

## LEVEL 6

# GEAR UP. LOCK ON. FIGHT BACK.

HOW A GAME INSPIRED BY STAR WARS WAS TURNED INTO  
A MOVIE THAT WAS KILLED BY STAR WARS



When he was eight years old, Chris Roberts went to the cinema to see George Lucas' first outing into a galaxy far, far away with 1977's *Star Wars*. It was a movie that made quite an impression on Roberts—as it had done with thousands of other eight-year-olds around the world—and was a huge influence on *Wing Commander*, the first game in Chris Roberts' space opera video game series.

Although born in California in 1968, Roberts grew up in Manchester, England, and began his career in the video game world from the age of thirteen, when he had three number one titles for BBC Micro. He moved back to the United States one year after his parents did and began to work with Origin Systems on a game called *Times of Lore*. "I showed Origin and EA and a bunch of other people a prototype of a game called *Knight Wizard* and a bidding war broke out," Roberts recalls. "I decided to go with Origin because I'd struck up a really good relationship with Richard Gary, a.k.a. Lord British. We got on well. He was based in Austin and my parents were living in Austin, so rather work from the Bay Area I worked from Austin." Toward the end of the 1980s, Roberts began working on a game that would go on to be known as *Wing Commander* and wanted to push the boundaries of video games by adding a compelling story that would drive the action. "The things I loved were movies, arcade games, and stories, and when I played games I always thought, 'why can't you have context and reason for your action?'" Roberts asks of the games he grew up playing. "So all my games—even the early ones—were story based. And *Wing Commander* was the culmination of those ideals. It used a lot of visual language from movies to get a feeling and emotion across in the game. It wasn't about a high score or how to beat a level, it was more like 'you're in this world.' Because that's what I'd always wanted from a gaming experience. I watched *Star*



*Wars* when I was eight, and I wanted to create a game that gave you that feeling of being in the world and making a difference.”

Released for PC on September 26, 1990, *Wing Commander* was critically acclaimed, with role playing magazine *Dragon* giving the game six out of a possible five stars<sup>1</sup> and *Computer Gaming World* awarding it their highest score of all time at that point. The game would later be ported to the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) and Amiga in 1992 and the Sega CD in 1994, retroactively named *Wing Commander I* due to the release of its sequel, *Wing Commander II: Vengeance of the Kilrathi*. The sequel was equally praised, with *Computer Gaming World* saying it “flies right and plays not only on one’s computer, but also on one’s emotions.” In the wake of the success of *Wing Commander* and *Wing Commander II: Vengeance of the Kilrathi*, several other developers tried to emulate its style, including—ironically—LucasArts with their 1993 release *Star Wars: X-Wing*. Roberts only served as a producer on *Wing Commander II: Vengeance of the Kilrathi* due to his commitments on a new title he was developing called *Strike Commander*, but he would return to his creation in 1994, and this time he wanted to try something new.

While developing *Strike Commander* Roberts wanted to cast well known movie actors to provide the voices for the game’s animated cut scenes rather than have text. “I wanted Mel Gibson as the lead, and if you go back and look at the designs you can see the influence of the actors who I thought could be cast,” Roberts jokes. “But back in those days Origin wasn’t a big company and didn’t have a lot of money to spend on actors and no one knew who to talk to, so it was basically, ‘nice idea Chris, but we don’t have the money for that so we’re not going to try that.’” In September 1992, Origin Systems was purchased by Electronic Arts (EA) for \$35 million, which injected a lot of money into potential Origin projects. Not only that, but an Electronic Arts subdivision headed up by EA founder Trip Hawkins (the 3DO Company) was working on their own home console called 3DO Interactive Multiplayer, which they hoped would compete against the SNES and Sega Genesis.<sup>2</sup> Unlike both those consoles, 3DO Interactive Multiplayer would be a CD-based system, which would allow for game developers to use full motion video in their games. “They were experimenting with video stuff,” Roberts recalls of EA’s early developments of the 3DO. “I felt that with video we could have more emotion in the narrative scenes. It’s hard to do that with Saturday morning cartoon animation, so we started to experiment with taking real actors and filming them against green screen backgrounds and then compositing in the digital environments. Partly we could do this because of the financial backing of EA, but I also wanted to push the boundaries of what CDs could do, because CDs had just started to become prevalent among PCs and people were not really utilizing them.” With an algorithm that compressed the playback of video quickly without compromising the quality, Roberts and his team decided to use real actors in their next title *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger*. “It was about getting human emotion into the game and using the newest tools of technology—which was something *Wing Commander* was always about,” Roberts says. “With *Wing Commander I* we used VGAs and extra memory so you could see





a hand on the joystick of the cockpit, and with *Wing Commander II* we were one of the very first games to use the Sound Blaster, so we could record voices instead of subtitles, so *Wing Commander III* was like the next step.”

Released on March 27, 1994, *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger* not only moved the series from sprite-based graphics to texture-mapped polygons, it also featured full motion video cut scenes starring Hollywood names such as Mark Hamill (*Star Wars*), Malcolm McDowell (*A Clockwork Orange*), John Rhys-Davis (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*), Thomas F. Wilson (*Back to the Future*), and adult film star Ginger Lynn. It was ported over to the 3DO Interactive Multiplayer in 1995 and Sony’s PlayStation in 1996, but the most successful version was the original released on PC.<sup>3</sup> While several games had tried to utilize full motion video to help enhance the gaming experience—most notably *Night Trap* on Sega CD—many video game outlets hailed *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger* as the first game to successfully create an interactive movie.

## Moving to the Big Screen

After the success of *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger* Roberts approached Electronic Arts about the possibility of creating a movie based on the franchise. “I basically said, ‘I want to make a movie,’ and I convinced EA to pay to have a script written,” Roberts jokes. After meeting with several writers—including Michael Schiffer, best known for *Crimson Tide*—Roberts and Electronic Arts commissioned a script by Kevin Droney in 1995. Although best known at the time for writing video game adaptation *Mortal Kombat*,<sup>4</sup> it was not what got him the job of writing *Wing Commander: The Movie*. “I actually wasn’t fond of the *Mortal Kombat* adaptation,” Roberts admits. “We didn’t pick him because of *Mortal Kombat*, but he was part of the list of writers we looked at because of *Mortal Kombat*. He actually had some other scripts that I’m not sure ever got produced, but I really liked them and they had a military vibe, which is something *Wing Commander* has. And he gave a really good pitch in the room. That’s what I was looking for. I wanted a screenwriter who had done a World War II script, because that’s what I was going for with the film. Of all the people we talked to Kevin had the best take. EA wasn’t going to give me \$1 million—which was what the top writers commanded back in the day—EA was going to give me \$250,000. Which is still a lot of money, but it’s the difference between getting the hottest action writer and the lower level, which is what we went for.” Roberts did feel that *Wing Commander* had a distinct advantage over other video game adaptations, in that there was an already established story in place for the universe. “I sort of felt that video game adaptations hadn’t really taken projects that were story based,” he says. “They were ideas and concepts. Even *Mortal Kombat*, for me, there isn’t a story there—it’s just fighters fighting each other. It added an extra story element to the movie itself. So I was hoping that *Wing Commander* could be slightly different, because the genesis of *Wing Commander* was very cinematic and story



driven as opposed to *Super Mario Bros.*, which wasn't. So, with the arrogance of youth, I thought this one would be different."

Though Roberts had approached Electronic Arts about making a movie in 1995, he was not the first. *Wing Commander*'s co-producer Warren Spector had put together a proposal to make a feature film demo based off a script he had commissioned a few years earlier. Although the script was written and submitted in October 1991, Roberts says it was an attempt that sadly went nowhere.

Roberts instead met Droney after he had been hired to give notes on what he expected from his *Wing Commander* script. "I gave him the talking point that *Wing Commander* was influenced by the war in the Pacific, with the Kilrathi being the stand-in for the Imperial Japanese Navy and the Bushido Warrior culture, and the Confederation was the stand in for the US. So we had these discussions, and having these World War II comparisons we would have a Pearl Harbor moment, for example," Roberts recalls. "I had an outline of what I thought would be good." Droney's first draft, titled *Wing Commander: The Movie*, was delivered in October 1995, and was met with praise from Roberts and EA. Building upon the ideas set out by Roberts, Droney added in a subplot about wars lasting decades due to time dilation borrowed from Joe Halderman's novel *The Forever War*. "The idea now is that when you go to war you may not come home to see your loved ones, but in a future war in this situation, even if you do survive, by the time you come home your loved ones will have passed away," Roberts says. "Because at the speed of light five years is hundreds of years relatively speaking. So you're never going to see your loved ones again, you're guaranteeing you won't. And the idea was that isolation made the crew of the ship become tighter, and really it was just them together in their lives."

Although Roberts and Electronic Arts were happy with the script, Roberts was taken away from the movie to work on *Wing Commander IV: The Price of Freedom*, which would be released on PC on February 12, 1996, and a year later on Sony PlayStation.<sup>5</sup> The game had an unheard of budget at the time of \$12 million, which was mostly spent on the full motion video cut scenes that were shot on 35 mm film on sets rather than against green screen. Mark Hamill, Malcom McDowell, John Rhys-Davis, and Thomas F. Wilson all returned to reprise their roles, and were joined this time by martial arts B-movie star Mark Dacascos. The game was again well reviewed by critics, though the PlayStation port received a mixed reception. But it wasn't just the development of the fourth chapter in his ongoing *Wing Commander* franchise that slowed the development of Droney's script. "Essentially, I had a four-year contract with EA and I didn't want to re-sign with them because I wanted to go out on my own," Roberts admits. "And as part of the exit negotiation I got EA to agree to give me the *Wing Commander* script and to be able to take it off and set it up as a film. So once I was out of EA I started the process in the beginning of 1997."

After Roberts left EA he was set up to meet producer Todd Moyer, who would help find studio backing. Moyer had started out his career as an agent for Dark Horse Comics and worked out the deals for their movie adaptations. "I was really the first guy to be selling comic book rights," he says. "I sort of developed a specialty.





I sold *The Mask* and *Timecop* and a lot of these Dark Horse properties. And then the founder of Dark Horse and I started a company called Dark Horse Entertainment, and we were then producers on *The Mask*, *Timecop*, *Mystery Men*, *Virus*, and *Aliens vs. Predator*. I was like the first comic book guy. I actually have no interest in it now, but I did at the time. The sort of movies we were doing at the time weren't really 'guys in tights,' and I've never been into those kind of superheroes." Moyer then worked with Steven Segal on his studio movies *Fire Down Below* and *The Glimmer Man*, but was never happy with the final products. "I was just watching them spend a lot of money on films that were poor quality. They did okay at the time, but this is when Steven was content. We did *Fire Down Below* in Kentucky and spent \$60 million. At that time that was a lot of money and there's nothing to show for it. So I got fired from Steven Segal. And I was like, I just watched Steven Segal spend a lot of money and I was disgusted by the way he behaved on his movies—I'm going to make my own movies." Moyer was aware of *Wing Commander* but did not know a lot about it, calling it a "b-version of *Star Wars*," but thought a film version had potential.

Before Roberts was introduced to Moyer he had personally met with Universal Studios, who had created the animated spin-off series *Wing Commander Academy*, which ran for thirteen episodes in 1996 with Mark Hamill, Malcolm McDowell, and Thomas F. Wilson providing voices for their animated counterparts. At one point there had been talk of creating a feature length movie based on *Wing Commander Academy*, but conversations broke down early. "The head of the studio at the time told me, 'science fiction just doesn't sell in movies,'" Roberts recalls. "And I was thinking, 'well I love *Star Wars* and I think a whole bunch of people love it too.' And this was around the time that *Independence Day* was set to come out and I told them at the time that the film was going to do well because the trailer was awesome—and of course it did."

## Casting Conflict

Eventually the pair signed a deal with 20th Century Fox, but there was a discussion about doing a joint financing deal with Sony Pictures, with Fox handling the domestic release and Sony taking care of international. However, conversations broke down over casting disagreements. "Fox wanted to go younger and go for the younger audience, while Sony wanted to go slightly older because international audiences prefer that," Roberts says of the casting. "So there was a disagreement over that, so Fox just took the territories off them."

The casting of *Wing Commander* was something that caused arguments between Roberts and Fox in the early stages of development. With the video game series featuring big name actors like Mark Hamill and Malcolm McDowell Roberts wanted to transfer them into the big screen adaptation, but this was shot down by the studio, who still wanted to cast younger actors. "This is Hollywood and Hollywood can be very short-sighted," Roberts says of Fox not wanting to use Mark Hamill. "For them,



that was yesterday's news and they wanted the hot actor for the younger generation. They don't care that Mark Hamill was in it, which I would argue is not right. Look what happened with *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*—that was \$2 billion worth of nostalgia right there.”<sup>6</sup> Todd Moyer, on the other hand, agreed with Fox's casting arguments. “Fox had joint approval of the casting process,” he says. “They weren't going to put Malcolm McDowell and Mark Hamill in there. Never. And believe me, it would have done more poorly if they had.”

With Fox demanding a younger cast, Roberts met with Catherine Zeta-Jones to play the role of Angel Deveraux and the two hit it off. “My father is Welsh and she's Welsh too, so we got on super well,” Roberts recalls. “So we decided to make it work with Catherine, but the problem was *Zorro* had not come out yet.” Though it was originally set to be released in December 1997, *The Mask of Zorro* ended up being released in March 1998 to favorable reviews and \$250 million worldwide, making a star out of Zeta-Jones in the process. “Everyone was saying ‘she's really good in *Zorro*,’ but we hadn't seen it and Sony wouldn't share it, and her agents wanted \$1 million for her,” Roberts says. “We're a smaller budget movie, so \$1 million would have been a lot and a massive stretch. So in the end Fox told us that we couldn't spend \$1 million on someone who we don't know for sure is good and worth the money. And of course, not long after *Zorro* comes out and it's a monster hit, she becomes this huge star.” Moyer adds: “Once *Mask of Zorro* came out there was no way we were going to get her. I was chatting with a casting director for Fox just the other day who said the same thing—you couldn't get Catherine after that.”

Roberts does admit that bringing Zeta-Jones in to play Angel would have made the casting of the lead role harder due to her age. Roberts had met with Peter Facinelli and Vin Diesel about taking on the role of Christopher Blair, both of which were in strong contention for the role, though Roberts recalls meeting with Vin Diesel was not like any of his other auditions. “We met and talked about potentially being Blair,” he recalls. “It was weird because he'd only just done *Saving Private Ryan*, but he was interviewing me in the casting session.” Although even if the interview had gone well, Todd Moyer argues he wasn't right for the role. “He was not how we envisioned the character, he was too bulky and old, even at that time,” he says. “We were after guys that were twenty years old.” In the end Freddie Prinze Jr. was cast as Blair, who was best known for teen horror *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, but was brought in to meet with Roberts based on a connection to Origin Systems. “I was a big gamer at the time and there was this big Origin title called *Crusader II: No Remorse* with this red-looking Stormtrooper,” Prinze Jr. recalls. “And Chris knew the designers over at Origin, so he came in and we talked about *Wing Commander*.” Prinze Jr. screen tested against a potential co-star in Keith Edward Elam, best known as rapper Guru and Gang Starr, who was up for the role of Hunter. However, there was one problem holding Elam getting the role. “He didn't get hired because he wasn't European,” Prinze Jr. jokes. “And they got a tax break if they hired a European actor.”

The tax breaks came from Moyer pushing a lot of the production to Luxembourg in an effort to save money on their budget. While it made financial sense, Roberts





argues it had an impact on certain aspects of production. Roberts had met with Peter Lamont to work on the production design based on the award winning work he had done on movies like *Aliens* and *Titanic*, but found a roadblock with Moyer's budget. "The problem was that he was expensive for our budget, but I fought and fought to get him," Roberts argues. "He's been doing this for a long time and so he has a crew that he works with. And he said that we need to get the Cobalt Brothers to do our practical effects. So we bid for them and their bid was half a million pounds. And we were already sort of over budget, and our producer said that we couldn't do that. And so he went and got a Dutch company that bid a quarter of a million for the same work—and that's who I got instead of the team who win Oscars every year." Lamont was eventually hired, but Moyer feels that it was not the right decision. "They practically killed us," he says of Lamont and his crew. "He's a genius, obviously, but he comes from the 'school of unlimited budgets' and no one cares."

Along with Freddie Prinze Jr., Roberts cast Matthew Lillard<sup>7</sup> as Todd Marshall and Saffron Burrows in the role Zeta-Jones was nearly cast in. Roberts had met with Russell Crowe to play Paladin but scheduling difficulties kept him from joining the project, as they also did for Malcolm McDowell, who was set to reprise his role of Geoffrey Tolwyn, which eventually went to David Warner. Roberts had also worked out a way to work Mark Hamill into the movie by having him provide the voice for a CGI character called Merlin, but the character became less of a factor as Droney's drafts were rewritten.

Droney handed in his first re-draft to Fox in September 1997—now simply titled *Wing Commander*—which removed many of the original draft's elements that the studio had decided were too complicated for audiences to understand. Not only was the Merlin character also lessened, but a plot line involving a "Pilgrim Traitor" was also losing prominence. "David Suchet, who plays Sansky, was secretly a Pilgrim," Roberts argues. "And he was secretly sabotaging stuff behind the scenes and this was all connected to the Merlin character. We lost all that, and there was a ripple effect where David Suchet just dies. There was supposed to be more to it. The idea was that, in the very opening of the movie during the Pearl Harbor attack, he is the Pilgrim Traitor that sabotaged the Kilrathi base. That was more apparent in the script, but it's lost in the movie."<sup>8</sup>

While Droney and Roberts continued their script discussions, an outside factor suddenly fast-tracked *Wing Commander* into production.

## Return of the Jedis

In 1993, George Lucas announced he was considering returning to his *Star Wars* franchise, which he had sworn off after releasing *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* ten years prior. The series had found a resurgence in popularity thanks in part to a Dark Horse Comics series and a trilogy of novels penned by Timothy Zahn, and this prompted Lucas to begin writing a script that would follow the adventures of a twelve-year-old Anakin prior to joining the Dark Side. While he



was working on this script Lucas re-released his original *Star Wars* trilogy in cinemas with new footage and improved effects that further reignited the passion and excitement for a new *Star Wars* movie. Lucas eventually signed a deal with 20th Century Fox to distribute the film titled *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* shortly after the studio penned a deal with Roberts, Moyer, and *Wing Commander*. “As soon as they did that they basically said to us, ‘you’ve got to have your movie out before *Star Wars*,’” Roberts recalls. “And so we got put on a compressed timeline for production to get the movie finished on time. It really hurt the movie because science fiction movies need a lot of pre-production time to get all the effects correct.”

**“What we ended up with was large guys dressed in suits that looked like cats.”**

Rather than have a few months to prepare *Wing Commander*, Roberts and his team were given four weeks before they were to leave for Luxembourg. This impacted several practical aspects of the movie, including the look of the Kiltrathi. In the games the Kiltrathi were cat-like humans and Roberts had envisioned having animatronic versions created for their live-action counterparts. He had met with designer Patrick Tatopoulos, who had done creature effects for *Independence Day*, *Stargate*, and *Super Mario Bros.*, and they planned to emulate what Ridley

Scott did with the Xenomorph in his seminal 1978 sci-fi horror *Alien* by having lithe dancers on stilts in body suits and then shooting them in a certain way to make them appear taller. Tatopoulos was going to cost the production \$500,000, which they could not afford. Because he had fought so hard to get Lamont on board Roberts lamented and gave up on hiring Tatopoulos; Moyer instead hired a small UK-based design company for less than half the price. “I never got to see the Kiltrathi in action until the day before we shot because the creature people had started late and then ran behind, probably because they had signed up to do the work for a lot less than it really needed,” Roberts later recalled on *WCNews.com*. “Todd had promised me that it would be all right when I was asking on the progress and was concerned about not seeing much at all yet getting closer to our shooting date.” Moyer recalls the event differently. “That is completely not true,” he says. “Chris was involved with every single moment of designing the Kiltrathi to his specifications. Every single moment. I had nothing to do with it, except that I didn’t want them to be eight feet tall, or guys in suits. What we ended up with was large guys dressed in suits that looked like cats.”

Another aspect from the game that was changing was the look of the ships, which came about due to the impending release of *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*. “The *Wing Commander I, II, III*, and *IV* designs were much more evocative of *Star Wars*,” Roberts admits, “so instead we went for this ‘World War II in space’ feel for the movie, and we changed the look of the ships more than I would do if I was doing it again. Mainly because I didn’t want to be accused of





being like *Star Wars*, but I didn't know that they had changed their designs, too. If you look at *Episode I* it doesn't look anything like what you saw in *Episodes IV, V, and VI*." Roberts feels like these changes alienated the *Wing Commander* audience who wanted to see the game on the big screen. "Because we went young with the casting, which is not necessarily what they wanted to see even though Freddie and Matt were really nice guys—it's just not what people were expecting," he says. "We changed the look of the Kilrathi and we changed the look of the ships around enough to the point where you say, 'I was flying a Rapier in the game, but the one in the game doesn't look like the one in the movie.'" In an on set interview with Todd Moyer during the movie's production he feels the changes were for the best. "The look and style is completely different than anything from the games," he told *IGN Sci-Fi*. "The spaceships are meant to look like World War II battleships. Some people like it, some people hate it. The first battle scene is Pearl Harbor and the last battle scene is the Battle of Midway. This is the area that the director and the designers really went for and some people haven't liked it, but it's what we wanted to do."

Another problem Moyer had with the production was Kevin Droney's script. "His script was terrible," he says. "I call it like I see it. We had a couple of other writers come on and make it marginally better, but you know movies don't turn out so well like *Mortal Kombat* and *Super Mario Bros.* unless they have a good script." Droney's 1997 draft of the movie was rewritten by Roberts with assistance from Larry Wilson, best known for the work he did on *Beetlejuice* and *The Addams Family*, and was considered much better by the studio. Moyer brought in screenwriter Michael Finch to polish Roberts' and Wilson's script of *Wing Commander*, which was handed in on January 8, 1998. This script became the final shooting draft and was given to the crew as they headed over to Luxembourg.

"It was a grueling production," Moyer recalls. "We shot on a German border in the winter in an old Mercedes factory and it was cold. It was brutal. It was a tough experience." Roberts agrees of the production, saying, "It was fun, but we weren't in massive stages. We essentially overtook this massive warehouse factory and used that as the interior of the Tiger's Claw. Luxembourg isn't very big so there isn't much there."

Budget issues arose again when it came to the practical effects during filming. "We had around four days' worth of first unit shooting that used all these practical gags and I couldn't use any of them," Roberts recalls. "And each of those days was \$200,000. So I'm like that's \$800,000 wasted, plus \$250,000. I could have afforded to use the best guys. My producer should have said that I couldn't have four days and instead have two or three days with the best guys." Moyer argues, "You don't have unlimited money, that's the job of being a filmmaker and producer. You've got to work within the amount of money available." Roberts argues that Moyer should have helped him more while on set in terms of prioritizing. "As a producer now I tell first time directors, 'I know you have ten things you want to do, but pick five of these and stick with that,'" he says, "because you'll never have the time to do it all properly."



While Roberts recalls a happy production, Prinze Jr. argues that it was made harder than it should have been. “I got out there and everything changed,” he recalls. “It was a tough ride, man. Chris had to put a lot of his own money into it because a lot of things promised to him were untrue. And he’s too good a guy to say it, but I will. He got screwed in a lot of ways on that flick. So much so that Peter Lamont shot third unit because we had four days left, and he made sacrifices that I know he didn’t want to make. Sacrifices that he wasn’t supposed to have to make.”

When production finished Roberts and his team moved back to Austin to work on the visual effects and edit the movie. And to the delight of everyone involved Todd Moyer had come up with a way to get the best talent without spending much.

In 1997, the visual effects house Boss Films had shut its doors, making them all available for work. The team had started in 1983 and worked on films such as *Ghostbusters*, *Die Hard*, *Poltergeist II*, and *Alien 3*, and were nominated for several academy awards, but they were struggling to compete as an independent effects house during the competitive 1990s and decided to call it a day. “The lowest bid we could get for visual effects on this movie was like \$17 million,” Moyer recalls. “And Boss went out of business, and we black-boxed all of the digital effects and put the artists from Boss on the payroll of the movie. We built this all out of Texas and did all the visual effects out of there. It was the Boss guys that did it, but we did 230 fully 3-D visual effects shots, which had never been done before.” Roberts also worked on the digital effects with his company while also doing pick-up shots in Pinewood, and they all worked on a beta version of Maya—which would later become an industry standard. “We were one of the first movies to use Maya for visual effects,” Roberts boasts. “We got a pretty nice write up in *Cinefex* for it actually.”

## The Jedis Strike Back

Though they were deep into post-production on *Wing Commander*, Roberts and Moyer felt that 20th Century Fox was not behind the movie, instead focusing all their attentions on the upcoming release of *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*. Discussions had taken place with the studio about whether they were going to release *Wing Commander* before or after *Star Wars*, but Roberts and Moyer requested they get distribution from another studio who could give them 100% commitment. “I talked to Tom Sherek<sup>9</sup> at Fox and asked if we could take the movie and they said, ‘sure, you can take the movie—no one is going to give us our money back and \$2 million profit,’” Moyer recalls. “And I said, ‘well I’ll try.’” Moyer took the movie to Sony, who was willing to give Roberts more money to shoot some extra scenes and give them an August release date, but when Moyer went back to Sony with the papers to sign the film over he got a call from Sherek. “And he says, ‘no I’m not selling it,’” Moyer says of the phone call. “I told him we had a deal, but he said, ‘sorry, George Lucas has agreed to put the *Star Wars* trailer on your movie so we’re not selling.’” Roberts adds: “Fox said, ‘no, we’re going to release it on





2,000 screens in four weeks' time.' Which I was mad about, because although it was a wide release, there was no room for trailers or building anything up. They were basically getting it out along with the *Star Wars* trailer."

*Wing Commander* was released on March 12, 1999, to extremely poor reviews and a disappointing opening weekend. The film made less than the other four new releases that week, and its \$5.1 million put it seventh in the top ten releases. The following weekend *Wing Commander* dropped out of the top ten with \$2.2 million, and its \$11 million domestic total was a far cry from its \$30 million budget. Godfrey Cheshire of *Variety* wrote, "Though the ingredients are potent, their blending here mostly comes off as formulaic, humdrum and sometimes unintentionally laughable," while Roger Ebert noted, "These actors, alas, are at the service of a submoronic script and special effects that look like a video game writ large." So disappointing was the release of the film that it did not receive a theatrical release outside of North America and was released straight-to-video in European territories.

"I'm not happy with the film," Chris Roberts laments. "I usually see a project in my head and then I work with people, and then what I've seen in my head is on the screen. So I saw a movie in my head for *Wing Commander*, but that's not what ended up on screen. I wouldn't say it's a great movie at all, but I wouldn't say it's as bad as the reviews made it out to be. The timing of it was really bad because everyone was expecting a new *Star Wars* three months later. I think if it had come out after *Star Wars* and with Sony the reviews wouldn't have been nearly as harsh as they were. Having said that, do I think it's a good movie? Not at all. But I don't think it's as bad as it was considered." Todd Moyer doesn't think *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* had an effect on the performance of *Wing Commander*. "We were a totally different league," he says. "Ours was meant to be a b-genre film in space. It was a pop movie with Freddie Prinze Jr. and Matthew Lillard. I think Chris and I, and also Fox, had a different vision for what the movie is. He was thinking it was this very serious space drama and we thought it was kind of campy." He argues that the reviews were pretty harsh and that Fox did not give it the treatment it deserved. "They threw it under the bus and didn't care," he says. "As soon as they had the *Star Wars* trailer we were done. Fox was not interested in it at all. It could have had a huge release at Sony, and I think the movie could have done well. Visually it's stunning. It just falls short on story." Freddie Prinze Jr. is a little less kind on the movie. "People went to see it for the *Star Wars* trailer," he jokes. "That's the only reason anyone went to see that horrible movie." He does feel that neither Chris Roberts nor 20th Century Fox is to blame for the film's failures. "That was down to one individual who I've never worked with and will never work with again," Prinze Jr. says of Todd Moyer. "Guys like that, it's one of the reasons it was so easy to walk away from the movie business. Chris deserved a better producer, and someone who would have helped him to success. And if they would have allowed him to put what was in his brain onto the screen it would have been a very special sci-fi movie. And instead, it's just not. It fails on a lot of levels. I'm not crapping on anyone outside of the producer who screwed over Chris. I'm responsible for what I'm



responsible for, and there's things I would change because I feel I'm a better actor now than I was then. But if all of us had been put in a better spot we could have made something better. Chris is a sharp dude, we had Chris frigging Lamont, man. We had the DP who shot *Das Boot*, we were good to go. We had the right look, we had the right light, we just had a month taken away from us."

While Roberts was disappointed in the film's treatment by 20th Century Fox, he argues that the studio did have some faith in it. "Fox put it on 2,000 screens, and you don't put something on 2,000 screens that you think is going to be a flop," he argues. "There were some people who thought it was going to work and there were some that didn't. Most people in Hollywood don't really know. It was a punt for them; they thought they'd put it out wide and maybe the kids will love it." Prior to the film's release Roberts says he was offered to direct *Fantastic Four* and the long-gestating *Silver Surfer*, but he never wanted to use *Wing Commander* as a way to move into film directing. "I started to do games because I could control that aspect of it," he says. "I suppose today, where camera technology is much cheaper, I probably would have dabbled in film. But back in those days it wasn't that easy to go off and make your own home movies, so I felt that story writing in games was an area I could control. For me, movies and games were my two big obsessions... Even when I did the test shoot for *Wing 3* I wasn't sure I was going to direct the final one, but I wanted to go through the process to understand it. And going through the process, I thought 'well, this isn't too hard.' It's not that different to directing a project. A video game project has a lot of the same things as directing a movie: you have to communicate a certain vision to a lot of different people working on different aspects and ensure everyone is working to a common goal. And I'd been doing that for games for quite a while, so when I did it on a set it was okay. So I felt a bit more comfortable. And it was my world and my story, so I decided to direct *Wing 3*, but I was still nervous because I hadn't directed actors before. And then after *Wing 4* I felt that I could probably go and do a movie." Even with all of the problems he had, Roberts argues that he learned a lot. "I sort of feel that, if I go back and direct a movie now, it would be very different to how I did *Wing Commander*. *Wing Commander 3 & 4* are only really one component, and there's a lot of silence and action that you need to do in a film that you don't really need to do in a game because that's provided by you as a player. There are subtleties in filmmaking and on that canvas that aren't immediately obvious until you've gotten into it. So, in some ways, I wouldn't have minded some more time understanding those. It wasn't quite as simple as 'I'm going to direct some action bits to put on top of the talking bits from *Wing 3* to make the movie.' But at the time I felt I was ready. Now in hindsight I wished I'd have appreciated the little aspects in film that I know are very important."

Todd Moyer says that Roberts, being a first-time director, was part of the movie's failure, and was not ready for such a big project, let alone *Fantastic Four*. "I've worked with a lot of first-time directors," he recalls. "*Virus* was a first-time director, *Barb Wire* was a first-time director after the first director was fired, and my experience is with big budget movies that they're just not qualified. With Chris Roberts it was





doubly difficult because he was involved in creating the franchise, so he had a vision in his mind of what *Wing Commander* would be, but it was not the most marketable version of the movie.” He adds: “Chris Roberts didn’t want to be involved in the movie if he wasn’t directing it and it wasn’t presented that way. I’ve worked with a lot of first-time directors. I’ve done two movies since with first-time directors. But you can’t work with somebody who was involved with the creation of the franchise because it’s difficult to get them off.”

Since the release of *Wing Commander* Roberts has not directed another theatrically released movie, but he says the experiences he learned have influenced his video game projects. “As a first-time director you sort of look at a script which is usually dominated by dialogue,” he says. “It’s usually around 80% of a script, even though action is bigger. You look at *Gone with the Wind* and ‘Atlanta burns’ is a small part of the script but is huge in the movie. What they teach you in film school is that it may be one line in a script, but it’s usually something completely different. You just learn to focus on different things. Silence. Like focusing on a reaction shot or them just looking at something or being silent—which isn’t on the page—are the moments that stay with you. So it’s the appreciation of those subtleties that when I did *Wing Commander* I didn’t really have, but if I had—and I do have now and I’m using it on *Squadron 64* and *Star Citizen*—I would.”

## ***Wing Commander* is not *Star Wars***

At the time of its release and in the years that followed several *Wing Commander* fans questioned Roberts’ decisions about the film’s design, casting, and style. Roberts admits that in hindsight he should not have removed *Wing Commander* as far from its source material. “If I was doing it again I would try and be more consistent,” he says. “To be honest, it was a good lesson for me.

Because in doing *Star Citizen* and *Squadron 42* we raised \$107 million so far and counting from a huge crowd funding project, and that was mostly generated by gamers who played and loved and keep *Wing Commander* dear to their hearts twenty-five years later. And I didn’t appreciate that. That was *Star Wars* for me. I grew up as an eight-year-old who went to the cinema and had my mind blown and was one of those people who helped fund the \$2 billion worth of nostalgia with *The Force Awakens*. And now in hindsight I can see there is that same kind of—for whatever reason—that ten-year-old who played

*Wing Commander* for the first time or *Wing Commander 3* for the first time and was taken to that world the same way I was with *Star Wars* when I saw it for the first

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time. That's the world they remember. So when they saw the film it didn't look or feel the same way as the game they remembered, and as such they didn't like it as much. It's not on the same scale, but I think that was the same mistake George Lucas made with *Episode I, II, and III*. He changed it up, and now J. J. Abrams has taken everything we loved about *IV, V, and VI* and distilled it into *Episode VII*. I guess I underestimated and I didn't realize the fan inertia where they had a world in their mind and I changed it more than I should have." Todd Moyer argues that keeping it close to the source material would have been problematic. "All of this stuff of the 'fanboys' I could not care about [what] one of them said," he says. "Let me tell you why. Movies that are successful, that are based on these franchises, they have core audiences. If you get all of that core audience to come you make \$2 million on opening day. *Wing Commander* is not *Star Wars*. It did well in video games, but getting those people to see a movie based on it is another thing. You need to do something to make it work as a movie, not as a video game version of a movie. You have to take the parts that worked and you have to think of it in the medium you're making it."

Todd Moyer has not returned to video game adaptations and has no plans to do so—especially if the creator is involved. "I don't think I ever want to work with anyone who has created a franchise again as a director from a different medium," he says. "The problem with people like Chris Roberts is that they are so close to

their creation it makes it extremely difficult to navigate the pass of taking the four video games into one ninety minute movie. It's just difficult." He does not have overwhelmingly negative thoughts on the project. "I spent two years doing this and it was a very difficult, argumentative time," he says. "I did learn everything about international financing deals and pack deals. We did the first ever German pack deal on a movie. It was an incredible experience in terms of that, but it was an

**"It's not a terrible movie and I'm proud of some things we did. But in the end it didn't work."**

extremely difficult filmmaking experience. I'm not going to try and put a positive spin on something we did more than fifteen years ago that didn't work. It's not a terrible movie and I'm proud of some things we did. But in the end it didn't work." Chris Roberts has also not adapted any of his other work, but that does not mean we have seen the last of *Wing Commander* on the big screen. "I actually get the rights back from Fox either this year or next year," he says. "So, not right now, but I may actually go back and fix some things with the new technology and put the bits back in from the script that we took out. Because there are parts of the script we had to cut out and because of that other parts don't quite make sense. It oversimplified the story, and the Pilgrim story was gone, and Merlin was going to be a bigger character. The reason we cut Merlin is because we couldn't afford to





make him a digital AI that would pop up, which was how it was written. And he was tied into the Pilgrim storyline, so when we cut a whole bunch of that out—I'm not saying the movie would have been a masterpiece—but it was definitely a more interesting film with it in. So, I don't know, maybe it would be a fun project. If *Star Citizen* is a raging success maybe I'll do that for fun."

