things.

16 Movies, Games & Video

The movie section of *Privateer 2: The Darkening* was 'shot' at Pinewood studios and features a star-studded cast, a 'real' movie set, and a storyline full of lots of suitably melodramatic twists and turns. This is the bit where we go star-spotting and spooge on shamelessly about how cool the whole thing's looking.

The more astute among you will probably have guessed by now that *The Darkening* is in fact the official sequel to *Privateer*. However, Producer Erin Roberts is very keen to point out that *The Darkening* is not just *Privateer Part 2*: "*Privateer 2: The Darkening* is easily more than a sequel to *Privateer*," says Erin. "The enhancements we've made in every single part of the gaming experience make it not only much

better than its predecessor, but better than any other space flight sim out there. We have a brand new game engine which allows many lighting effects, and we've spent a lot of time creating a huge number and diversity of different missions to cater to the most hard-core space flight sim player."

Although the introduction of a brand new game engine is a major enhancement in itself, we wondered how different the general 'feel' of the game is to the

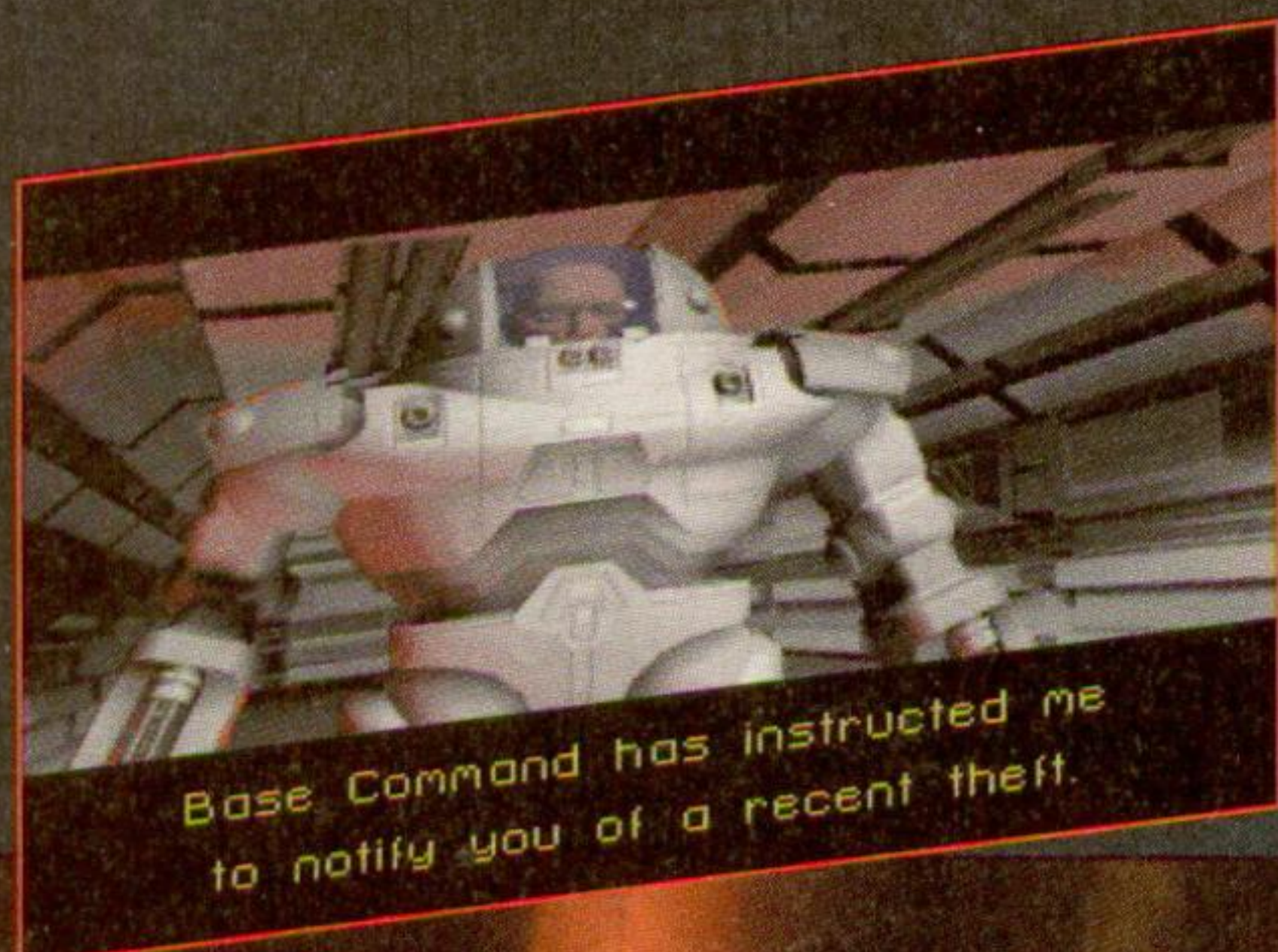
original, and how it compares with the considerable competition it has in the marketplace. Erin explains: "*The Darkening* is many different things. It's a state of the art space flight sim with over 150 missions and a full universe with hundreds of destinations. It has trading as one way of making wealth, as well as a different look and feel to any other product, incorporating some of the best graphic design in any game to date. Although you could say that its roots come from games like *Elite*, you could also say that *The Darkening* more than matches the likes of *X-Wing*, *TIE Fighter* etc in every single department."

Erin describes *The Darkening* as the most ambitious project he has ever worked on. We asked him just what he set out to achieve and how he decided to go about it. Over to Erin: "I wanted to create a game which would redefine this genre, something which would be remembered as one of the best games of its time, the way people look back on titles such as

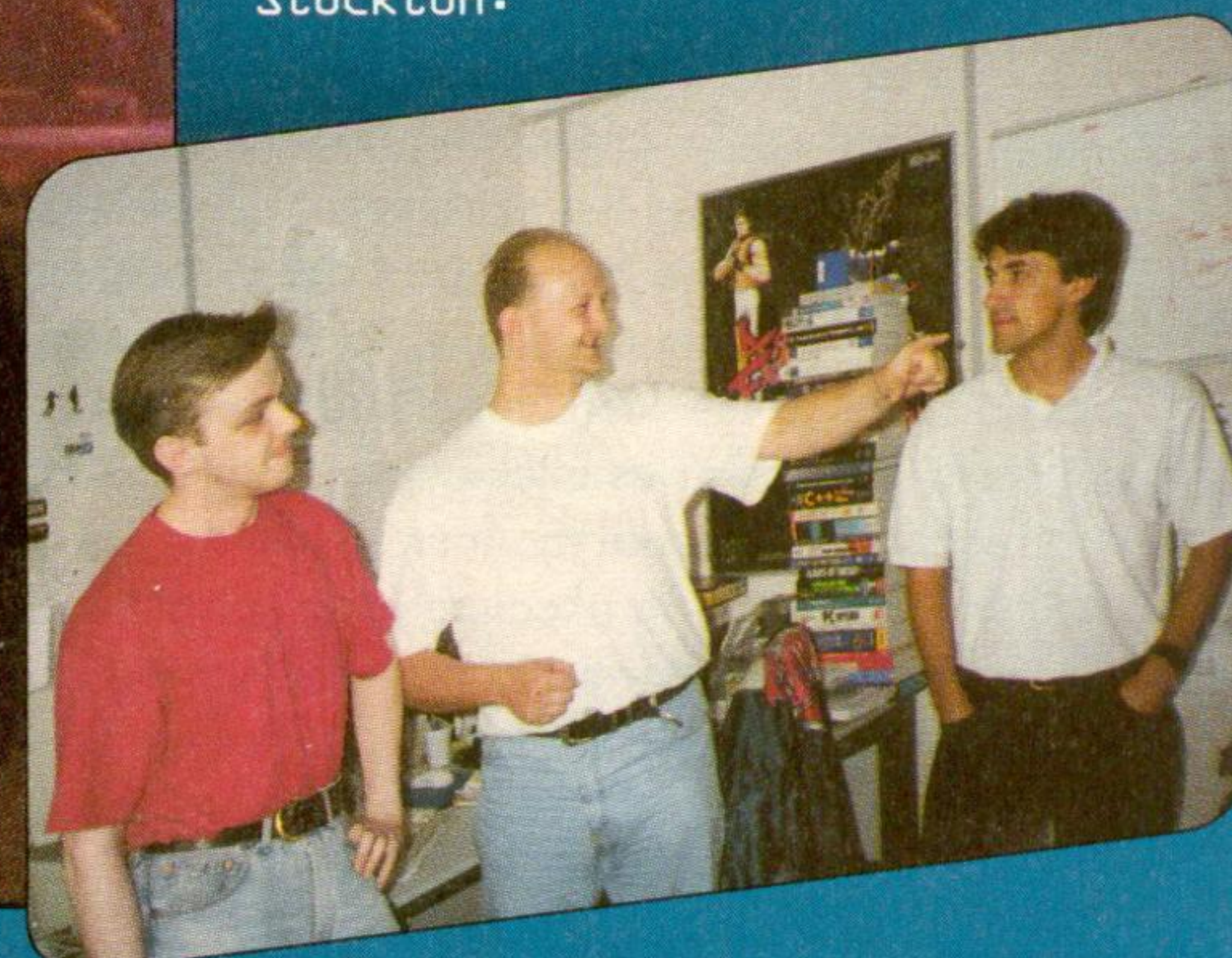
The Zone office has been plunged into a spooge frenzy with the imminent arrival of the sequel to Privateer.

Chris Anderson locked himself in a small room with the producer and programmers and refused to let them out until they'd told him the full story...

Privateer: That Was Then



(Below) The programmers, from left to right: Brian Marshall, Paul Hughes and Tony Stockton.



(Above) The programmers examined *X-Wing* and then made sure that *The Darkening* is even better.

Elite. I know I'm very happy with what we've done, and very proud of the game. Whether or not it will achieve the 'cult' status enjoyed by games like *Elite* we'll just have to wait and see."

X-who?

I'd like to point out at this stage that we were conducting this interview in an office with Erin and the software engineers that worked on the game (programmers to you and me). Playful as ever, we decided to stir things up a bit by bringing up the old 'How does it compare to *X-Wing*' problem. Tony Stockton, one of the programmers, immediately piped up: "It's much, much bigger than *X-Wing*. It's got its own open universe too, so you can go wherever you want, whenever you want, and do whatever you want. Basically, everything it does far exceeds *X-Wing* in every way." Er, cheers.

At this point Brian Marshall (another programmer) looked as though he'd just remembered something and offered: "And

another thing, you're not forced to practise the game for bloody ages and ages before you can get into the game proper." Brian is referring to the fact that *X-Wing* forces you to go through training school and prove yourself before you can play the actual game. Some people like this, some people don't. Brian didn't!

On a slightly different note, Paul Hughes (yet another programming bod) went to very great pains to point out that the trading elements in *The Darkening* are far better than those in *Frontier Elite: First Encounters*: "Basically, *The Darkening* is what *Frontier* should have been. I've played *Frontier* and it's the biggest pile of shit I've ever seen." Nice one. Well, having spoken to the team and actually played the game first-hand ourselves, we'd like to conclude that *The Darkening* is a massive leap over its predecessor, both in terms of technological advancements and in the game's general content. In fact, they couldn't really be more different from each other if they tried really hard.

A brief history

Origin's highly successful *Wing Commander* series was the inspiration for the first *Privateer* game – in fact that's where all the combat sections for the missions were directly lifted from. The idea was to do something a little different with the *Wing* series by adding trading elements and a stronger in-game storyline to what was essentially a winning formula to begin with. This resulted in a game that had the tense and exciting *Wing* combat scenes, and a much-needed injection of new gameplay elements that lifted the series to new heights.

It's safe to say that *The Darkening* leaves both *Privateer* and the *Wing Commander* games for dead with its gorgeous SVGA graphics, open universe and *Elite*-style trading elements. If this is the shape of things to come from Origin, their future is looking very rosy indeed.

nd This Is Now



As you can see from these screenshots, *The Darkening*'s SVGA modes make the original *Privateer* look a bit sad. Also, the ship handling is much more realistic, though obviously you'll need to play the game to appreciate this.





In-flight En

It's all well and good having a compulsive storyline, an admirably star-studded cast, not to mention an involving and complex trading system, but *The Darkening* will ultimately be judged by the majority of gamers on the quality of its most exciting element – the space combat sections. The Origin team are only too well aware of this, so it's no surprise to learn that they've devoted an incredible amount of time and effort to developing this particular aspect. Over the next few pages we're going to look at these 'actiony bits' from every possible angle. We're going to inspect the mission structure, the look and feel of the spacecraft and the 3D engine that runs it all. We'll look up its skirt, tell you what colour pants it wears, and try to ascertain how recently said garments were last washed. It's

going to be that interesting, you won't be able to leave it alone until you've read every single word of it. You may even break out in a sweat. So before we press on, make yourself a coffee, sit down, and concentrate.

On your marks, get set, GO! So, then. *Privateer 2: The Darkening*. Let's first consider the title. It has a number in it. And a colon. And a slightly scary word. All in all, as game titles go it's fairly ominous and you certainly wouldn't want to bump into it down a dark alley late on a Friday night. It'd probably beat you up while making a scary grunting sound with its nostrils as it pounded its ham-size fists into the small of your back.

Okay, okay. I admit I'm talking a load of rubbish, but please try and find it in your hearts to forgive me. Because I'm scared. I'm scared of the daunting task I'm about to undertake. I'm trying to postpone the moment. And no matter. How many. Short. Clipped. Sentences I write. I. Just. Can't. Stave. It. Off. Any. Longer.

There's no way round it, I'm going to have to explain just how *The Darkening's* 3D engine works. In detail. Help.

Love me B-Render

First of all, I'd like to introduce you to my chum B-Render. She may not say that much, but she's quite bright really. She's one of the best three-dimensional graphic rendering routines in the business. She

can take a bunch of slow-moving, jerky polygon slouches and twiddle them about until they spin around in a fluid fashion at the speed of light like a bunch of whirling dervishes. Did you ever play *FX Fighter*? Well, my pal B-Render worked on that too.

Anyway, as I hadn't seen B-Render for some time, imagine my surprise when I bumped into her at Origin's Manchester office and discovered she'd landed a starring role in *The Darkening*. In fact, the truth is I didn't recognise her at first. She looked like a million dollars. Super-smooth spacefighters, gigantic great cruiser ships, immense, brooding planets – all of them gliding slickly through the vast expanse of the twilight corners of the galaxy, with highly detailed texture maps and lighting effects failing to hamper their progress.

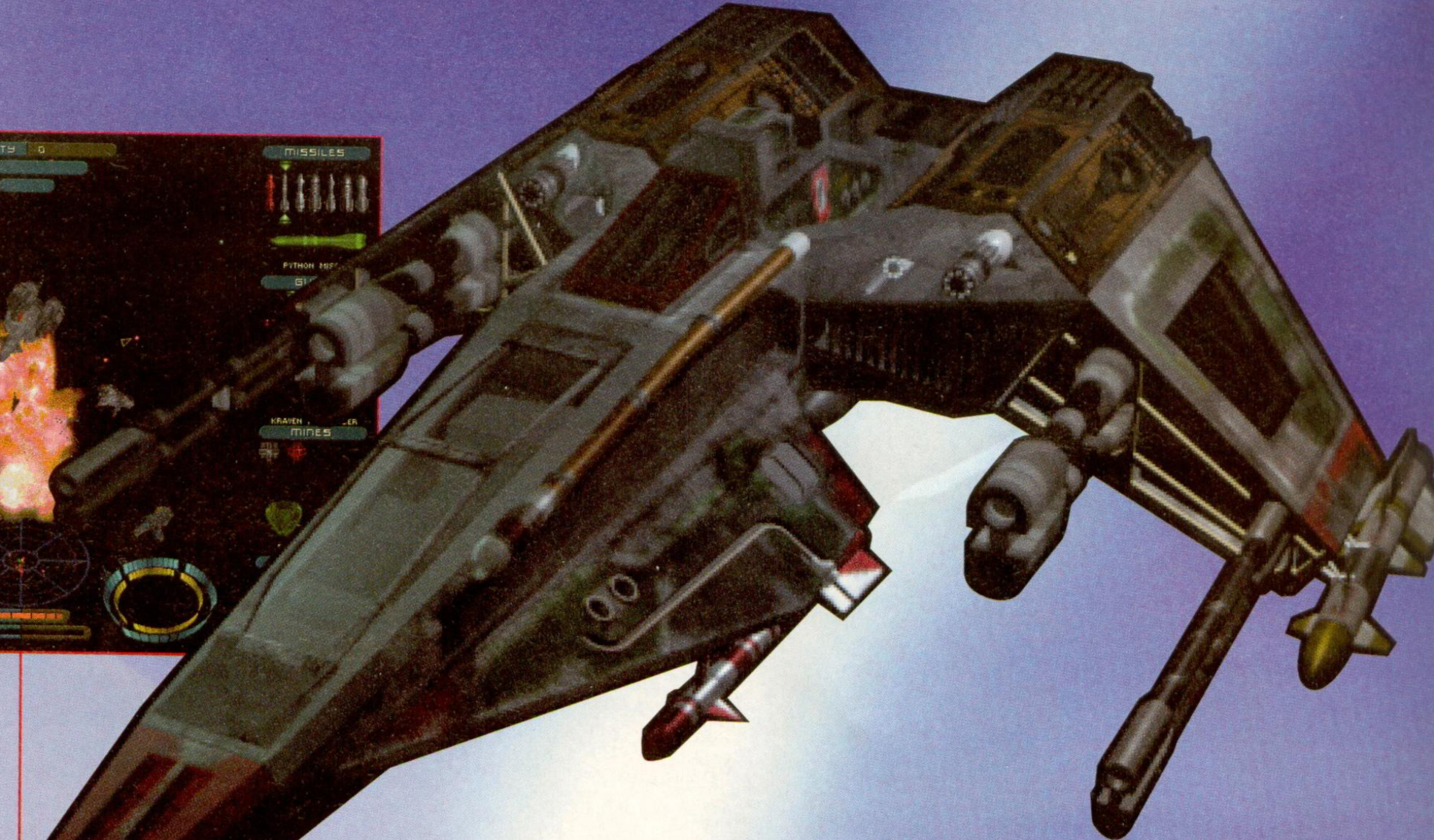
All this was light years beyond anything I'd seen her doing before, but then she had been given a comprehensive make-over by the Origin team. And we're not talking about a dash of eyeliner here and a buff of rouge there (heaven forbid). No, we're talking major surgery. She'd had several important body parts either fiddled with or replaced. And to paraphrase Madonna (I'm sure she wouldn't mind), it makes her feel 'shiny and new'.

Like a virgin

Say a big hello to Paul Hughes, Graham Marshall and Tony Stockton. They're the software engineers who've taken B-Render, tweaked its nose, kicked its arse and transformed it into the Pentium-specific,

(Right) Look out! It's a... it's a... oh look, just shoot it anyway, yeah?





tertainment

SVGA-only super-spinny-round-o-vision behemoth that drives *The Darkening's* combat sections. I asked the chaps to clarify exactly how they set about such a project, and preferably in terms that I could understand. Now unfortunately, at the exact moment that they launched into an explanation, my Dictaphone decided to have a 'wobbly' turn, and when I played the tape back later, it sounded like this:

Graham Marshall: "B-Render wasn't really engineered to handle the sort of numbers and models we're dealing with. We had to change the en route Dan Dare, and change the lumps and girders and the bitter costume-makers."

Luckily, you didn't really miss anything. I had failed to comprehend a single word he'd said anyway, and I reckon it would all sound like so much Greek to you too. And this is precisely why I was so nervous about writing this section. There again, that doesn't actually matter since the only important thing you need to know is this:

Graham Marshall: "There's about 50-60

On a mission

Aside from the never-ending flying, trading and exploration that takes place in *The Darkening*, there are over 150 unique fully-scripted missions. They're split roughly half and half between 'ongoing story' missions (which you'll have to complete in order to reach the the dramatic conclusion of the main narrative), and 'self-contained' missions (which you can stumble across completely by accident, or miss out altogether, depending on where you go and what you do). It isn't going to be boring, in other words.

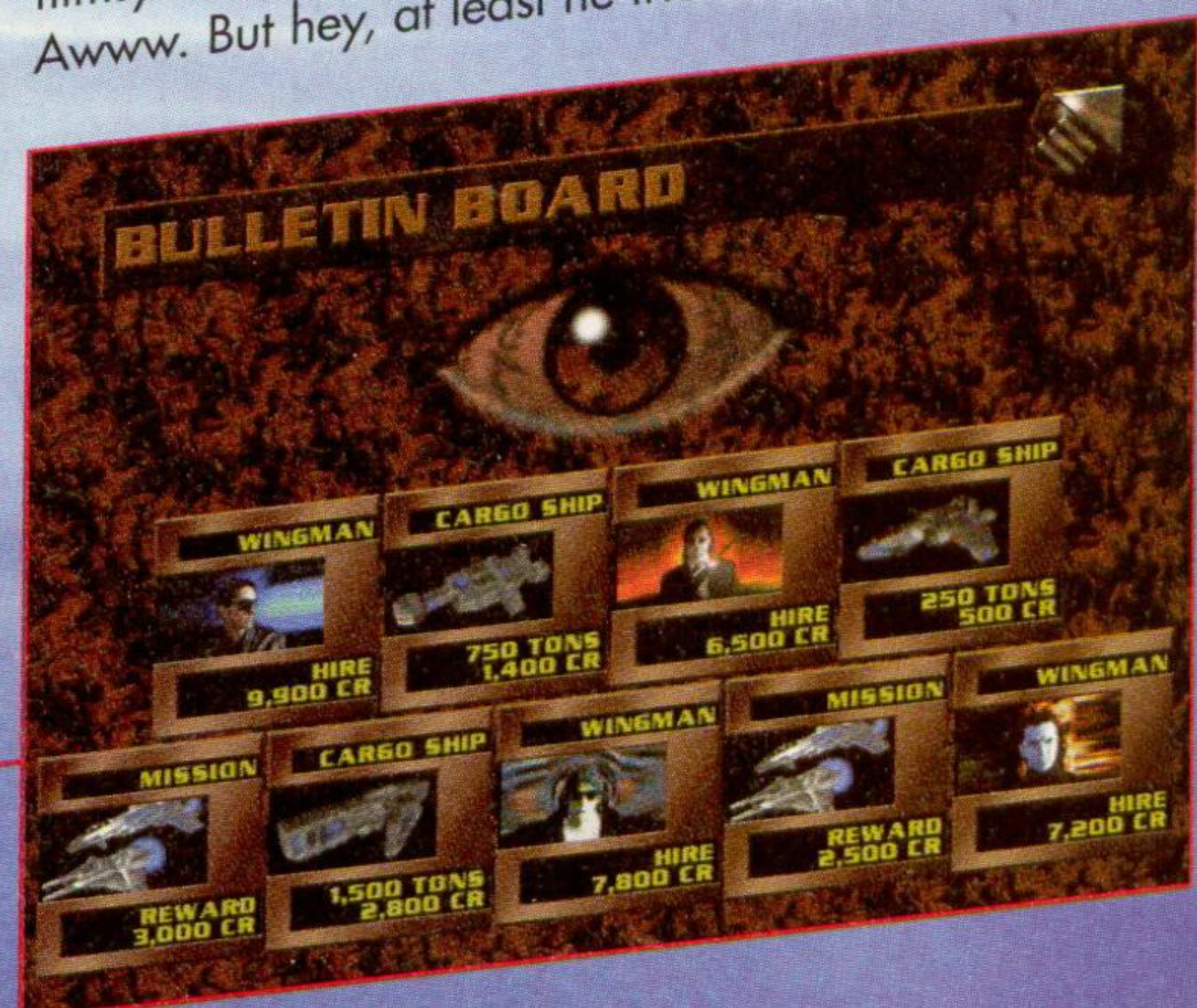
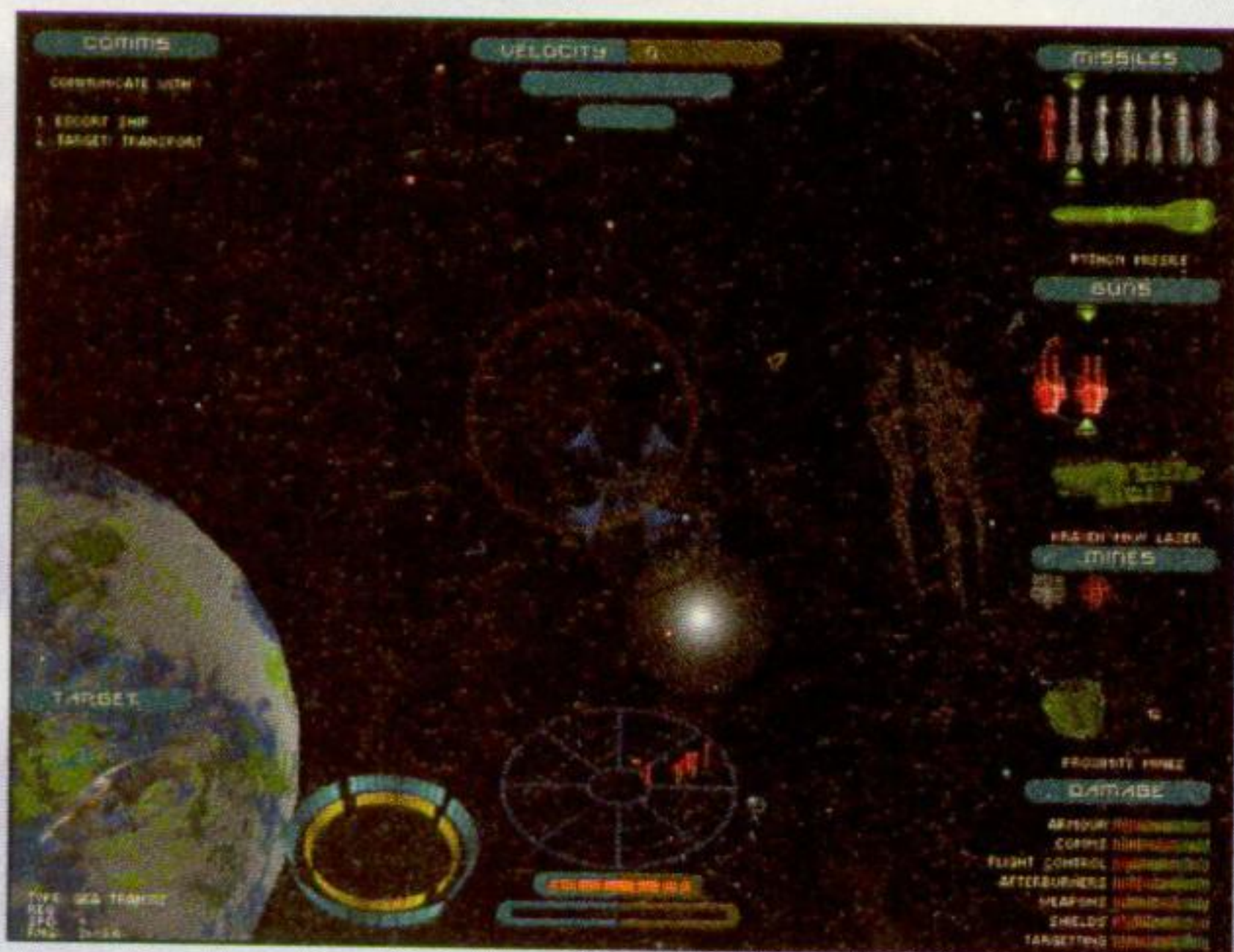
Dreaming up this many 'mini-storylines' is no mean feat, and to this end the Manchester team decided to 'borrow' a couple of extra hands from Origin USA to further swell the ranks of their level design team. I spoke to Marcus Merrell, one of the guys from 'over there', and asked him to explain just how they went about such a daunting task.

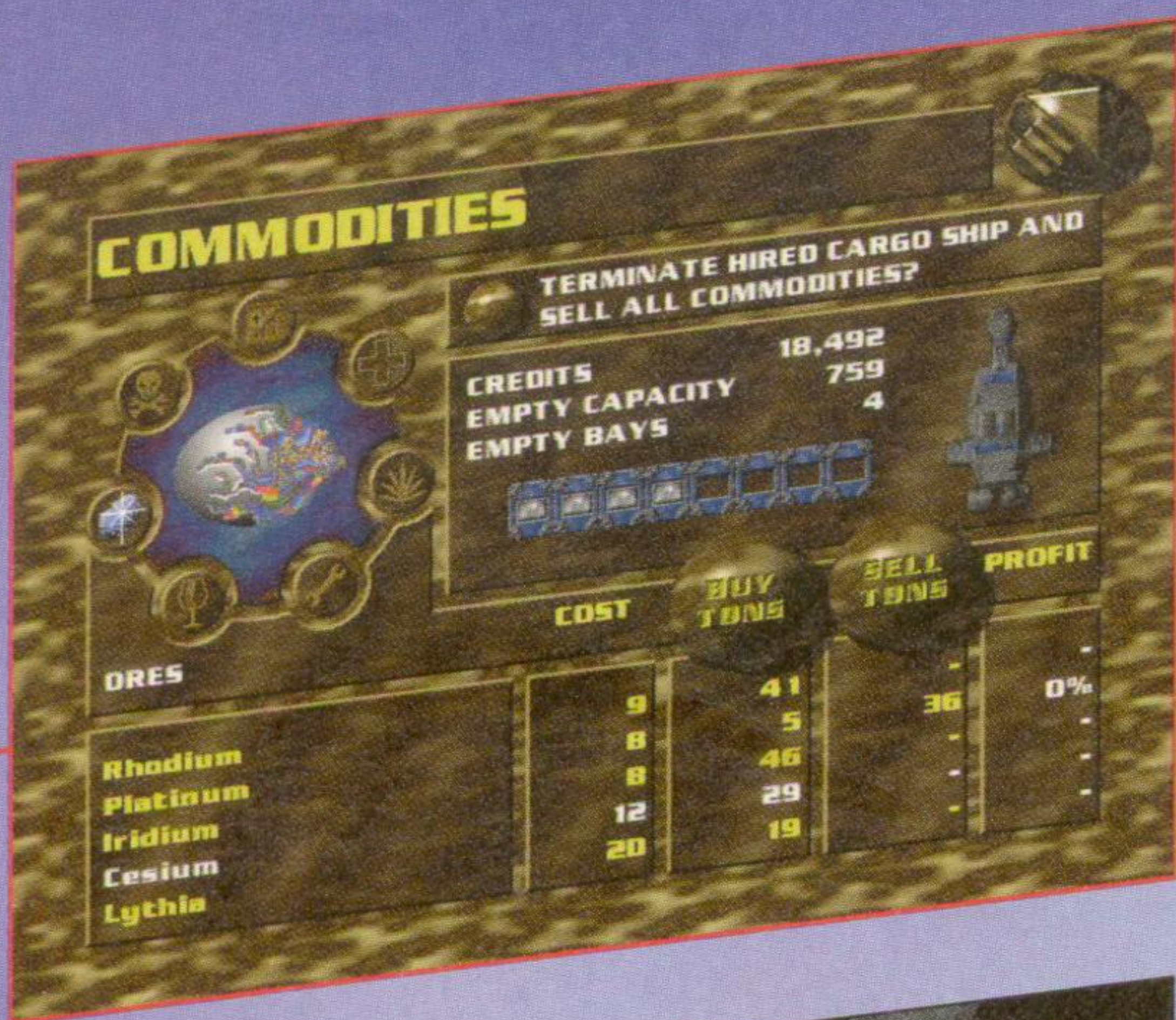
"First we had to decide what type of missions we wanted, and then split them up into categories. So we ended up with about seven different types of categories and then tried to write lots of each type. Some are relatively simple, like going out to destroy a particular cargo ship containing drugs, and some are more complex. For example, somebody might offer you some money to go out and assassinate some people who then turn out to be somebody's wife and kids – and then you get the military after you and so on. You might even end up going back to seek revenge on the guy who offered you the mission in the first place. The simpler missions generally aren't worth as much money. There's a

lot of variety there though. There's even a mission where you have to go and assassinate a Mariachi band that's been terrorising a planet."

Sometimes mission opportunities will pop up when you least expect it. During our visit to EA's Manchester office, we all had a quick go at the controls. While Jeremy was in the middle of a minor space battle, he suddenly intercepted a distress call from some poor soul whose ship had been destroyed. Spinning helplessly through space inside an escape pod, the unfortunate pilot promised a substantial reward to anyone compassionate enough to make a rescue attempt. Being a thoroughly good sort (and, like all of us here at Zone, inherently greedy), our man Jeremy swung his ship round and headed straight in the direction of the signal.

Sadly, the drama was short-lived, because Jeremy was so excited at the prospect of being hailed a saviour that he forgot to slow down as he made his approach. We'll never know what the ejected pilot thought of his would-be liberator, since he was killed outright as Jeremy's ship collided head-on with his flimsy escape pod at about six billion miles per hour. Awww. But hey, at least he tried.





Trading places...

Money not only makes the world go round, but all the other planets too. In *The Darkening* you need to make money to get ahead, and as luck would have it, it's not hard to do. You simply hire a cargo ship, fill it with stuff that's plentiful and cheap, zoom off to another part of the solar system and flog it for a profit, just like you did in *Elite*. You then buy up a load of their splendidly cheap wares and do it all again. As each different planet has a different 'national' product (some planets are very industrial, others agricultural), you'll soon be able to work out a very profitable trade route by following the simple laws of supply and demand. As well as trading in ore and furs, blood and animal feed, you can also deal in illegal goods, such as narcotics, arms and tortoises (only kidding). Successful interplanetary dealings mean big profits, but if the military get wind of what you're doing, or space pirates learn of your activities, then be prepared for a bit of a scrap to keep your cargo intact. It's a cosmic jungle out there.

per cent of the original B-Render code in there, and the rest has been replaced. So about half of it is new and has been written specifically to suit the game."

Cool. And the only other important thing you need to know is this: that judging by the battles I saw (and briefly took part in too, although I exhibited an alarming early tendency to fly like an arse), *The Darkening's* engine is very very powerful indeed. We're talking jaws on floors here. It looks awesome. There's a chance that the game will run on a 486DX/66 (the game's still being tested) but the minimum spec is more likely to be a Pentium processor and SVGA graphics card. This news may set alarm bells ringing, but before you fly into a blind frenzied panic, let me reassure you that it ain't going to run like a dog on a lower-spec Pentium machine. And you don't need a fancy accelerator card either.

Having seen it running side by side on a fairly modest P90 and a god-like P166, I can safely say that there's only a weeny smidgen of difference between the two. For once, playing the game on a machine with the minimum supported specifications shouldn't be a harrowing journey to flick-book land. Super-cool.

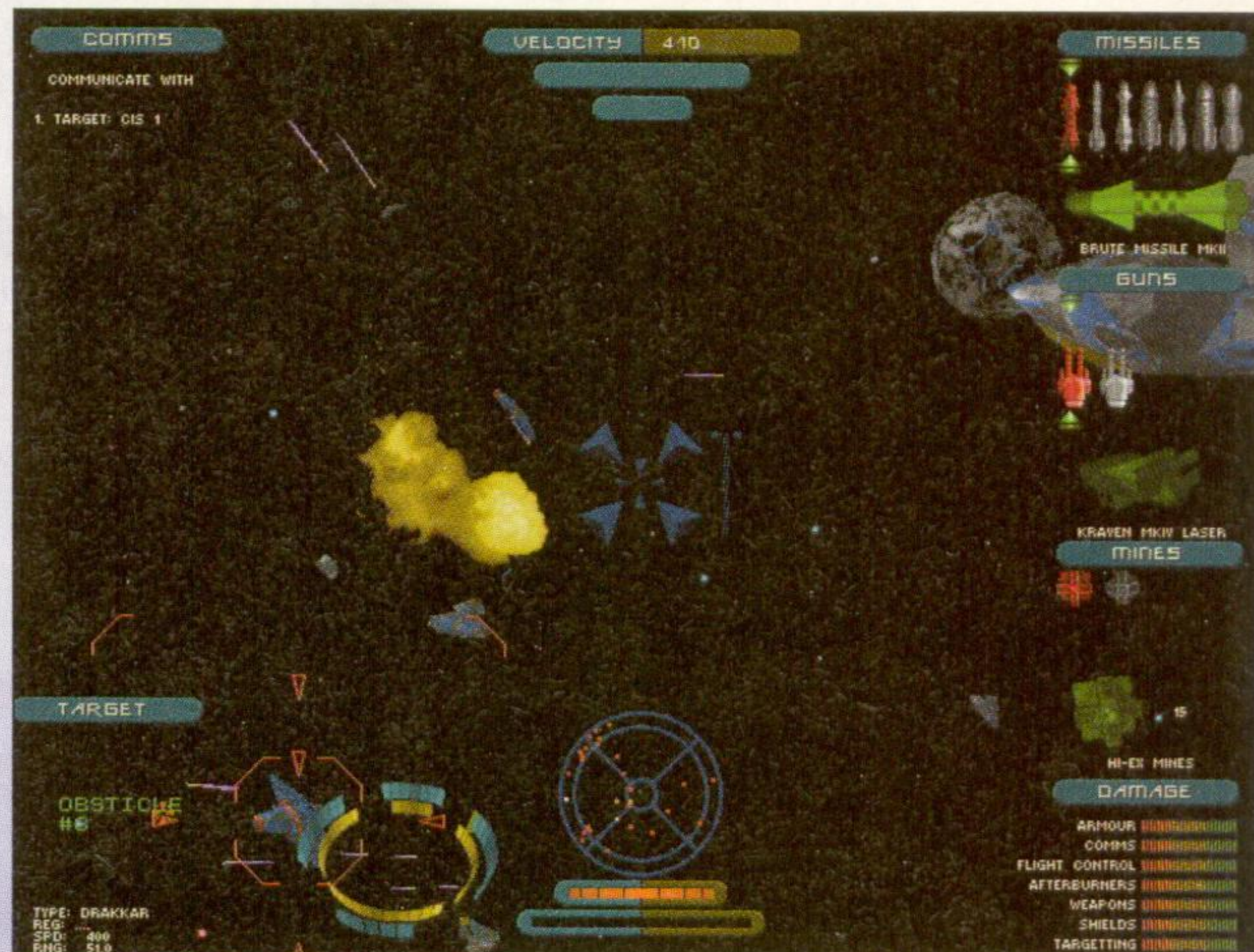
Last rev for the Wing Commander engine?

One of the reasons why *The Darkening* has been 'in production' for what seems like the better part of the millennium was due to the unexpected removal of the *Wing Commander* flight engine. Work had already begun on most of the ship models, missions etc when around Christmas 1995, the team suddenly decided to dump everything they'd been doing thus far and write an engine of their own – hence the customised B-Render hybrid that drives the game today. So why did they do that then, eh?

Paul Hughes:
"We took the original code that we'd been working with and binned it, just threw it all away

Now there's a good idea

Unlike *Wing Commander* for example, where you're committed to finishing your current mission before attempting another one, *The Darkening* will allow you to bugar off on a completely different tangent to do something else, should you so desire. This may sound a bit weird, but it's logical really: let's say you're halfway through a particular mission. You've defeated three fleets full of insane, slaving pirates. They've shot a zillion holes in your undercarriage and ploughed nasty scratch marks through your go-faster stripes. Before the next wave of attackers arrives, you've got a few minutes to think. Now what would you do in 'real life'? Would you press on regardless and take on yet another fleet, even though your ship's so knackered that an opponent could easily destroy it with nothing more than a well-aimed phlegm glob? Or would you nip off back to some kind of sanctuary and patch up the damage first? You could even go and do a few trading runs until you can buy a bigger gun. Having done all that, you can then return to the ongoing mission – and the game will remember how much progress you've made, and how many ships you've destroyed. Clever that.





and started from scratch. We wanted to break away from the *Wing Commander* mission structure and do something a bit different, and in order to do that we had to change the engine. Instead of missions where you go out, fly to a few navpoints, blast the bad guys and then fly back to your ship, we've made a massive universe – now you can fly from one end to the other, you don't have to jump around."

And it certainly is a massive universe. Rumour has it that one of the Manchester team wedged a coin down on the 'afterburner' key and left a ship flying from one end of the playing area to another – and when they all swanned back into the office the next day, it was still going like a good 'un. Traversing the whole thing in real-time would take over 16 hours.

Say goodbye to space dunces

Tony Stockton has been in charge of sorting out the artificial intelligence that drives your opponents on. He's the man you should blame every time some sneaky little spaceship bastard chases your tail and laser-beams you into oblivion. How, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, did he go about programming all this stuff?

Tony Stockton: "There's lots of different things that go into it. There's different strategies depending on what 'clan' they belong to – pirates behave differently from police, for example – and on top of that there's different 'pilots' that actually fly the ships. They've got different skill ratings and tactics, and then of course there's the performance factor for whichever ship they're flying as well. It's a combination of all these things."

"As far as an individual pilot's skill rating goes, that's broken down again. It takes into account their firing accuracy, their



(Left) A few shots from the intro sequence. This smooth landing is about to go horribly wrong...

flying skills, loyalty values, bravery... all of those sort of things. As for how tough they are – well, they're getting better and better all the time as we're tweaking it."

Paul Hughes: "The AI flies all the ships just as a pilot would in real life. In most games, if you were firing at it, the ship would just 'move out of the way', whereas in *The Darkening* our computer-controlled pilot actually has to do the flying. He's got a 'virtual flightstick', so if he pulls back on it his ship will gradually pull up and fly off in another direction. In that respect we've made it very realistic."

That reminds me of something...

The end result is a game which takes a slight tangent from the 'love it or hate it' style of *Wing Commander* where your ship moves in a noticeably 'up, down, left, right' kind of fashion. Also, instead of the linear mission structure, it leans more towards the universally-loved *X-Wing/Elite* feel. Have they been influenced by the legendary LucasArts' classic at all?

Paul Hughes: "Er, no. No – not at all."

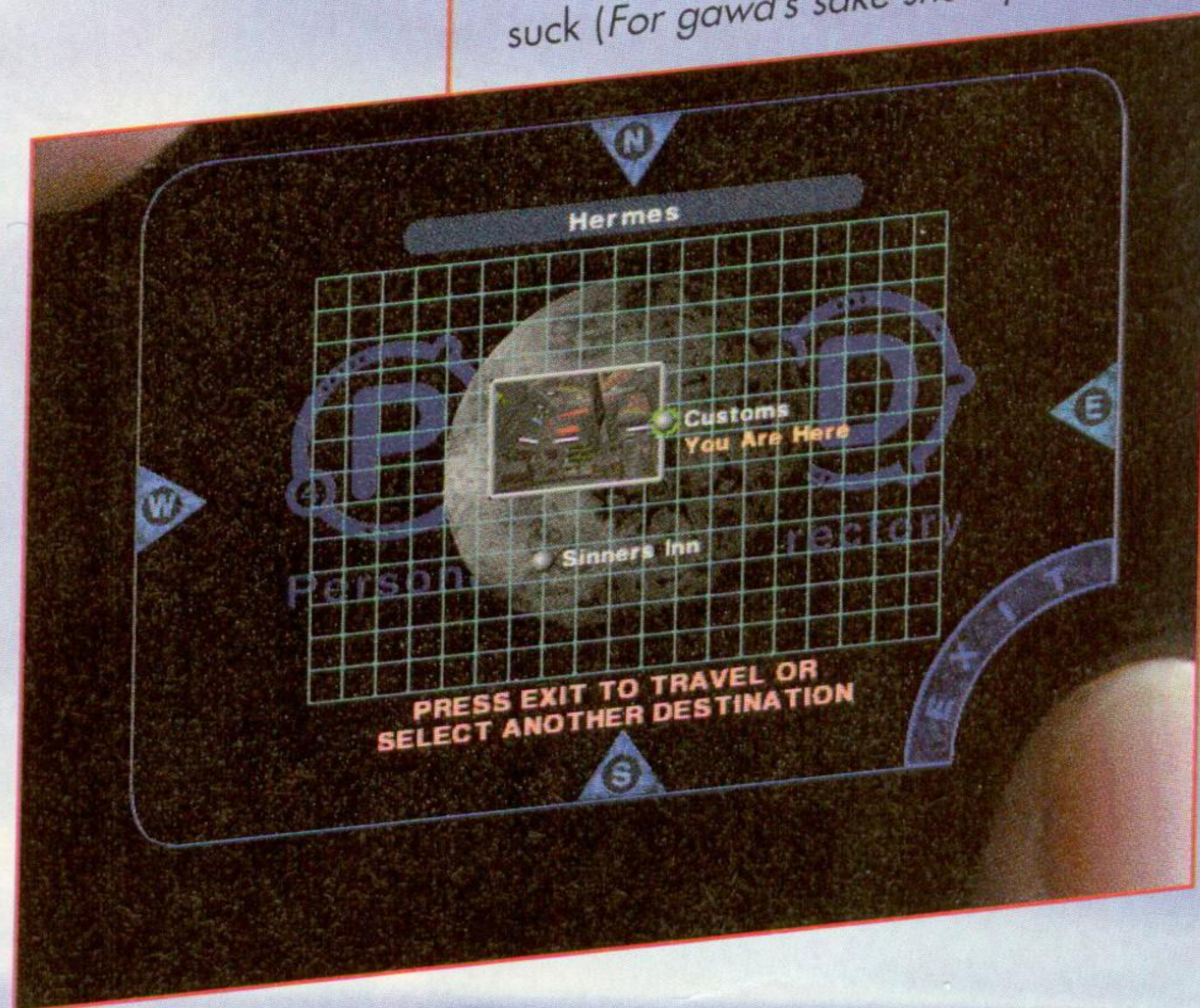
Bearing in mind that he said this a) with a huge grin spread across his face, and b) while indicating a copy of the *TIE Fighter* CD Edition which just 'happened' to be lying around next to his monitor, I think you can safely assume that they're all pretty big *X-Wing* fans. Good. So, do they think *The Darkening* is better than the LucasArts game?

There follows a very long and slightly awkward pause. The three are obviously seriously proud of the fruits of their labours, but they're also sensibly modest too. Eventually, one of them decides to offer a comment.

Graham Marshall: "It's different." How very diplomatic.

There's a starmap waiting in the sky

It's the future. Everything is impossibly hi-tech. Cashpoint machines now talk to you as you withdraw money, spouting phrases like, "Don't spend it all at once!", and "Loadsamoney!", and other intensely annoying things. Toothbrushes have reversed-view television screens built into their heads so that you can watch Mr Motivator pumping iron in your mirror while you clean your teeth each morning. Shane Ritchie has been reborn as a cybernetic stress-relief android (you take him home and torture him to death). And maps have gone all three-dimensional and now spin around and stuff. And if you can't find the place you're looking for, you just enter the name and the map finds it for you. And these cartographic marvels will even chart the route you're taking and tell you how far away it is and everything. And they sing too! And dance! And bake cakes and throw dinner parties! And breast-feed children and dry-clean tuxedos and gut fish and suck (For gawd's sake shut up – Ed).



(Left) A space station! What do you do? Easy – attack!

The ships

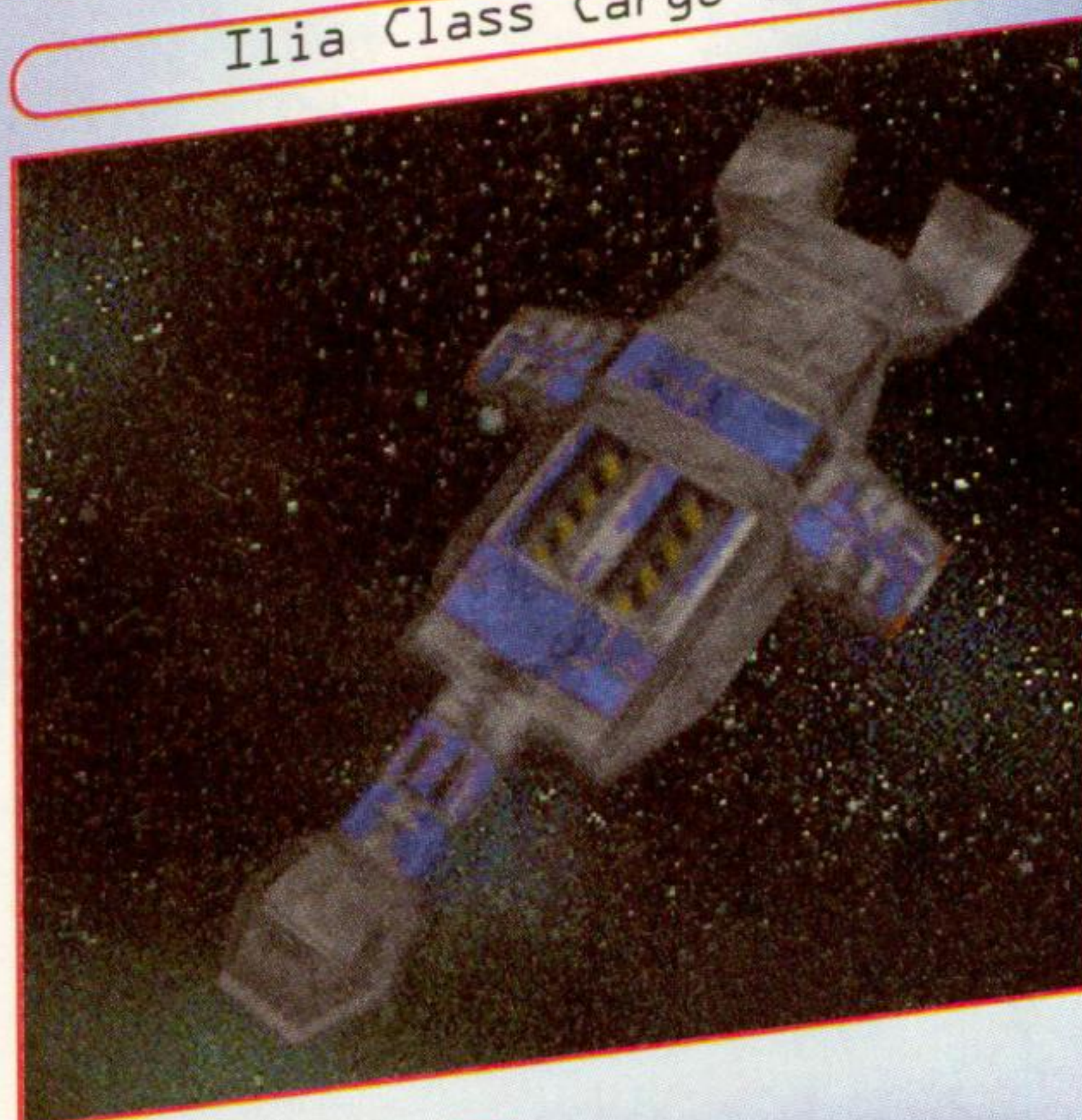
To say that there is a remarkably diverse range of ships in *The Darkening* universe would be a spectacular understatement. In fact there's over 190 different types. Of these, you'll be able to actually fly about 19 yourself, while the rest will crop up throughout the game (and they'll usually be attacking you). Their size ranges from small and insignificant (such as some of the cargo ships), to unbelievably huge and terrifying (the capital ships). Indeed, there's one particular ship which is so huge, it's actually bigger than the entire universe used in *Wing Commander III*. Flying from one end of it to the other would take you a very long time indeed, and attempting to blow it up with your phasers probably wouldn't be a very good idea either.

Another remarkable thing is the sheer variety of design. Almost every possible shape you can imagine is here, from ugly hulking brutes, to gorgeous curvy Porsche-a-likes. Still, you wouldn't want to accidentally sit on any of them. Anyway, a picture is worth a thousand words, right? So I'll shut up now (At last! - Ed) and let you feast your eyes on this lot, which is just a piddling selection from the overall pool. Prepare to spooge till you die of dehydration.

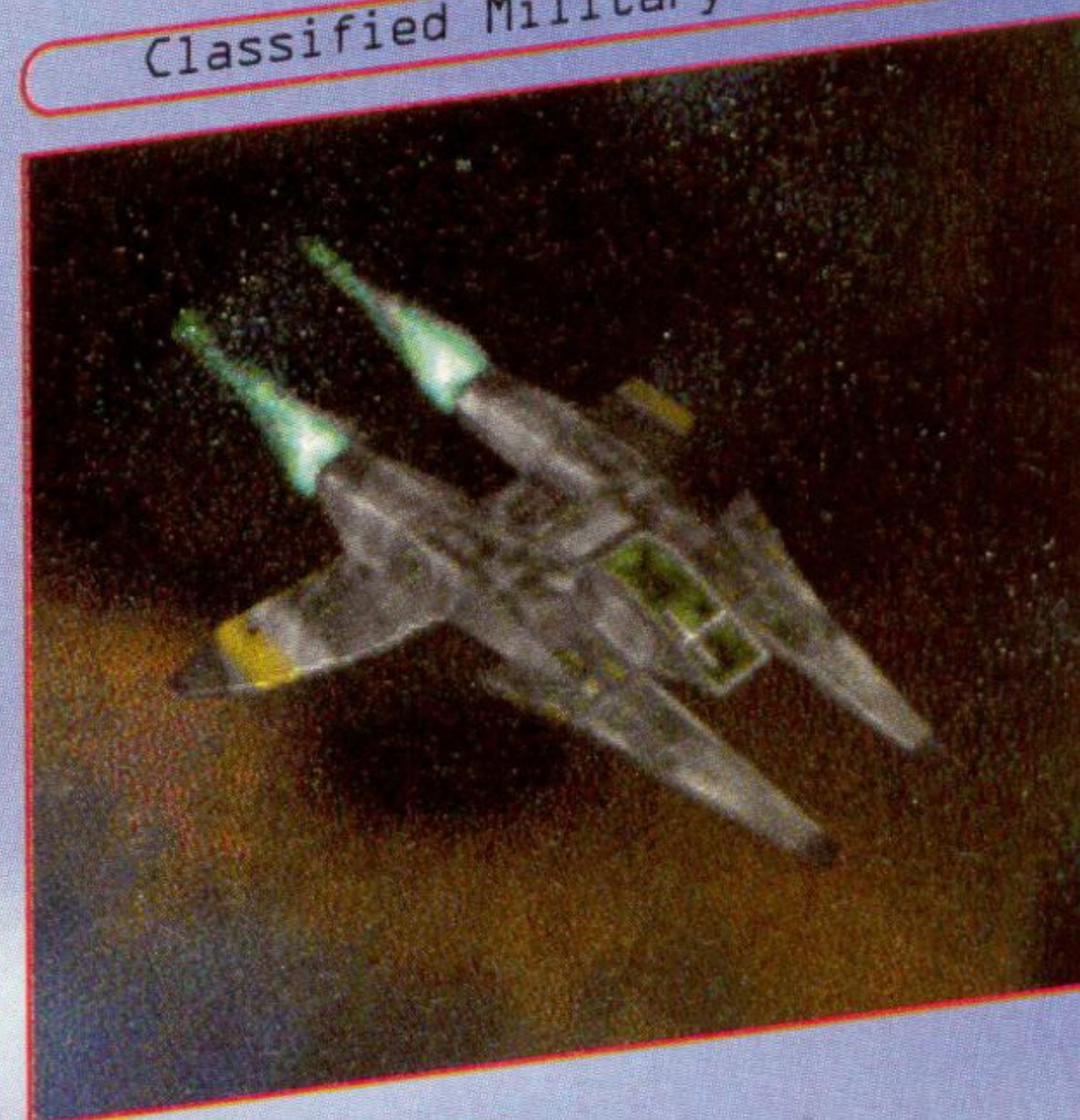
BULLETIN BOARD

CARGO SHIP	
Ilia Mk III	
COST PER TRIP	2,800
MAXSPEED	750/120
ARMOURMENT	1,400 CR
SHIELD RATING	7
ARMOUR RATING	10 WINGMAN
CAPACITY	1,500
BAYS	9
REWARD	2,500 CR
HIRE	7,800 CR

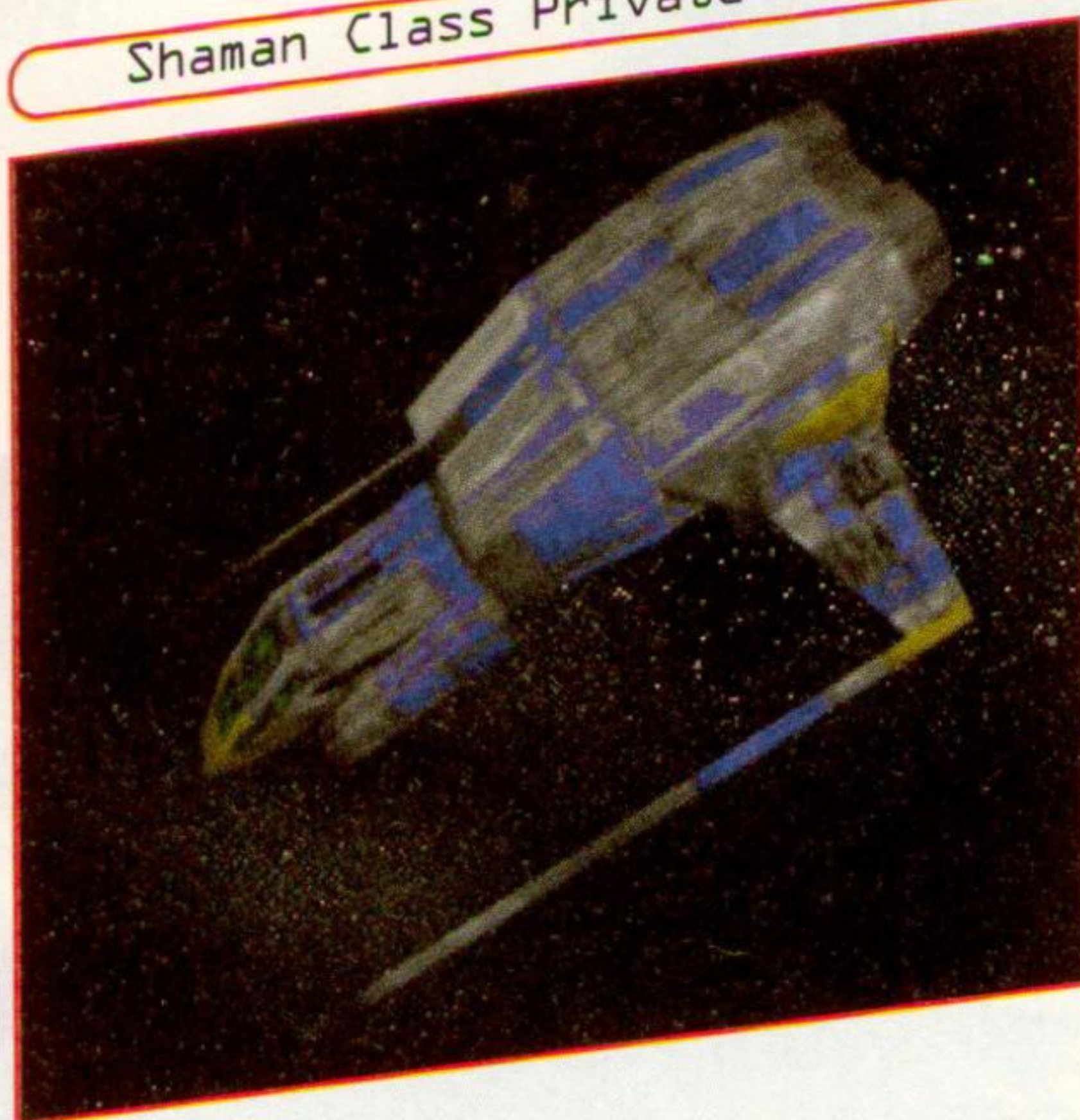
Ilia Class Cargo Ship



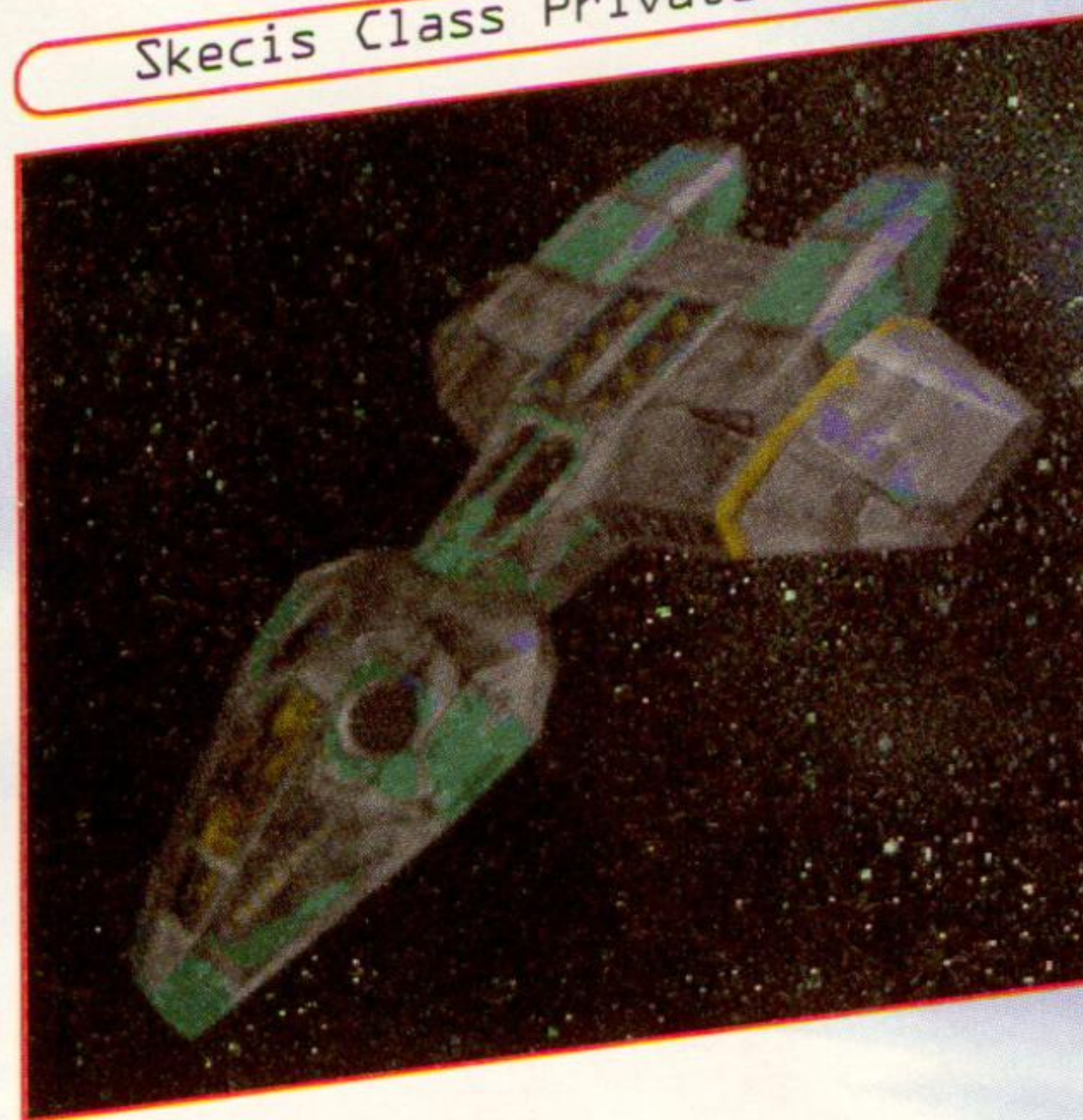
Classified Military Fighter



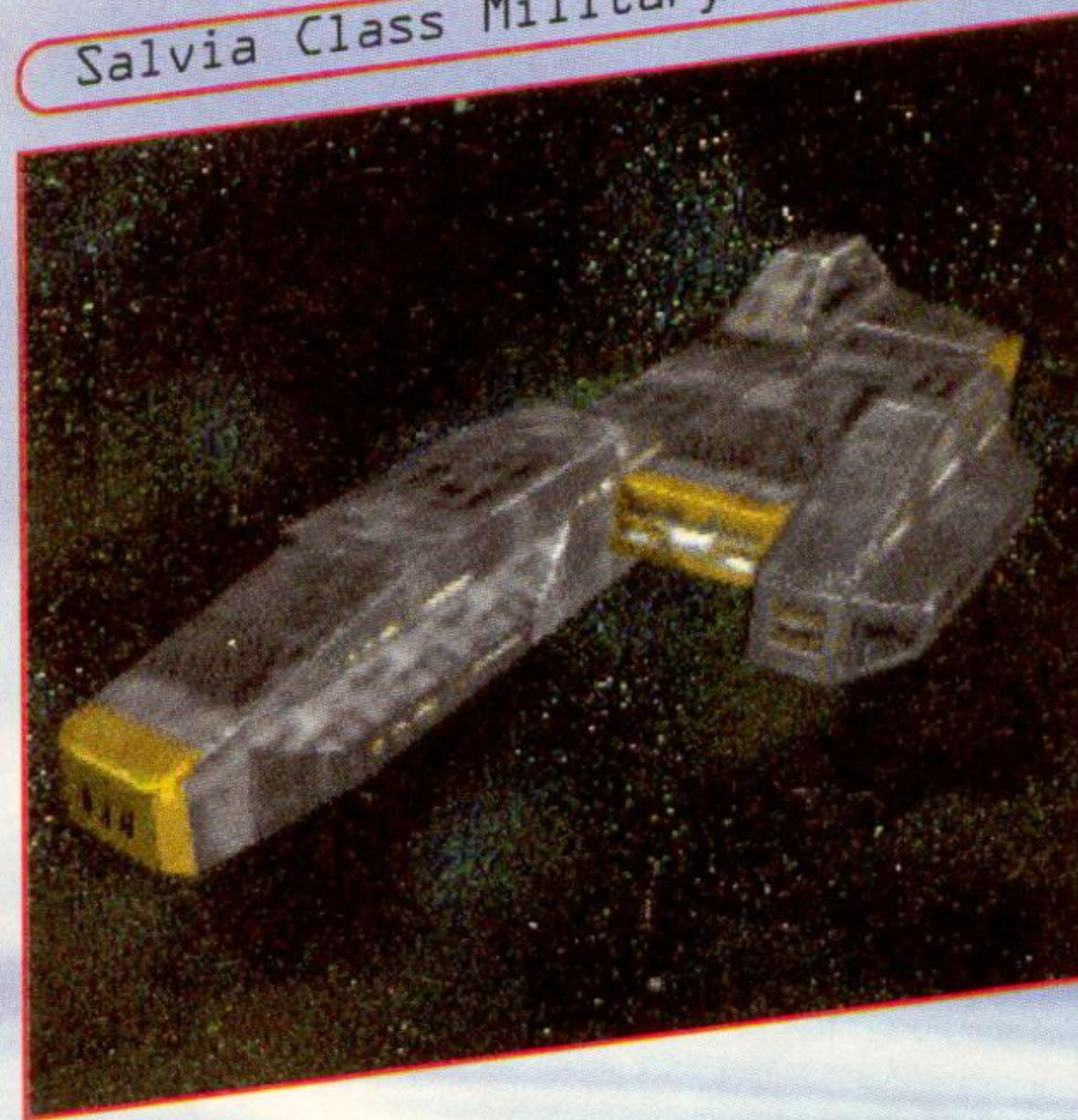
Shaman Class Private Vessel



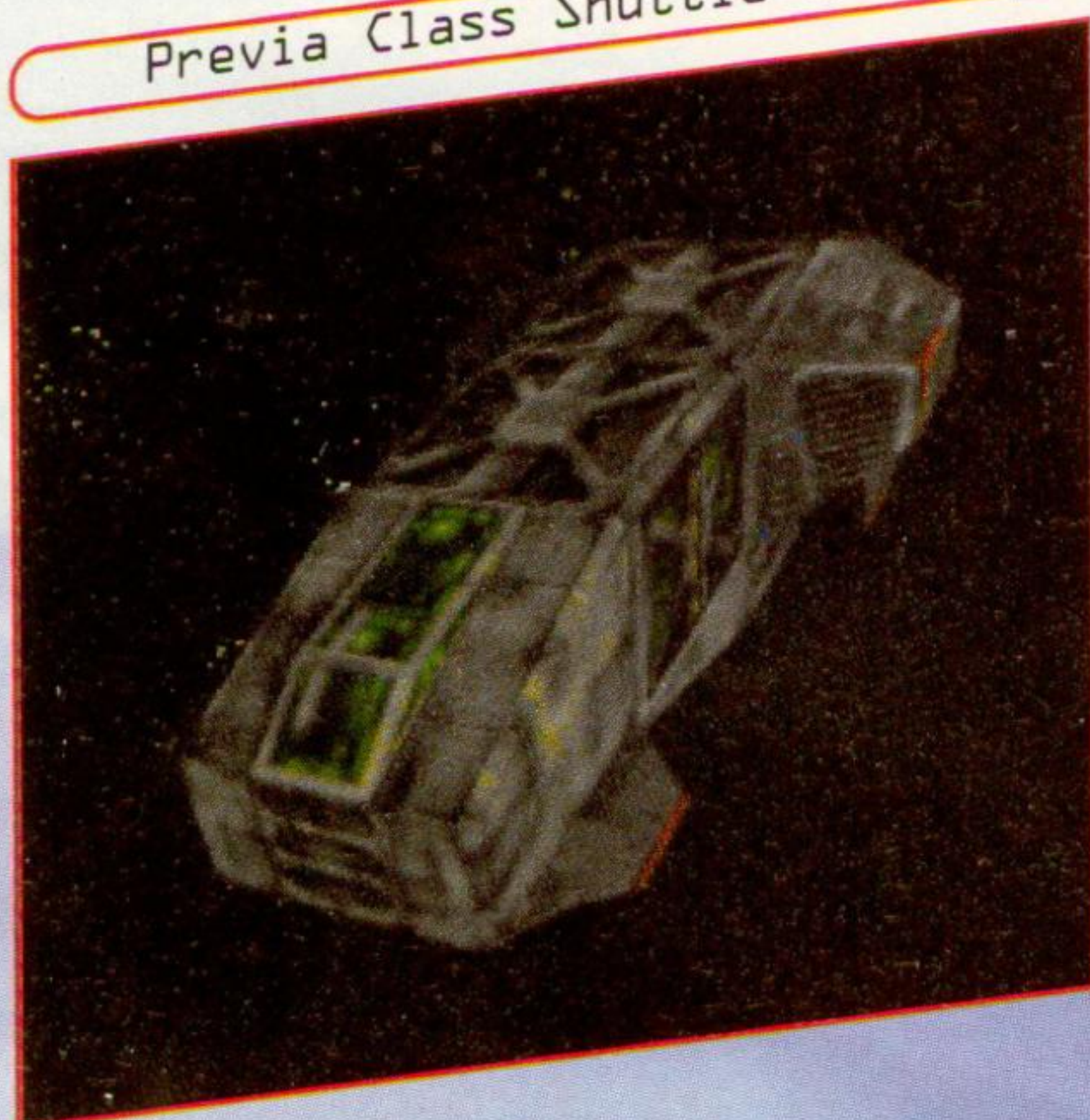
Skecis Class Private Vessel



Salvia Class Military Destroyer



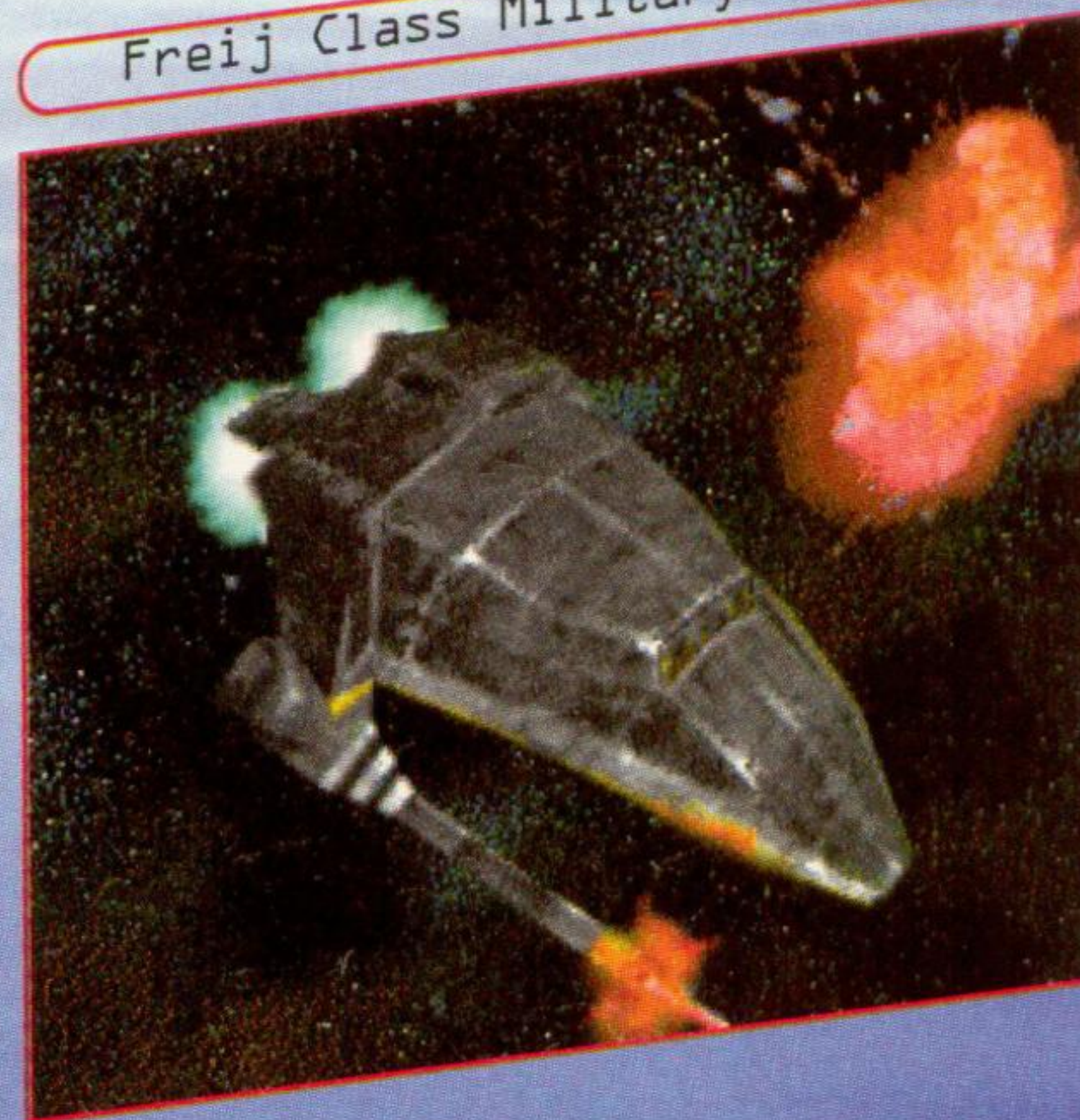
Previa Class Shuttle Craft



Faldari Class Military Fighter



Freij Class Military Fighter



PRIVATEER 2

THE DARKENING

Win! Win! Win!

A limited edition

The Darkening combat jacket

To celebrate the pending release of *Privateer 2: The Darkening*, Electronic Arts are giving away an absolutely super chick-pulling combat jacket. This is an official EA product promoting the game, and seeing as how it's limited edition, it's bound to become a coveted collectors' item within a couple of months. If you want to impress your friends by becoming the proud owner of the jacket in question, simply answer the three questions below, send your entry coupon in to us, and we'll stick your name in the bag for the big draw. One lucky winner will get the jacket and a copy of *The Darkening* (combined value £210 smackerones), and ten almost as lucky runners-up will get a copy of the game (which will retail at about £60) and our best wishes, or something.

1 The Darkening is:

- A. What happens when daytime turns into night-time
- B. A fab new game from Electronic Arts
- C. What happens when you stay out too long in the sun

2 Which of these actors does not make an appearance in *The Darkening*?

- A. Clive Owen
- B. John Hurt
- C. Norman Wisdom

3 The Darkening is the sequel to which game?

- A. Pong
- B. Privateer
- C. Monopoly

Send your entries to:

The Darkening Competition
PC Zone
CPZ610B
Customer Interface
Bradley Pavilions
Bradley Stoke North
Bristol BS12 0BQ

Please fill in the details below

Question 1: A ☐ B ☐ C ☐

Question 2: A ☐ B ☐ C ☐

Question 3: A ☐ B ☐ C ☐

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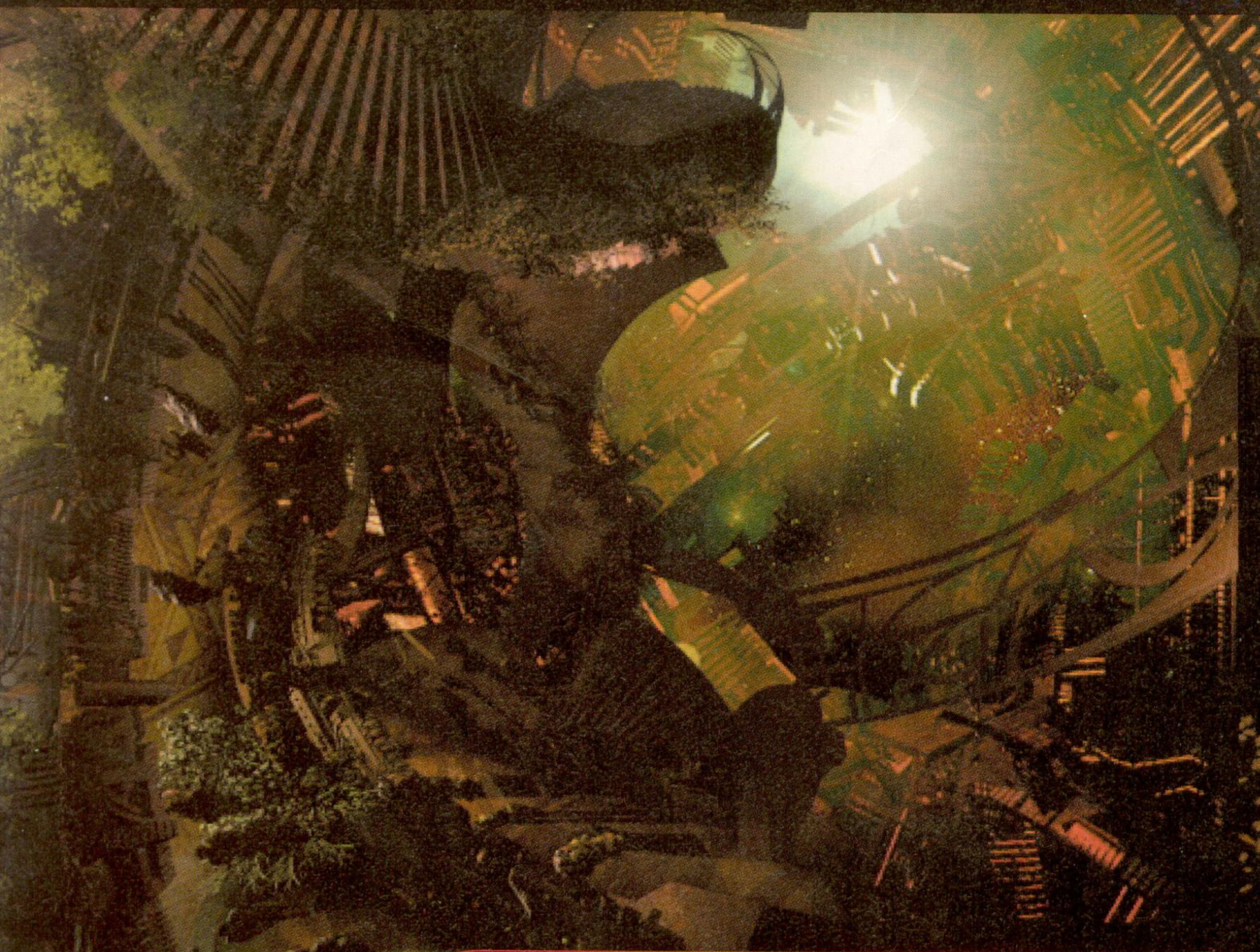
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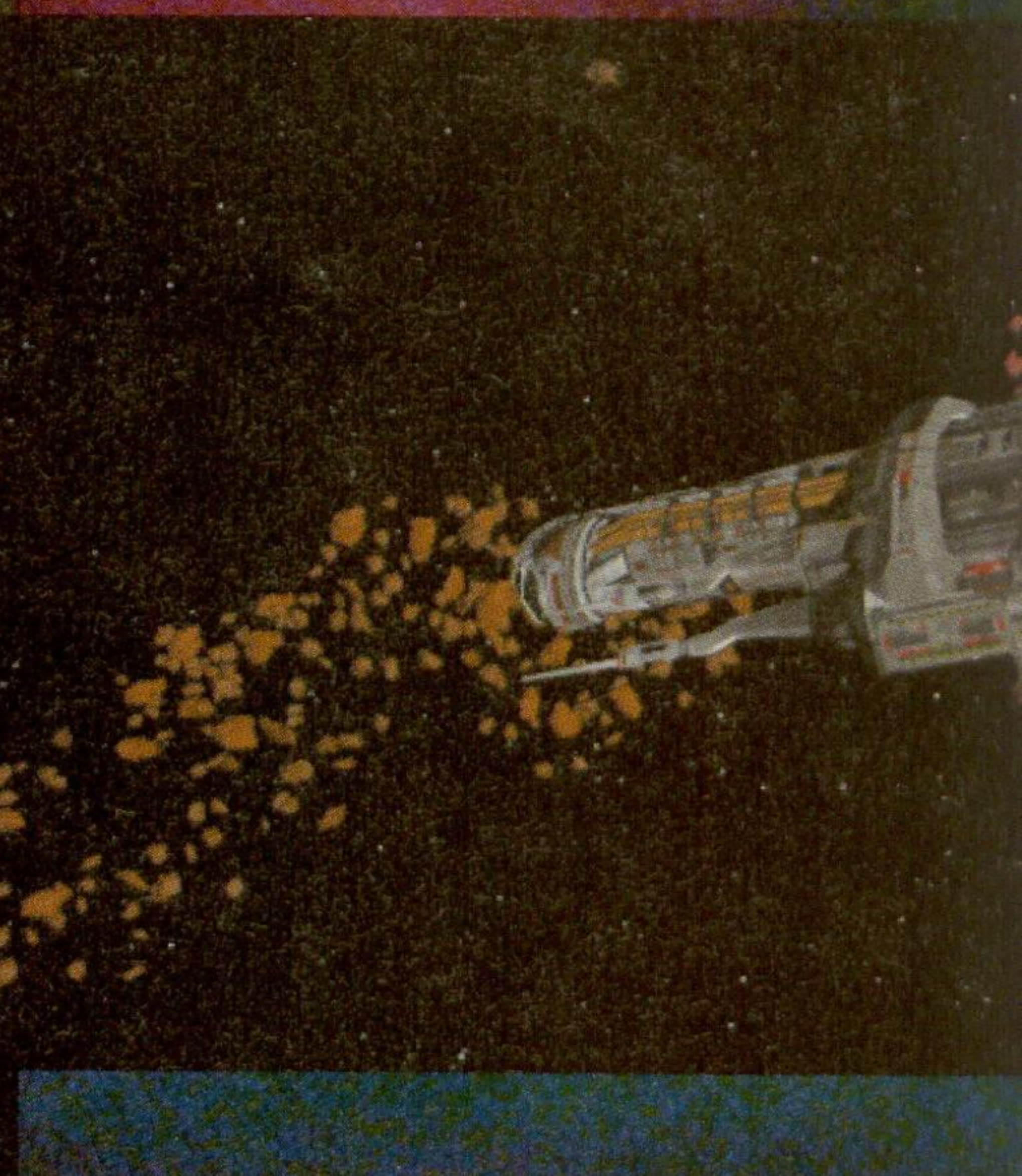
All correctly answered entries will be dumped into a bag and a winner will be chosen at random. Winners will be notified by post. Any entries received later than 30 September will be the subject of much abuse and derision. No cash alternative will be offered. No employees from either Dennis Publishing or Electronic Arts need bother entering as they will be completely ignored. Only one entry per household. No correspondence will be entered into and the Editor's decision is final on everything in the whole world. All usual bottom-covering restrictions apply. Submission of entry will be taken as acceptance of the rules.

CPZ610B



(Left) Ooh, that's pretty. It's a big rendered space station thing. Check out the space dudes strolling about inside.

(Below) Clive Owen takes a wrong turn and finds himself in asteroid central. Doh!



The Advent



(Above) Erin Roberts is the driving force behind *The Darkening*. It's all come out of his mind and straight onto your screens. So thank him!

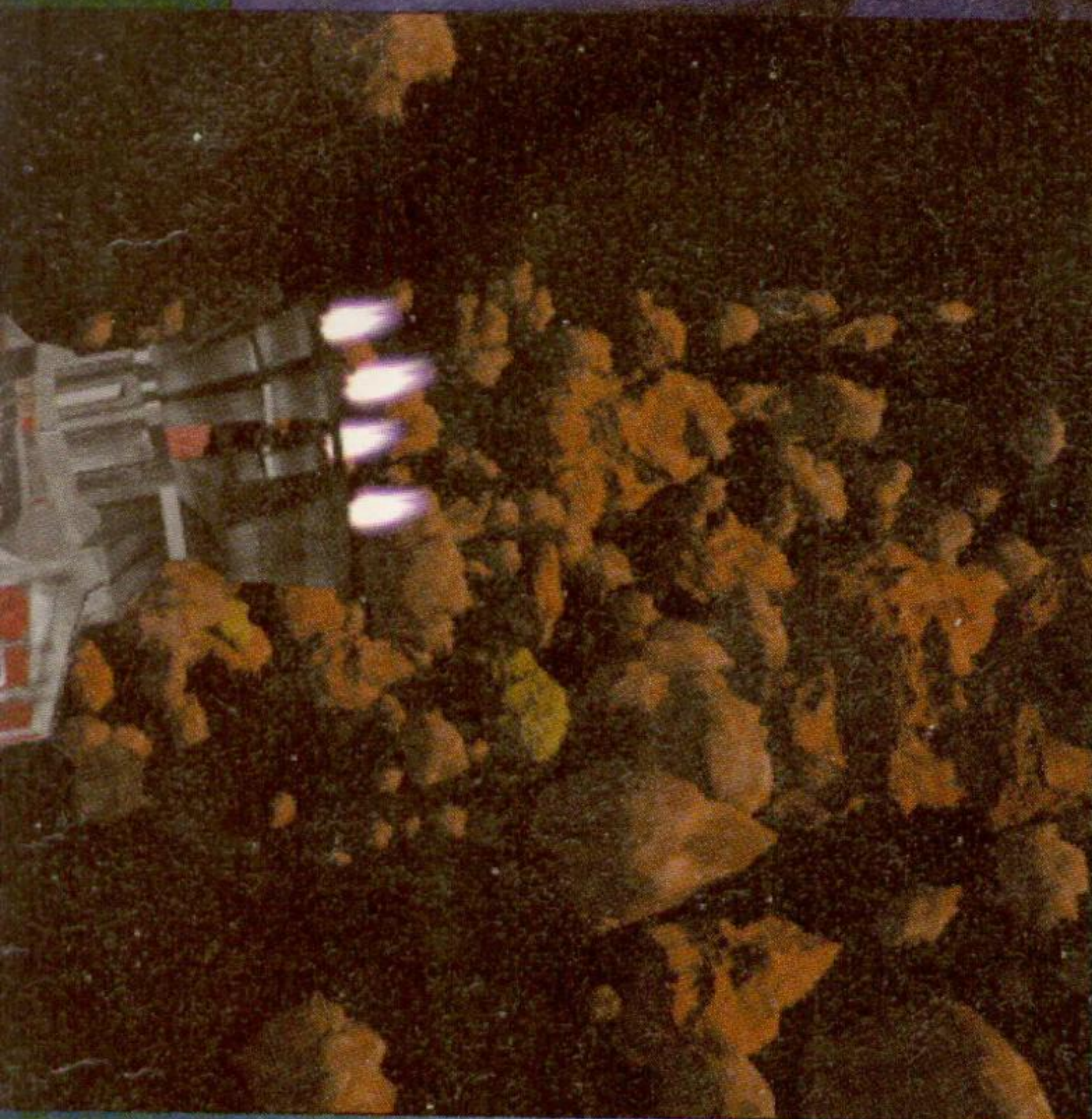
The *Darkening* promises to bring you the best of three different worlds: you've got the 'freeform' structure of the game itself (you can carry on trading, exploring and building up your status indefinitely), oodles and oodles of nerve-wracking space battles (ranging from simple attempts to fend off pirates, to all-out military assaults), and last but not least, a cinematic storyline to follow. It's this latter element that we're going to be looking at here. And who better to tell us all about it than head honcho Erin Roberts?

PC Zone: Without giving too much away, can you give us a brief outline of *The Darkening's* main plot?

Erin Roberts: Basically, the player is involved in a crash at the beginning of the game, which leaves him without any memory of his past. He is then abducted from the hospital where he is recovering. His abductors are killed, while he escapes alive. This leaves him with no knowledge of anything – except that someone wants him dead – and so he has to fend for himself until he discovers what's going on.



(Left and far left) It's time for another round of "Spot the Superstar". Can YOU find Mathilda May and Brian Blessed in either of these pictures?



ure Begins...

Armed only with his cyber note-taking equipment (well, okay pen and paper) our very own Charlie Brooker set off to find out exactly what we can look forward to from The Darkening's storyline...

PC Zone: The game features a 'multiple path' storyline. How flexible is this likely to be, and how many different 'endings' are there?

Erin Roberts: The main storyline, which is only a small part of the playing experience, is about the player attempting to rediscover who he is. This is not a compulsory storyline, however. If the player wants to go and do other things in the universe, then he can. There are many different characters which the player may, or may not, meet depending on what he does and where he goes – characters which have nothing to do with either the main plot or the player's past. Also, there are different branches in the main plot, but since the player is in search of his own identity, there is only one successful

ending – which is obviously when that search is over.

PC Zone: Are you anticipating players to be able to start the game over again, and by making different decisions, enjoy the game 'afresh', as it were?

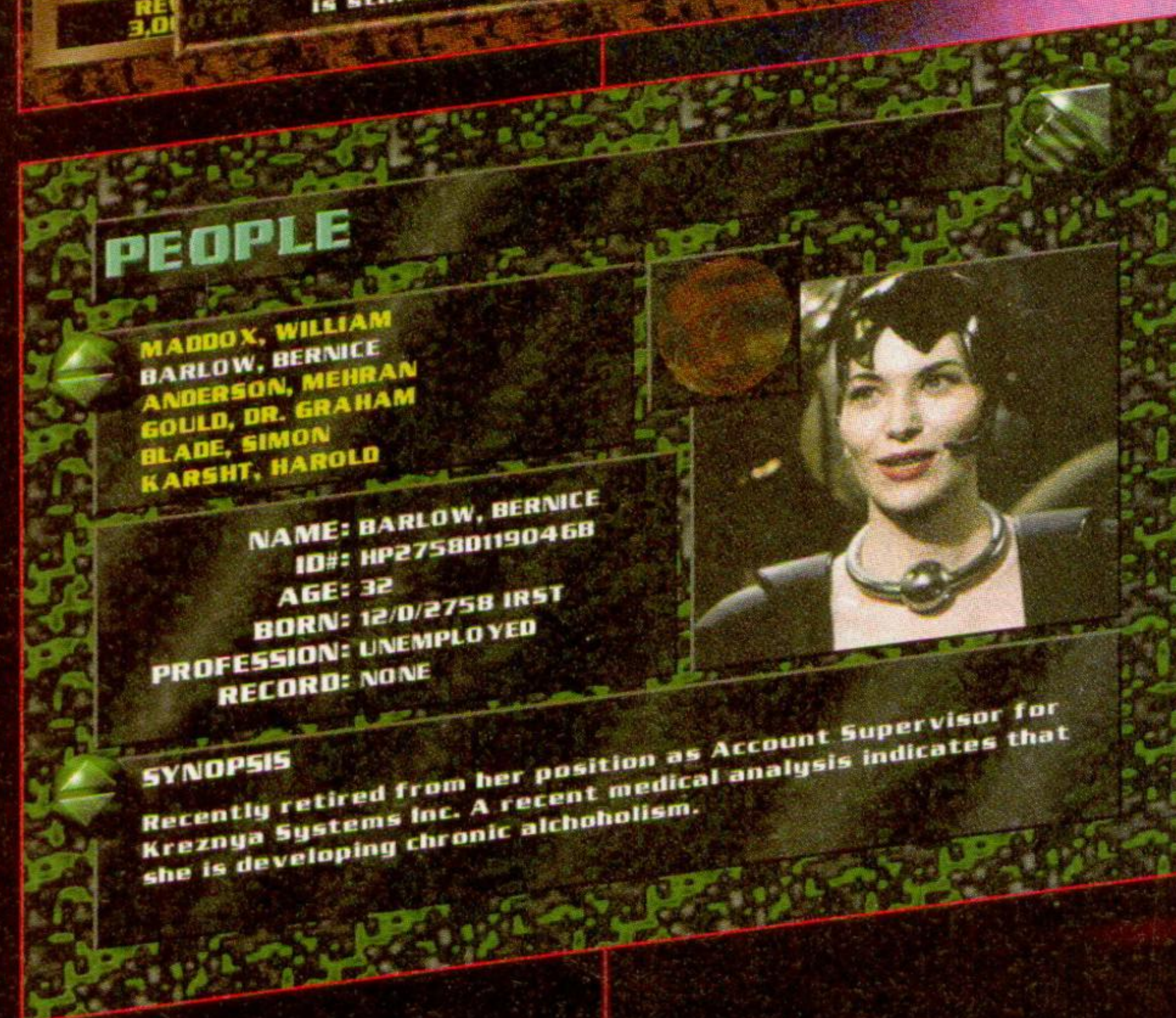
Erin Roberts: Definitely. When playing *The Darkening* there are many characters and sub-plots which a player will never see in one game experience because they weren't in the right place, or decided not to answer a distress call in space, etc etc. The player could build the best ship possible, with the best equipment, have explored the galaxy and discovered who he is, but may have missed out on 50 per cent of the other characters which are out there. I expect people to play the game

Space Age bachelor pad

Let's face it, with a game this big it could be all too easy to get a little confused now and then. There are so many planets, missions, trading routes, social classes and people floating about out there in the *Privateer* universe that attempting to remember every detail about every single one of them would probably cause your brain to swell up and explode. Nobody wants a thick gluey soup of cerebral matter pouring out of their ears (it absolutely ruins T-shirts, believe me), which is why Origin have seen fit to provide the player with a zippy little gizmo known as the P.A.D.

In case you're scratching your noggin and going 'duhhhh' like the incognizant elephantine oaf you are, let me explain: P.A.D. stands for 'Personal Access Directory'. It's a bit like a Psion Organizer really (except since it doesn't really exist, you don't have to worry about dropping it in a puddle or anything). Throughout the game, you'll access the P.A.D. whenever you want to send or receive e-mails, check out your status, save or load the game... or remind yourself just what the bloody hell you're doing. In fact, it's so handy, you don't even have to enter information into it yourself: whenever a character tells you something important, or you stumble across something new yourself, the relevant information is automatically stored in the P.A.D.'s bulging database, ready to be called up at any time. How utterly wonderful. I could do with one of them, just so I can remember the names and telephone numbers of all the air hostesses and supermodels I've slept with*.

* Er, okay then, this is a lie.



One stop info shop

Each time you land on a new planet, the first place you want to visit is the nearest available Information Booth. These act as handy 'all-in-one' centres, containing all the information you need to know about more or less everything. For starters, there's a 'bulletin board' where people offer ships for sale, and discuss missions they want you to undertake. You can also get the going rates on all the trading commodities – and buy and sell them accordingly. Furthermore, all the stuff you need to know about possible ship upgrades is here too. Think of it as a kind of public library-cum-marketplace-cum-discussion room, all in one easy-to-find location.

and have different experiences. For instance, there are a number of love interests which are set up for the player, which he may never meet. It's completely up to the player what he does and where he goes inside *The Darkening* universe.

PC Zone: How heavily does the storyline rely on knowledge of the *Privateer* universe? Will it satisfy newcomers and experienced *Privateer* players alike?

Erin Roberts: The storyline is set in an unknown part of the *Privateer* universe. Players will know nothing of the fiction within *The Darkening* until they start playing. The game itself provides all the information through the 'Booth' system. *The Darkening* should satisfy newcomers and experienced players alike, because it's a refreshing new story, but it also offers major improvements in technology and gameplay over the original title.

PC Zone: What kind of problems did you encounter while trying to develop a 'flexible' storyline? How does it differ from a linear story?

Erin Roberts: The biggest problem is creating a system which allows the player to do anything in what ever order he likes. Rather than being able to control the flow of the game by making the player go down a certain path, we had to make all the game elements flexible enough to handle the complete freedom of decision we give the player.

PC Zone: Is there a 'proper' route through the game, or is it possible to make mistakes en route and still succeed?

Erin Roberts: There is no proper route through the game – the player can go anywhere and do anything – but obviously, if he doesn't follow up the clues he's given, or fails to save the people who can give him the answers he needs, he will never find out who he is.

PC Zone: Are the adventuring elements more or less 'tacked on', or are they of equal importance as the combat sections?

Erin Roberts: The whole game has been written so that it all moulds together. No one element is more important than another. The live action footage is there to bring realism to the characters you meet, while the trading, mission and combat elements give the player the opportunity to show his prowess, make some money to upgrade his ship and weapons, pay his bills – and survive in a hostile universe.

PC Zone: How long do you reckon it'll take the average gamesplayer to play his or her way through the main adventure sections of the game?

Erin Roberts: Well, I reckon a gamesplayer will play *The Darkening* for at least 40 hours before getting to the end of the main plot – and that's assuming the player decides to follow that one route straight away. Anyway, there's loads more to do besides that...

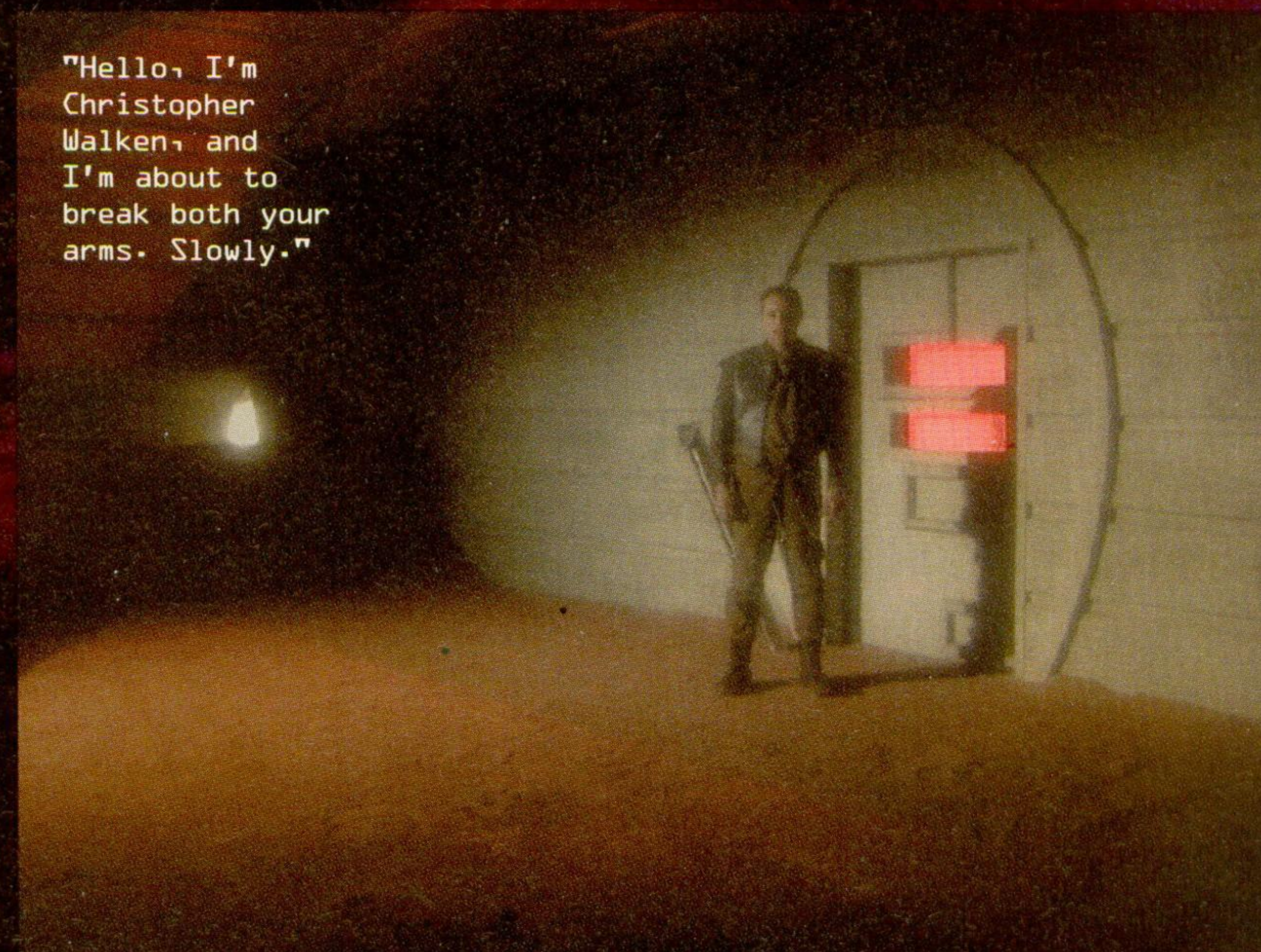
PC Zone: Time for a rather different question – let's talk about the actors. Assuming they fell out and had a fight, who do you reckon would win: Clive Owen or Christopher Walken?

Erin Roberts: Um... I can't really say. Neither of them struck me as being particularly 'hard'... that's tricky...

PC Zone: What if Clive had a pillow stuffed full of ball bearings, and Chris was armed with a bowie knife? And the fight took place in the back of a moving truck? Who would win then?

Erin Roberts: I honestly don't know. I'd like to say Chris Walken would win, but I think that Clive might come out on top, simply because of the age difference between them...

"Hello, I'm Christopher Walken, and I'm about to break both your arms. Slowly."

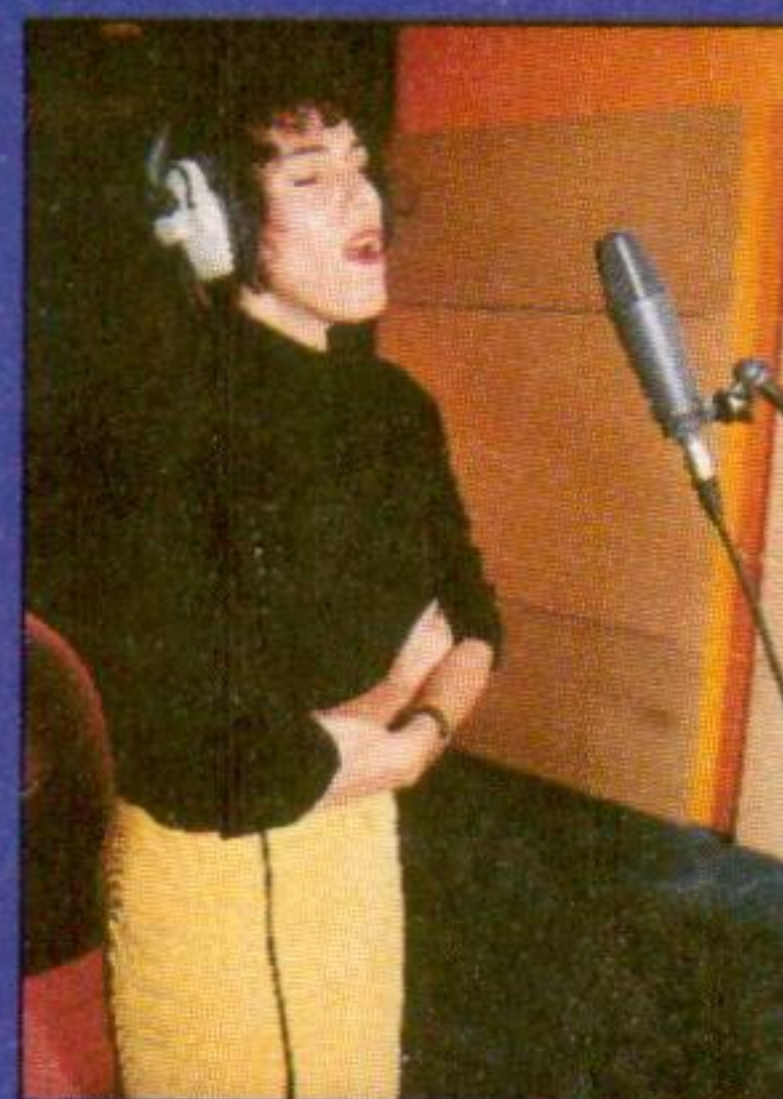


The importance of music and sound effects in games is often overlooked by the average punter, but just imagine how crap it would be if you found yourself suddenly switching from an eargasmic, movie quality soundtrack, complete with atmospheric orchestral score and surround sound effects, into a wibbly collection of bleeps and bleeps each time you entered the combat sections of *The Darkening*? It'd be really crap, wouldn't it?

Well, thanks to the sterling efforts of Chris Nicholls, audio producer, this is definitely something we won't encounter

with *The Darkening*. He's been steadily burning the midnight oil at the Electronic Arts recording studio, ensuring that the sound quality remains high throughout every segment of the game. When you consider that there's over three hours of movie music, a separate, action-reactive score for the combat sections and literally hundreds of miscellaneous spot effects, it soon becomes apparent that this particular aspect isn't an easy task.

The two main pieces of music that flow throughout the game have been written by different composers. First of all, Ray Shulman wrote the three-hour movie soundtrack – which can best be described as a kind of sonic clash between sweeping



(Above) Opera singer Nicole Tibbels hits the high notes.

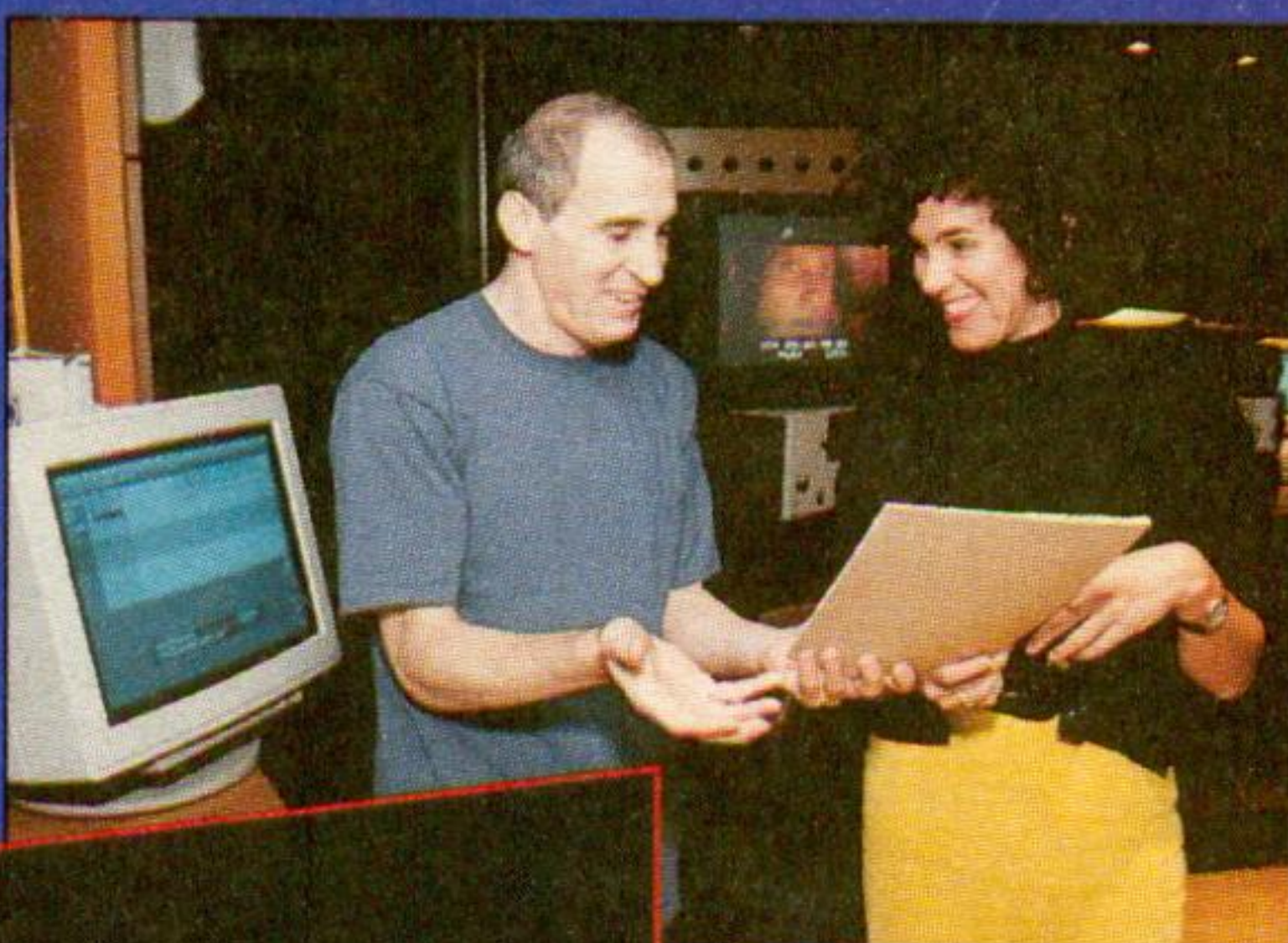
orchestral themes and Chemical Brothers-style industrial techno. The team wanted to emphasise the European origins of the game, and to this end they employed the services of, among others, opera singer Nicole Tibbels (whose larynx plays a starring role in the current British Airways ad campaign), and even a Turkish flute player (Danny Rubens). This is streamed from the CD during the video sequences.

Memory limitations mean that CD audio can't be used during the combat sections, which is where James Henigan comes in. He's written the adaptive MIDI score that forms the backdrop to all the 'shooty bits' – from ambient 'cruising' themes, through to knuckle-whitening battle crescendos.

Sound Sense



(Left and below) The team look pleased with the results of their knob twiddling marathon...



Out of their minds and into your ears... Charlie Brooker investigates The Darkening's music and sound effects.

(Right and below) Prepare to be won over by Dani Behr's sultry vocals.



Swirling sonic soup

Even when the action stops, there's still the music and sound effects. In order to trade or find out new mission objectives, you'll need to spend quite a bit of time on the interactive 'menu' style screens. Silence would be deathly dull, and an endless loop of background ambience would soon become irritating. Nick Laviers, audio programmer, has created a 'soundset' to take care of this – it's basically a set of different music and incidental sound effects which are played in a logical, yet continually shifting sequence. All the spot effects were equally important. Aside from a multitude of zaps, bangs and thundering crashes, there's also a large amount of 'radio chatter' going on in the cockpit – not forgetting the voice of the ship itself. Dani Behr spent a day at the recording studios laying down suitably sultry vocals – so if you find yourself suddenly taking something of a fancy to your own ship's computer, you'll know why.

The overall idea is to mould all the various elements together so the player won't notice any jarring sonic gaps as he makes his way through the diverse strands of the game. The end product should deliver a totally immersive experience, and by the sound of things, it pulls it off extremely well, thank you very much.



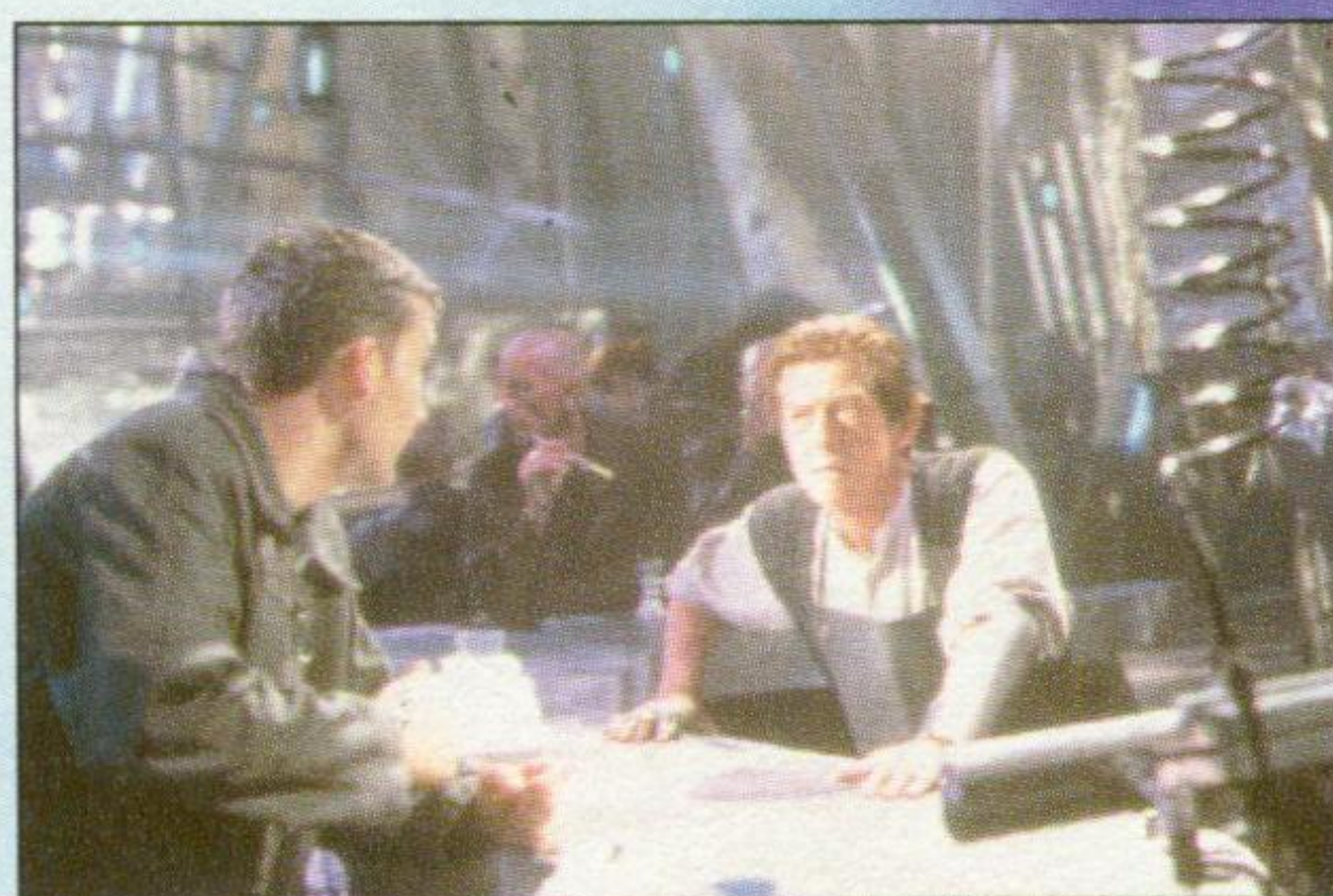
Lights, camera,
action - get
your cheque
book out!

Movies - Games

Games featuring glorious graphics and FMV are all very well, but Jeremy Wells poses the question – is FMV VFM?

Unlike just about every other PC game that's dared to incorporate FMV (Full Motion Video), *Privateer 2: The Darkening* is the first to use 'real' sets as opposed to flat rendered backgrounds (apart from *Wing Commander IV*, which was filmed after *The Darkening* but released earlier). As a result, the cast can actually interact with the set, walk around, sit down on 'real' chairs and even slam the door shut instead of having to contend with pretend props and bluescreen renderings that don't actually exist. Apart from making it a lot easier for the actors (let's face it, it can't be easy trying to avoid walking into a table that doesn't really exist), and looking a lot more realistic (it is, after all, 'real') it means that the whole thing is a lot more interactive – a quality that's not usually associated with games that use FMV. Just have another look at *Phantasmaboria* if you need convincing.

It also means that the filmy bits actually look like a real movie and not something that was filmed in a programmer's garage.



Because all the action takes place on a 'real' set and not a bluescreen, it means that the director has a lot more freedom to set up his shots, incorporate different lighting effects and make use of many established filming techniques, such as panning and dolly shots. This not only makes the FMV look substantially more attractive, but helps introduce tension, pace and fluidity to the game.

And it won't all be in vain. Because the developers have spent absolutely ages and ages working on new video compression software, the FMV will look brilliant on screen (we're talking VHS quality here) and there'll be loads of it. In fact, the new video compression software is so good that they can now squeeze all of the game, including around three hours or so of FMV, onto just four CDs (using the same video compression utilised in *Wing Commander IV* would have meant the game spanning at least six discs), so that means less chopping and changing.

So why go to all the fuss of building sets, tearing them down again, building more sets, paying a massive film crew to set it all up, bringing in loads of actors, extras, special effects people, make-up artists and the like, when you could quite easily go the more conservative route of sprites, bitmaps and renderings?

Adam Medhurst, Creative Design Co-ordinator explains: "*The Darkening* represents the beginning of a new evolution in home entertainment. We're approaching the stage when medium is of no relevance and we aim to be the first company to produce a product that is recognisably the next step in interactive entertainment."

And when you're doing anything that's cutting edge, it's going to cost money. So far, *Privateer 2: The Darkening* has just about exceeded its budget of \$5 million, and it's not quite finished. Around three quarters of that budget (in other words, well over \$3.5 million) was spent on producing the FMV parts of the game. That might sound like a lot of money (it is) especially in gaming terms, but in film land, it's comparative peanuts. However, when you consider where your money is going, it soon starts to disappear very quickly. First of all there's the cast (not just their fees, but the expense of flying them in from LA on Concorde among other things), then there's the crew, the set designers, studio hire, camera hire (*The Darkening* was filmed on both Digital Beta and 16mm film), special effects people, make-up artists, costume designers, set builders, stunt men etc etc – the list is endless. And so is the payroll.

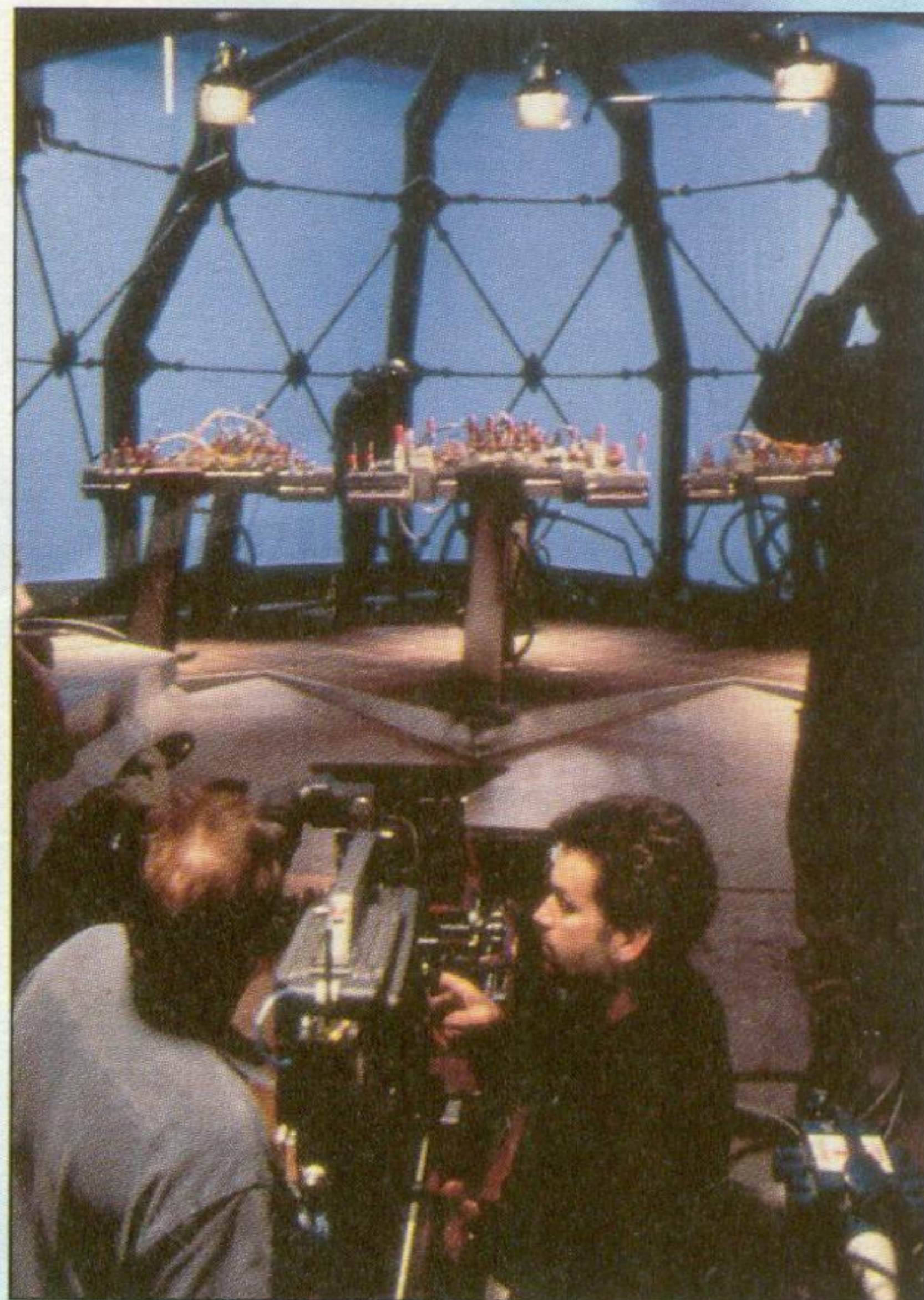
So just where does all the money go? Well, let's take an average day of filming (bearing in mind that *The Darkening* took around 40-odd days to shoot) and look at what's involved in terms of time and expense.

A day in the life

...The sun has only just stretched its glorious rays over leafy Pinewood and already the set builders have been hard at it in Studio Four for a couple of hours finishing off the set (cha-ching!).



(Left) "You're so talented, I've always wanted to work with you!" Chris Walken tells his new chum.



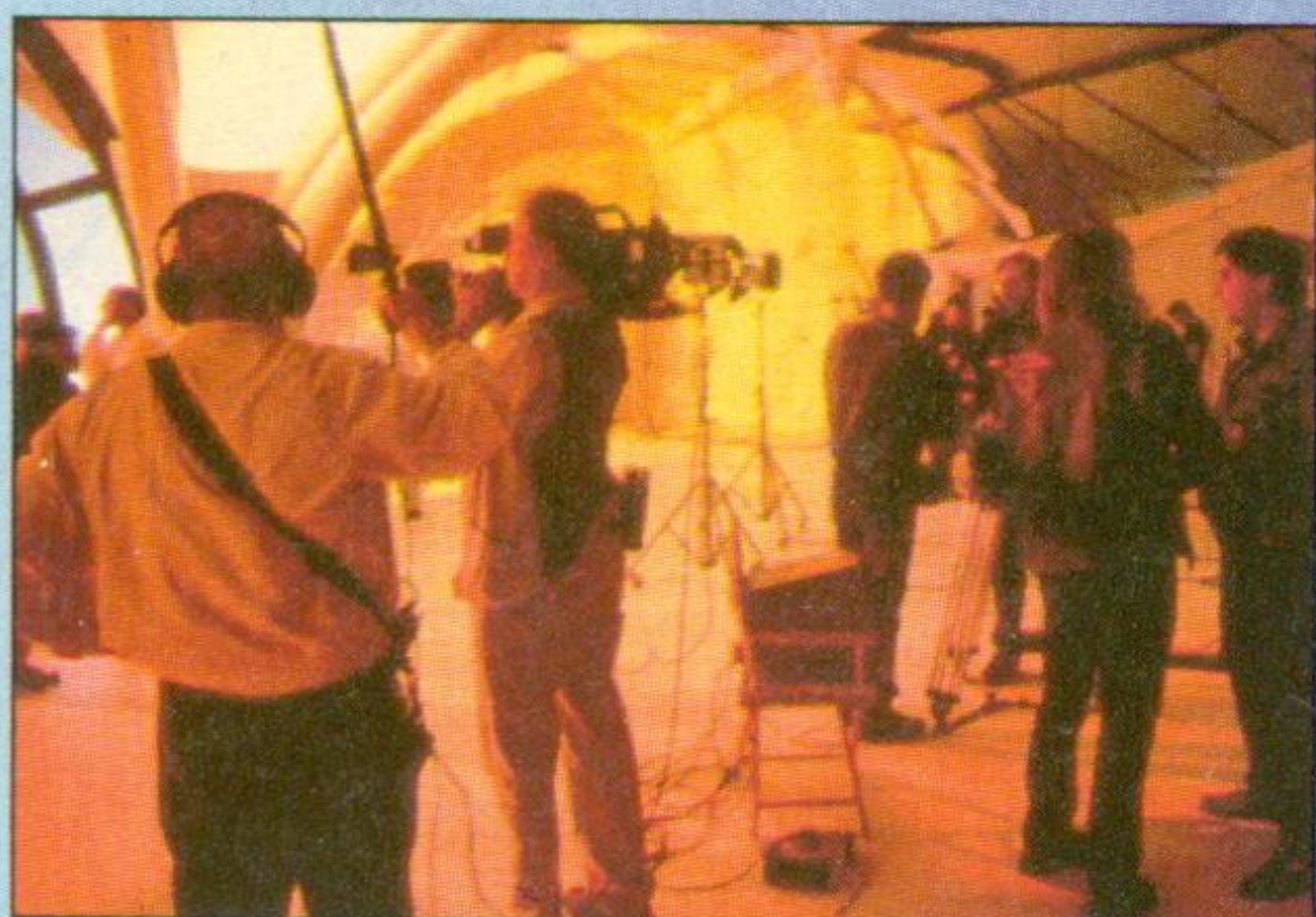
& Video

In Studio Three, the set decorators are just finishing painting the walls while the set dressers mess around with props and the lighting guys dance about the rigging changing the gels ready for the day's filming (cha-ching!). In Studio Five yet more set builders are tearing down the 'hospital' set and making room for the 'bar' one which they'll be rehearsing and then filming in tomorrow (cha-ching!). In other words it's all go.

Elsewhere, some of the cast are busy getting into costume and make-up ready for filming (cha-ching!). Just outside Studio Three the crew are sitting down to an early (and very welcome) breakfast of bacon, eggs and a large mug of tea, all laid on by the on-sight caterers (cha-ching!). The Origin cheque book has already taken a pretty serious bashing and we haven't even started filming yet!

In Studio Two they've already started shooting one of the spaceship crash scenes. David McCallum is rigged up to a complicated pulley system and six burly looking blokes are clutching the rope at the other end, tug-o-war style. The director screams for total silence and everyone holds their breath.

BANG! WHOOSH! The six blokes holding the rope tear across the studio and David McCallum flies into the air, landing a few seconds later in a heap on the floor.



(Left) The crew prepare for re-take number four zillion and ninety-six!

Set piece

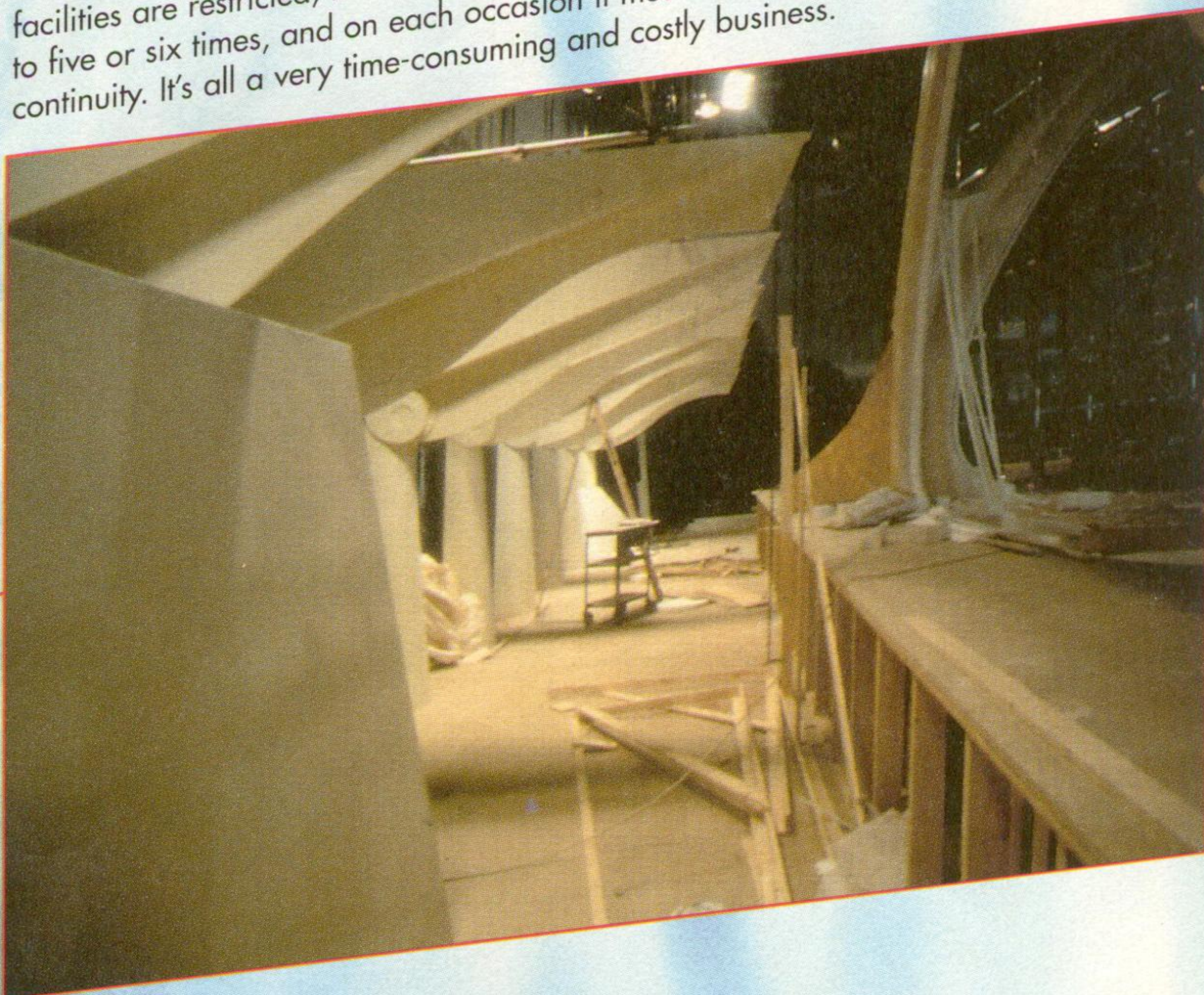
The Darkening uses real sets which have to be designed, built and then pulled down again, as well as loads of rendered sets 'built' by computer.

The first task facing the set designer is to sit down and have a chat with the producer and director to define exactly what they want to see on camera. Next, some sketches are put together and set builders are consulted to see whether it's viable. Just to make sure, little balsa and paper model sets are made and lighting and shots are planned.

Once it gets the nod, the set builders start building the set using masses of timber, foamy stuff that sets hard like plastic and lots and lots of scaffolding. Very careful consideration is also given as to what shots are going to be filmed even at this early stage so that no time is wasted building parts of the set that won't be seen on camera.

Once the shape and structure of the set is in place, set decorators swarm onto it to paint and dress it. Riggers also set up the lighting and start to plan where explosions or other special effects might be used.

As soon as shooting is finished, photographers take piccies of the set for future reference and it's then torn down to make way for the next. Because space and facilities are restricted, the same set may have to be re-constructed and demolished up to five or six times, and on each occasion it must look exactly the same for the sake of continuity. It's all a very time-consuming and costly business.



► Debris and smoke fill the set. The director screams "CUT!" and a flurry of make-up and costume people dash, coughing, through the smoke to swiftly patch up Mr McCallum's face and intergalactic apparel. The rest of the crew stare expectantly at the director, who just shakes his head. Shoulders slump and the crew automatically begin to set up the shot once again with an air robotic precision which, if you didn't know better, could easily be mistaken for abject boredom. David McCallum pulls himself to his feet and prepares himself for another re-take. *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* was a very long time ago.

Approximately one hour later they are still shooting the same scene. Incredibly, once it's been edited and re-edited this small part of footage will last for no longer than a few seconds in the final game. It's already taken a whole morning to get this far and time is running out. Tension is understandably high and everyone's keen to move onto the next scene.

So why go to so much fuss and expense? Erin Roberts, game designer, head honcho and bloke in charge explains: "We've got less of a budget than we had for *Wing Commander IV* so we've deliberately tried



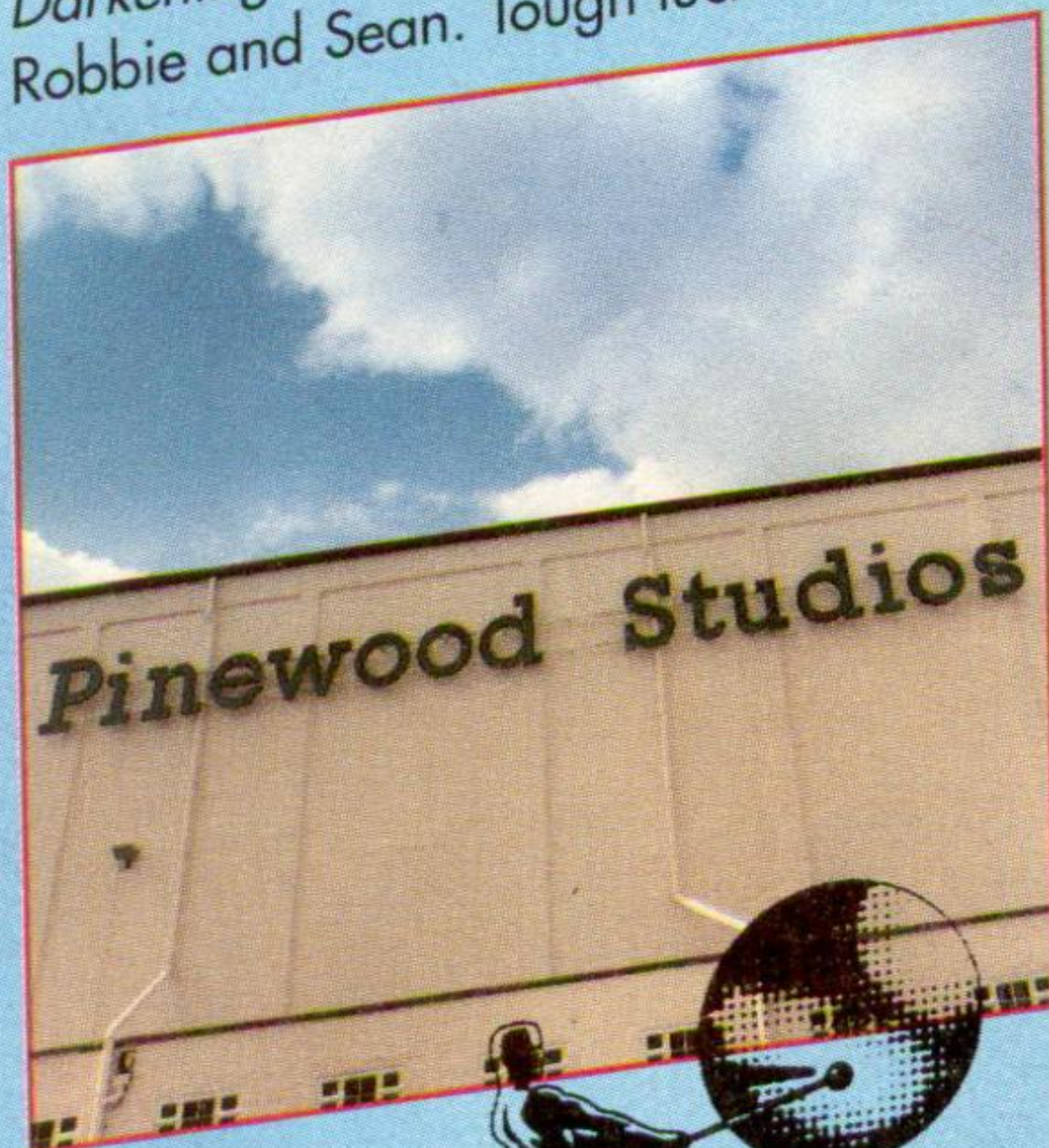
(Left)
Every shot
is thoroughly
planned and
rehearsed
before
shooting
begins.

to make *The Darkening* look a lot darker and dirtier, but we still want it to look realistic. That's why we've spent so much time and so much money making all the FMV footage look right. Having said that, we're not making a movie here, we're making a game that uses FMV and tells a story. I still believe that no one's used FMV properly yet – in the past it's been overused and has ended up taking over the game. I want to use it because I think that it's the best medium for this type of game. Okay, so it takes a lot of time and a lot of money, but in the end it'll be well worth it. *Privateer 2: The Darkening* will be one of the most compelling games ever developed. Trust me. I'm not going through all this, every day, for nothing."

Pinewood Studios - the home of British Film

Pinewood Studios is undisputedly the hallowed home of the British Film industry. All the *Carry On* films, nearly all of the *James Bond* movies and just about every major British celluloid spectacular you've ever seen or read about was filmed at Pinewood. Most recently Pinewood played host to the summer 'blockbuster' *Mission: Impossible*, which was actually filmed at the same time as *The Darkening* last year.

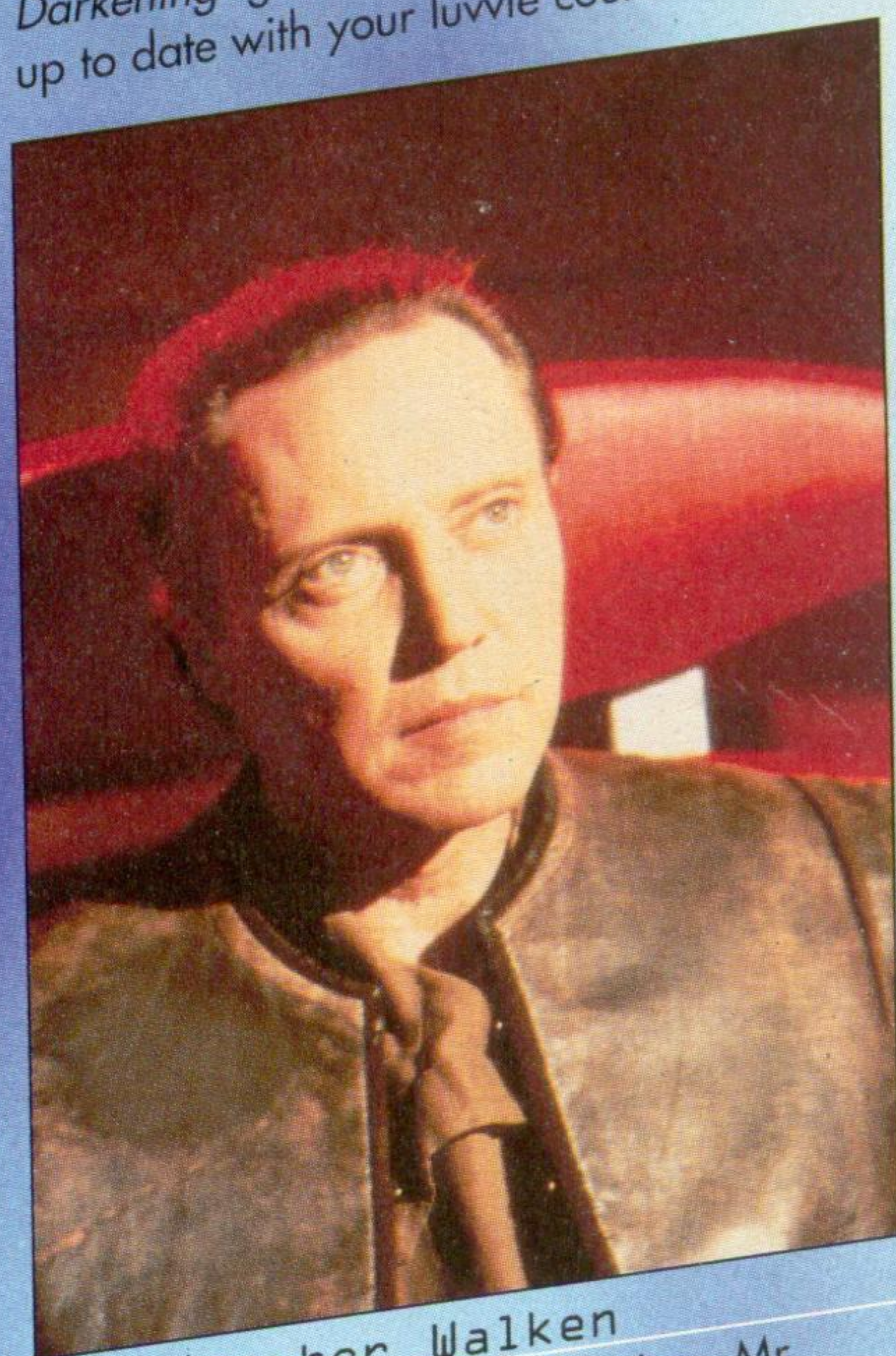
So why Pinewood? Well, apart from it being just about the only working studio left in Britain, it's got some of the largest studios this side of the Atlantic. The *Superman* movies were all filmed here because it's one of the only facilities to have a long and thin studio that enables the crew to shoot *Superman* flying through the air in one long take. Also, Britain still has something of a reputation for having the best crews, set builders and special effects people money can hire. As a result, it's one of the busiest (and most expensive) studios in the world, with producers, directors and the stars themselves all battling it out to jump the queue and shoot in the massive 'James Bond 007 Studio'. Ironically, the latest Bond flick *Golden Eye* wasn't filmed at Pinewood because the 007 studio (along with two others) was being used to film *Mission: Impossible*. Sadly, they just didn't have enough room to accommodate Pierce, Robbie and Sean. Tough luck fellas.



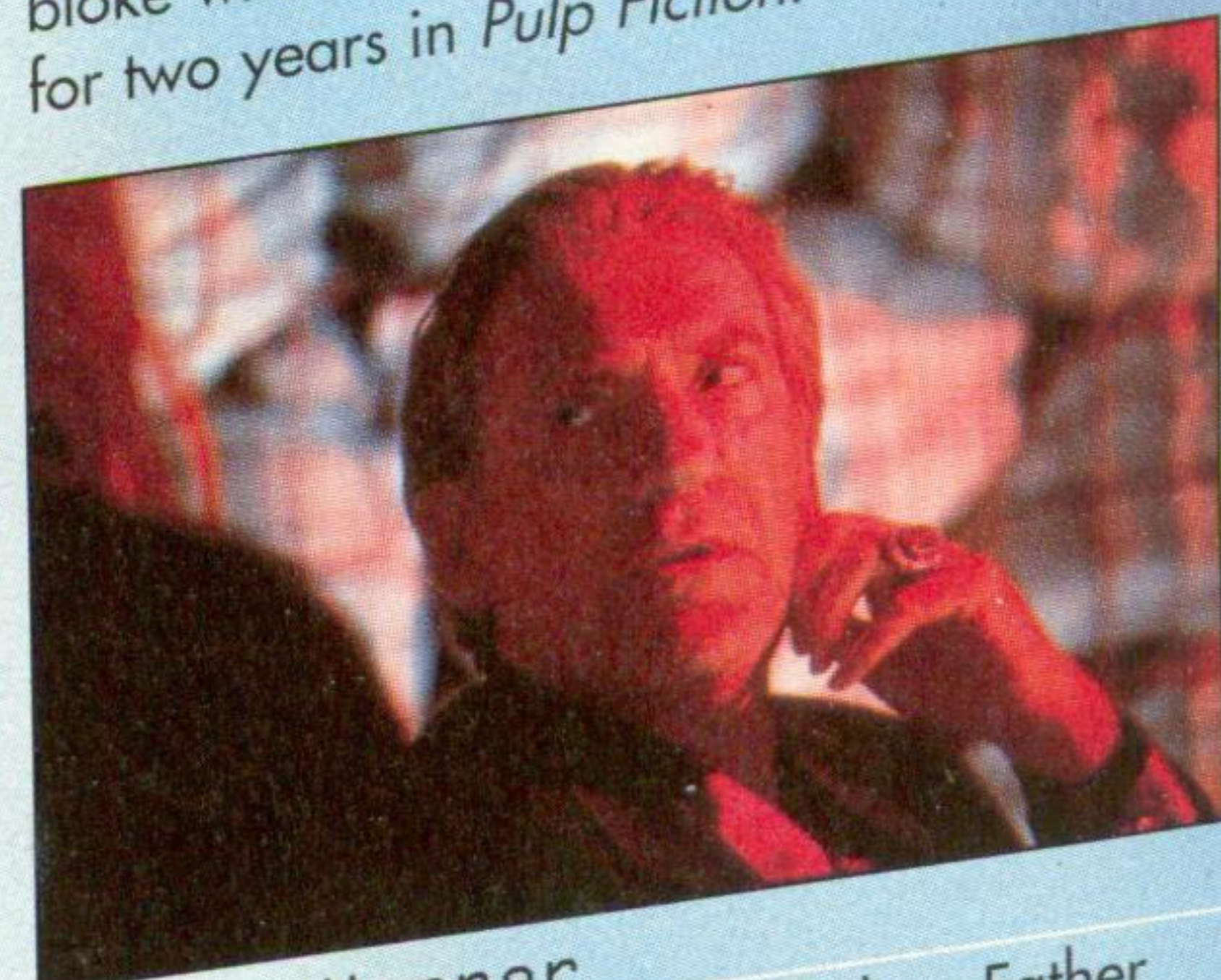
The Luvvies Guide

The Darkening is what one might call 'star studded', and when you play it you'll constantly be saying things like "'Ere, that's him from whaddaya call it – *Rising Damp!*" and "That's that bloke off *The Bill* who was also in *Frost*" and "That's her who used to be in *Brookside!*"

To give you a helping hand with your star spotting, we've compiled this special 'Famous Actors Who Appear In *The Darkening*' guide to help keep you bang up to date with your luvvie count.



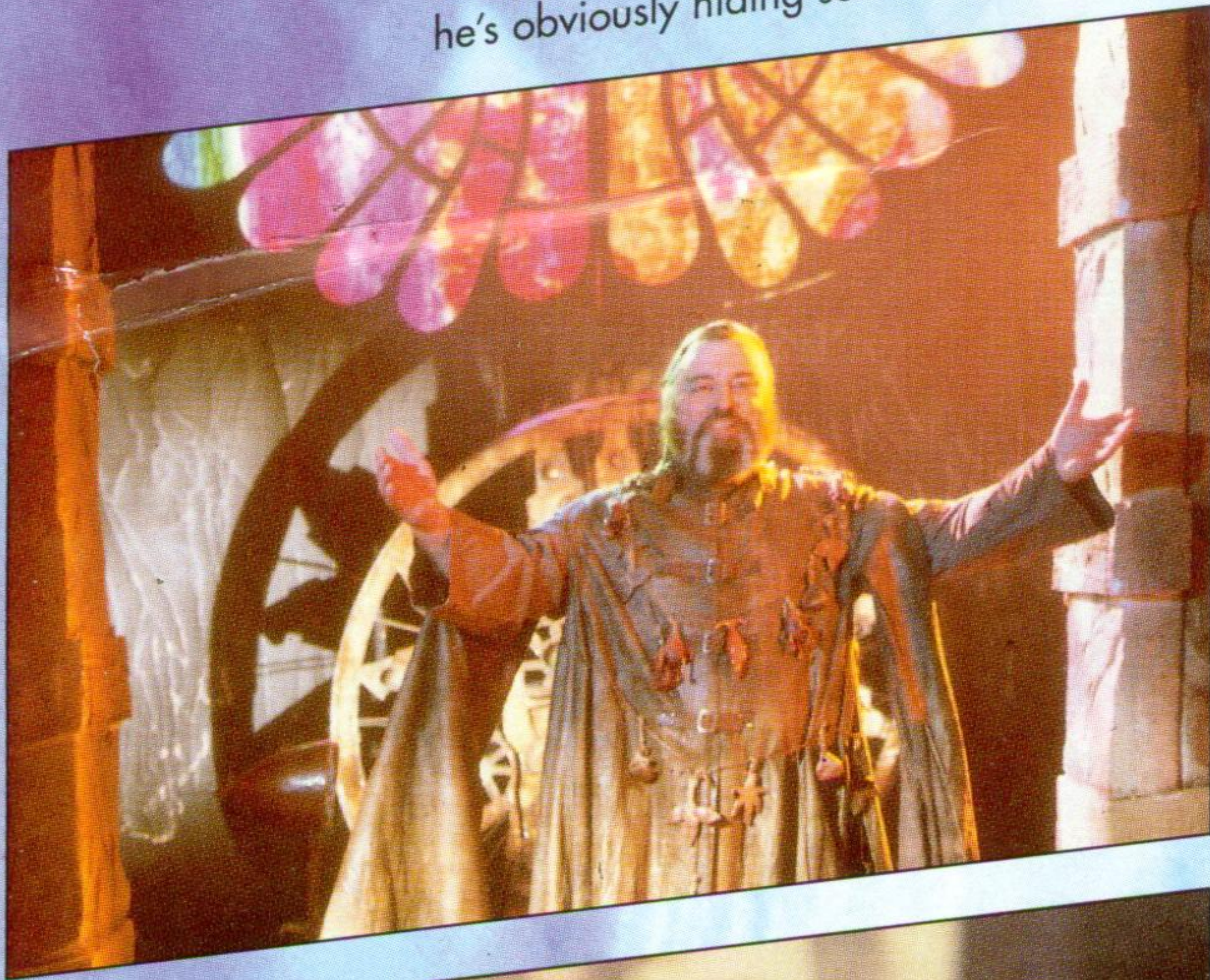
Christopher Walken
Truly a legend in his own life-time, Mr Walken is an Academy Award Winner whose film credits read just like Bazza Norman's favourite video collection: *The Deer Hunter*, *Annie Hall*, *True Romance*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Wayne's World 2*, *A View To A Kill*, *The Dogs Of War* – the list is endless. Don't expect Chrissy boy to play a nice character in *The Darkening*, so treat him with extreme caution when you meet him in the game. Remember, this is the bloke who wore a wrist watch up his arse for two years in *Pulp Fiction*.



David Warner
This man has more presence than Father Christmas, and successfully acts everyone off the screen in *The Darkening*. His film credits include *Time Bandits*, where he played a very scary man indeed, and other films that required a dark and nasty villain type. It's probably a good idea to do exactly what he says in the game, or you'll end up dead.

Brian Blessed

Laugh-a-lot Brian likes to swear a lot on set and play with his massive beard when he's not saying things like "Gordon's alive!". As well as starring in *Flash Gordon* he's appeared in *Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Sweeney*, *Boon*, *Blackadder*, *Minder* and *Lovejoy*. Never trust a man with a beard, he's obviously hiding something.



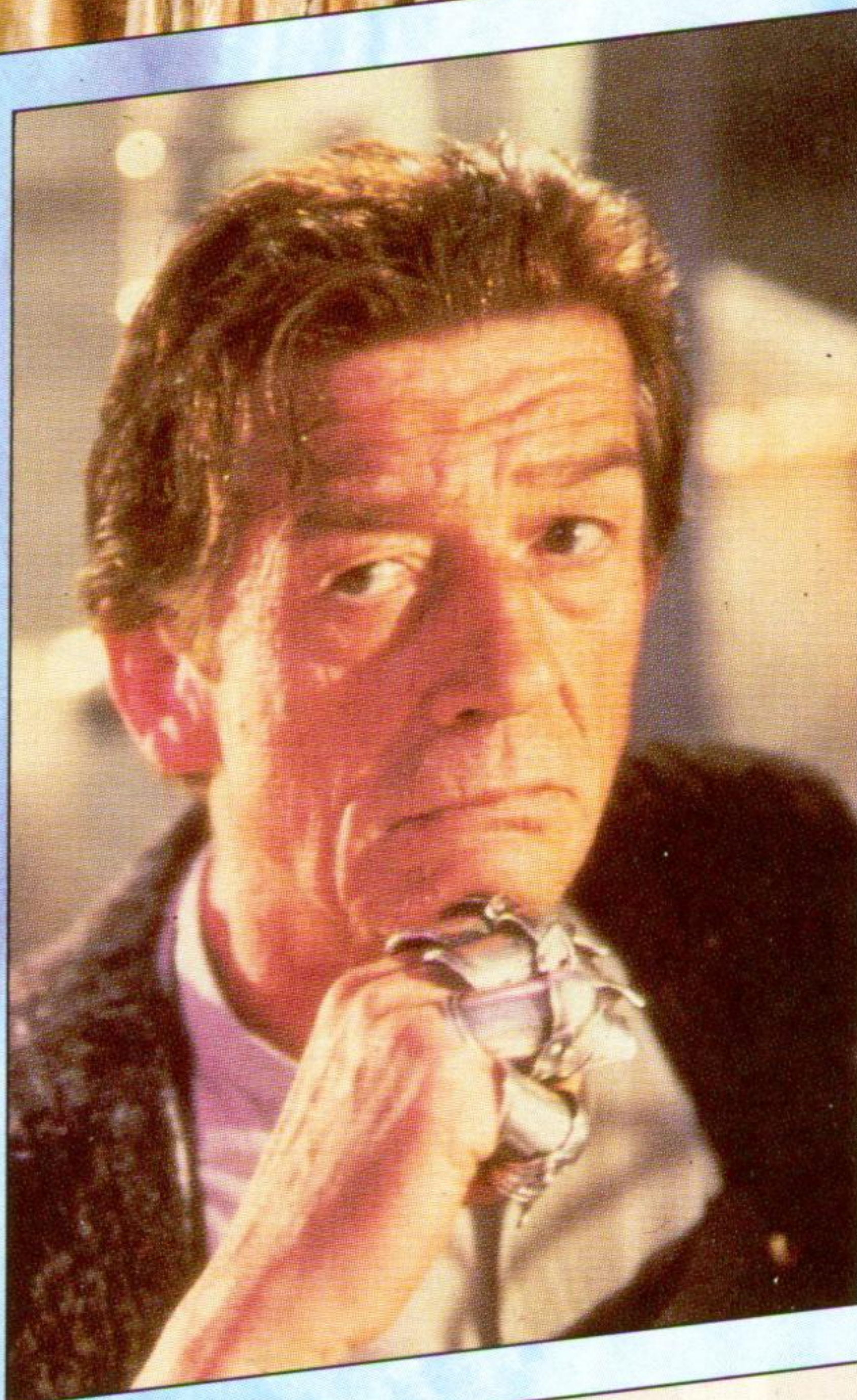
Clive Owen

Babe magnet Clive Owen shot to fame in the hit TV series *Chancer* a few years ago. To be honest his career has been a bit quiet since, although you'll see him playing a seedy detective on the telly this autumn. Clive plays hero Lev Arris in the game (it's him you control) and despite his mockney accent, he ain't half bad at playing an all-action space hero.



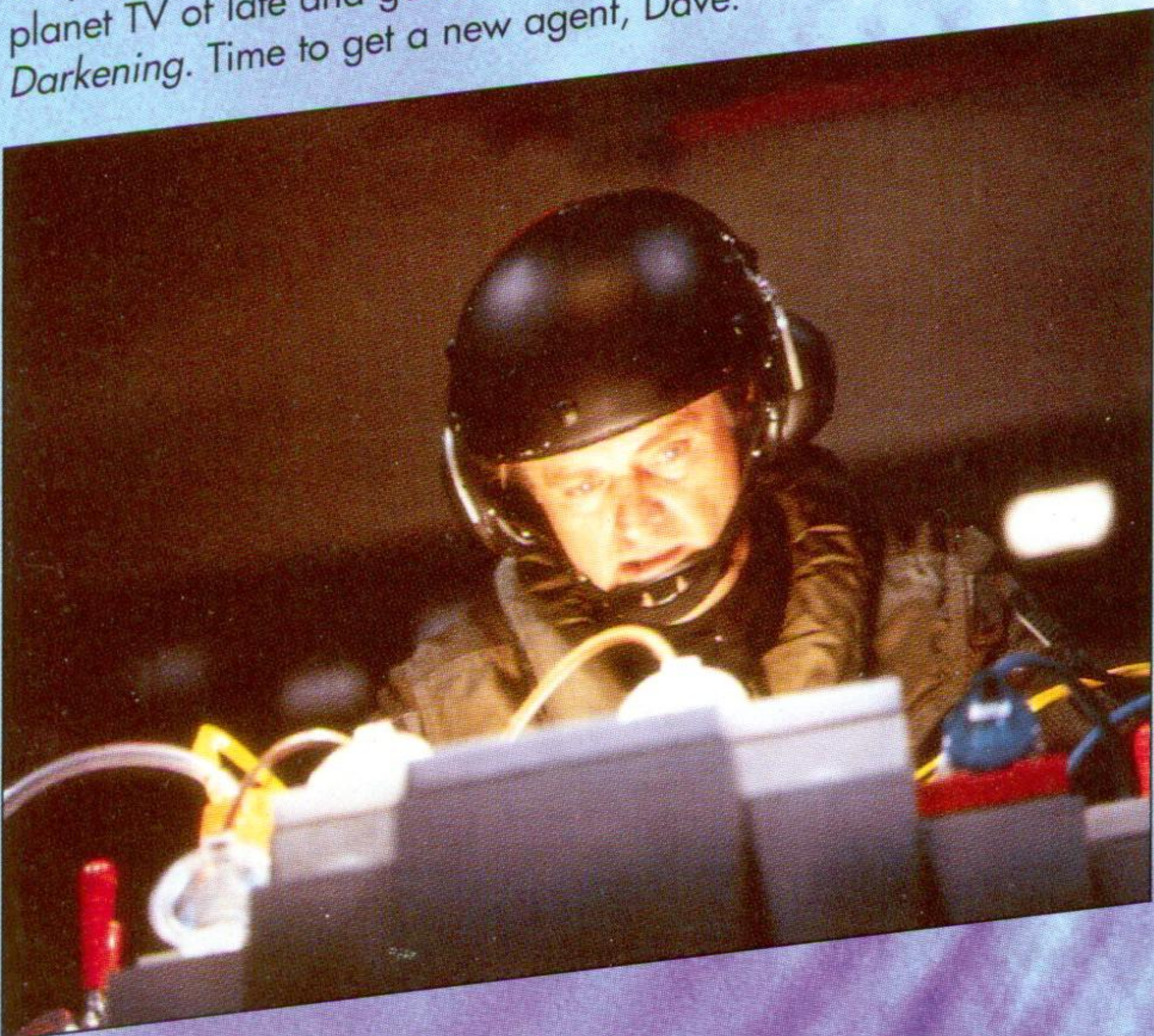
John Hurt

A real actors' actor, John Hurt has appeared in numerous films and TV productions since his acting career began back in 1971 – he's starred in *The Elephant Man*, *Alien*, *Rob Roy*, 1984, *The Naked Civil Servant* and *The Storyteller* to name just a few. John is your friendly neighbourhood barman in *The Darkening*, and one of your closest allies. If you need information, or just want a refreshing glass of green goo, he's your man.



David McCallum

The dashing blonde '60s dude from *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* has snogged Joanna Lumley (probably) in *Sapphire And Steel* and been run over in Michael Winner's *Dirty Weekend*. Has disappeared from planet TV of late and gets blown up in *The Darkening*. Time to get a new agent, Dave.

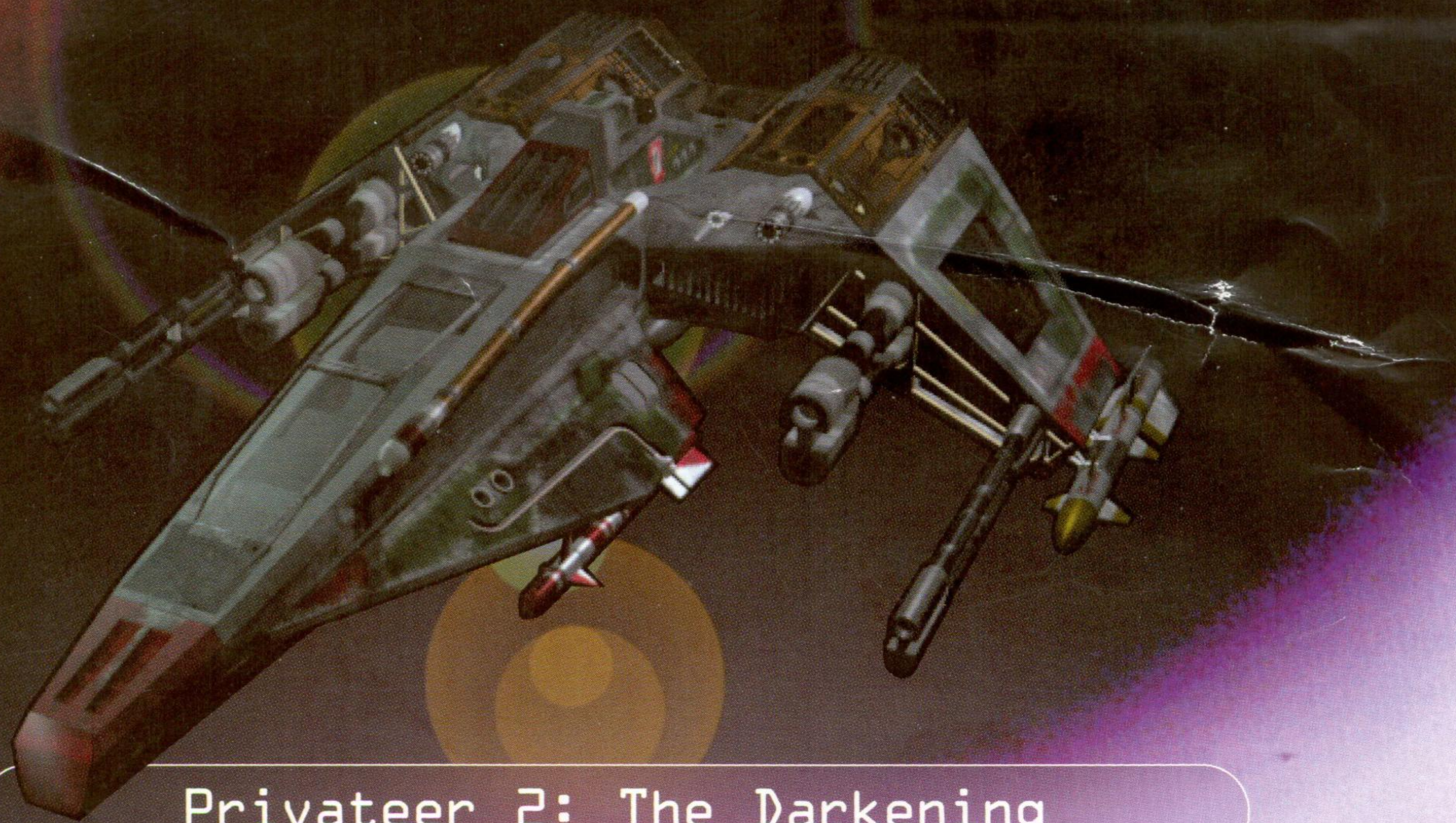


Mathilda May

French fox Mathilda can currently be seen in the arty flick *The Tit And The Moon*, a film about a young boy obsessed with breasties. Other film credits include *Naked Tango*, *Nemo* and *Becoming Colette*. She's also that actress who walked about completely as nature intended for the first half-hour of the hit sci-fi film *Lifeforce*. Treat her right and she'll love you forever.

Jurgen Prochnow

Sausage breath Jurgen has turned playing Mr Nasty into an art form in such 'classics' as *Beverly Hills Cop 2*, *Dune* and *Killing Cars*. Don't expect him to play Mr Nice Guy in *The Darkening* – and remember at all times that he's German.



Privateer 2: The Darkening

Presented
free
with
the
October
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of
PC Zone

