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WING COMMANDER

Heart of the Tiger III

by James Hogan

EVEN IF YOU AREN'T A FAN OF ACTION GAMES or space flight sims, you've probably heard of *Origin's* **Wing Commander** series. When the original **Wing Commander** was released in 1990, it flew to the top of the charts, stunning gamers everywhere with its groundbreaking graphics and music. Aside from that, though, there was something else it had which few other games in its genre did — a good, solid story that developed as the game progressed. Relationships with your shipmates formed. Conflicts between them ensued. Friends were killed in battle. Each new installment or mission disk in the **Wing Commander** saga improved over the last, not only in the gameplay aspect, but in the quality of the story, as well... and it looks as if the upcoming **Wing Commander III** will be no exception.

Things have changed in the two years since the end of the events in **WC2's Special Operations 2**. Your old carrier, the *Concordia* has been destroyed, and you've been reassigned and placed in charge of the fighter squadron on the decrepit *TCS Victory*, under the command of Colonel Eisen. Being the squadron commander, you're allowed more control over the missions you fly, including wingman selection and weapons loadout. As for the progress of the war... well, the Confederation has taken quite a beating in the last couple years, but they've been busier than ever on the technology front. There are five new ships available for you to fly, which can be equipped with cloaking devices, a variety of new guns, and missiles and decoy pods which report back to you upon completion or failure of their objective. Then there's the secret planet-smashing weapon that's been developed as a last hope to defeat the Kiltrathi. But will the Confederation get a chance to use it?

Although **WC3** will not be the final installment of the series, the story will see the end of the Terran-Kiltrathi war. Which side wins, of course, depends on you.

The game engine for **WC3** has been dramatically improved over those of the first two **Wing Commander** games, and the new graphics are nothing short of breathtaking. If your system has enough horsepower, you'll be treated to a stunning 640x480x256 SVGA cockpit view, flying and battling against ships rendered on a SGI workstation. Don't misunderstand, **WC3** is being developed, first and foremost, as an MCGA (320x200x256) game, and even those graphics are certainly nothing to talk about. The fact is, however, the hi-res graphics beat the pants off any other action game currently out there. *Origin* even made a *Penquin* with a fast local bus video card to play an SVGA mode at a

decent clip, but the normal MCGA mode should run just fine on your average 486/33 so as not to alienate us ordinary users. An optional automatic, on-the-fly resolution switching feature is being built in so that if things start moving too slow in SVGA mode, the graphics will be knocked down to MCGA, and then back to SVGA once the frame rate climbs back up.

Ship design and graphic detail have also improved. Capital ships, for example, used to be fairly unimpressive — sure, they were larger than your own one-man craft, but they often seemed to be little more than big, ugly ships that moved like pigs. That, however, has changed in **Wing Commander 3**. Doing a close fly-by of a Kiltrathi carrier is now akin to taking an X-Wing up against a Star Destroyer; these guys are enormous, and the sight of one alone is enough to make a seasoned veteran's stomach turn. The detail level is such that one can easily see the Kiltrathi insignia painted on the carrier, and little pinpricks of light coming from windows dotting the hull. Gun turrets firing lasers at you can be targeted and destroyed. The ships are so complex that you can even fly around inside their hangar bay, or swing around behind them and shoot a couple of missiles into the engines, bringing the whole carrier to a lumbering halt.

Not all of your sorties will be simple space dogfights any more, though. You're going to have to tumble it up in atmosphere fighting, go on bombing runs, and more... that's right, planetside missions. *Origin* is going for playability here rather than realism — your ship's "repulsor" technology negates effects such as gravity and g-forces, making the flight dynamics in the atmosphere essentially the same as in space. The same repulsors, however, limit you to an altitude of 1000-2000 meters, and you'll have to avoid running into terrain, so the four planetside missions in the game should still present interesting new challenges for **WC3** players.

The flight engine isn't the only thing that's improved in **Wing Commander 3**; *Origin* has jumped on the Hollywood bandwagon, and all of **WC3's** cinematics are recorded in full-motion video with live actors. The lead character (you), aka Col. Christopher Blair, is played by Mark Hamill of *Star Wars* fame. Other well-known actors on the **WC3** cast include Malcolm McDowell (*A Clockwork Orange*, *Time After Time*), taking the role of Admiral Tolwyn, John Rhys-Davies (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*) as Paladin, and Tom Wilson (Biff from *Back to the Future*) as Mamec.

The recording stage is not what you might expect, with the most striking difference being the apparent lack of a set. The original film footage is actually recorded with the actors playing out their parts in front of a green screen (the traditional blue screen used in moviemaking is too close of a match with the blue fabric of the characters' uniforms); later, the green backdrop is overlaid with the appropriate computer-generated background image. Not only does this save millions of dollars that would otherwise be spent on set and prop construction, but the process results in a virtually seamless integration of the actors and photorealistic background images. The final images look very convincing.

Equally as important as the new flight engine and the use of live acting is the amount of control the player is given over the storyline. During a cinematic sequence, you'll often be given a list of responses to a certain situation and asked to choose one, which will directly affect the events that unfold on the screen. This, of course, meant a lot of work on the part of the cast — your average Hollywood movie script is 120 pages, while **WC3's** was over 300 to accommodate all of the different paths the plot can take — but it presents the gamer with a degree of flexibility that is well worth it in the long run. Whereas the storyline in previous *Commander* games only changed based on the success or failure of a mission, **WC3's** plot can change simply because you choose one dialogue response over another one. The way you interact with your shipmates can affect how they look upon you, your pilots' morale, and possibly even spawn a love affair. Since players can control the protagonist's actions and responses to reflect to their own personality, it should be easy for most gamers to fit into the role of Blair.

Wing Commander III is certainly the biggest project ever undertaken in the computer gaming industry. In order to accommodate the video footage, it is being shipped on 2 CD-ROMs (no floppy version). Sales projections have set their sights on numbers well past the platinum level just to break even from the game's US\$3,000,000 budget.

WC3 shows a lot of promise — the new flight engine looks great, and the storyline has a degree of flexibility very rarely seen in today's "interactive movies." If *Origin* can pull this one off, action and non-action fans alike will be storming the doors of software stores everywhere this November. ☐

Net Note: Additional information on **WC3** is available for download from the Midnight Infodroid. For a list of available files, send the command GET WC3/INDEX in the body of a message to netslave@midnight.com.au