COMPUTER GAMES

STRATEGY PLUS

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12940 Research Blvd
Austin, Texas 78750

Dear Eileen,

Origin has permission to reproduce copies of the articles on **Wing Commander III** which appeared in the August and November 1994 issues of *Strategy Plus* magazine. Sources of the articles must be properly attributed to *Strategy Plus* and should include information pertaining to subscriptions to the magazine by calling (800) 283-3542.

Cordially,

Marc Dultz
Executive Editor





PREVIEW

ON THE WING

Marc Dultz Reveals the Ma

For some time now, Hollywood has openly embraced the technical marvels and wizardry of Silicon Valley. Movies like *Star Wars*, *Terminator*, *The Black Hole* and *Lawnmower Man* are indeed proof of a successful cooperative alliance, and freely demonstrate the computer's capabilities at enhancing the cinematic experience. Slowly, it has now become Silicon Valley's turn at bat, as they attempt to merge the best aspects of Hollywood with the world of computer gaming. While the jury may still be deliberating whether Hollywood indeed has the right stuff to improve the average game, one company is doing its utmost to test such uncharted waters. Like the fabled Icarus, *Origin* stands atop a precipice of uncertainty, preparing to venture where few companies have dared to leap. Fortunately, a game with a phenomenal track record serves as their air traffic controller. Daedalus would be proud.



Mark Hamill branches out

On a Wing and a Player

If any game company is serious about "SiliWood," the melding of Silicon Valley and Hollywood, it's *Origin*. Chris Roberts, the designer of both **Wing Commander 1** and **2**, originally wrote much of the huge script for **Wing Commander 3**. Since circumstances required introducing an unfamiliar element to the design equation, Roberts submitted his script to Hollywood guru Donna Burkons. Given her strong cinematic background, her forthright appraisal was important. After reading it through, she informed Chris that the script as written would never fly. Undaunted, Roberts pursued Burkons like a rookie seeking his first Kilrathi kill, inquiring about how much rework of the storyline would be required to bring it up to Hollywood standards. Burkons liked Roberts' dogged desire, and considered his impassioned plea.

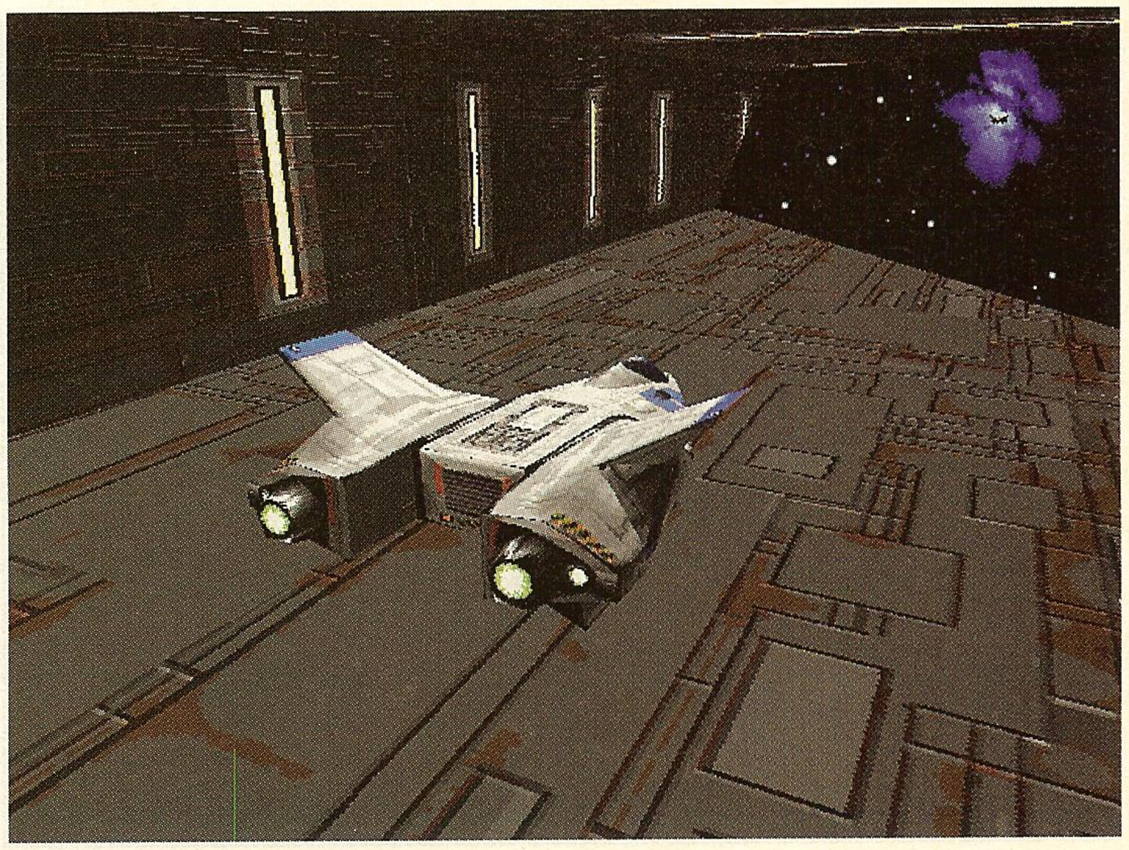
A few phone calls later, Donna, now named to the position of Producer on the **Wing 3** project, brought in some veteran writers to punch up the script and provide the answers. A few months and some eight hundred pages of rewritten script later, Roberts was finally ready.

Chris, 27, now officially named by *Origin* and *Electronic Arts* as the Director on the film shoot, continued amassing talent. When the casting call went out, a sizeable contingent of name actors applied for the varied roles. Recruited were none other than Mark Hamill, playing the starring role of Blair (a conjunction of "Blue Hair"?), Malcolm McDowell as the stalwart Admiral Tollwyn, John Rhys Davies as the sage Paladin and Tom Wilson (Bif from *Back to the Future*) as the unpredictable Maniac. In all, there are twelve principal actors backed up by an additional twenty-five supporting characters.

"I've done things on this (**Wing 3**) I never would do in a regular film," says an energetic Hamill. "On this, I understand the nature of the project so I'm willing to do it and see how it turns out. I think it could be an amazing product when all is said and done, and I certainly would love to play it even if I weren't in it. This stuff is completely new to me. I read the phonebook-like script and I like challenges. I like new things. I really look forward to coming to work and today is a red letter day. It's the very first day there's no actually branching (storyline) whatever."

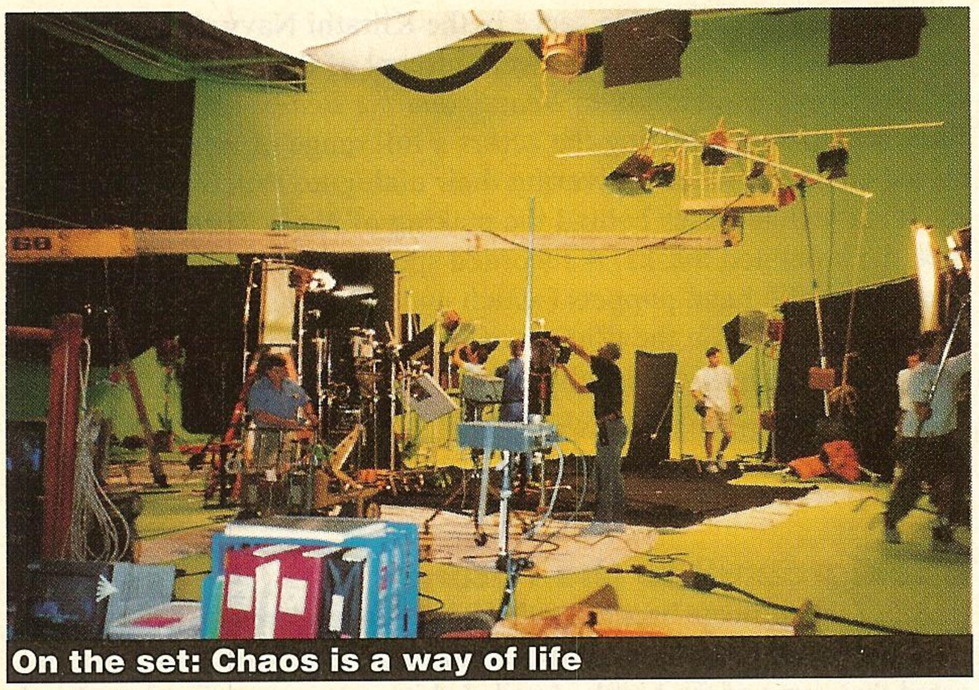
What Mark is referring to is the fact that a great deal of the filming





GS OF ICARUS

aking of Wing Commander 3



On the set: Chaos is a way of life

has to be shot several times because of the very nature of the branching storyline plot. For instance, if someone is questioning Blair, he may want to answer in the affirmative, in which case a response-specific conversational path will need to be shot and inserted.

Conversely, he may wish to choose a negative response, in which case an entirely different set of dialogue, emotional issues and character interaction has to be readily available, even if it is never chosen by the player. Some scenes require upwards of four different branchings, since some branches contain neutral responses.

For Hamill, 40, it's his second go round with computer gaming, having starred in *Sierra's* **Gabriel Knight** (**GK**). Hamill sings us a little ditty and takes note of the pivotal differences between **Wing 3** and **GK**: "*No branching. Today is the first day with no branching!* Today is much more like an extension of a television show or movie. I've kept count... so far only four times have I accidentally gone to the wrong side of the page triggered by some word or phrase or look, and when I met with Chris that was the only thing I told him I was worried about. I've done one interactive (game) before but it was voice only, so we had all the pages in front of us. On this one, we're actually being photographed doing a scene."

The talent have been scheduled to be on-site only on their character-specific filming days. For instance, while Mark Hamill is scheduled to remain on-site for the duration of the shoot, Malcolm McDowell first appeared on-site mid-way through the shoot and for only a few days. The pampered actors must share two bare-bones, mobile dressing rooms situated just outside the set. Couple that with the fact that many shooting days begin at 9 A.M. and finish up around midnight. While cast and crew could easily tire and fray under such circumstances, Producer Burkons is happy to report that everyone is getting along splendidly, especially when one considers that both groups are going into this a tad leery, since they are, essentially, fish swimming in each other's ponds.

Interestingly, it's doubtful whether companies will be casting the oft-mentioned and highly speculative "virtual actors" anytime soon. Several members on both sides of the shoot expressed serious concern about their viability. Although VR actors need no dressing rooms and sport no egos, live actors can read a line with expression or pose for the camera with more feeling, something that would be difficult to replicate currently with a computer generated virtual reality (VR) character. When the cost of hiring additional programmers to construct, constantly instruct and reconfigure the VR character, complete with a library of expressions and a repertoire of human emotions is considered, it becomes clear that production costs would skyrocket. For now, casting off the Virtual Reality couch is but a pipe dream, and will probably best be relegated to the quasi-existential, virtual reality games.

To the Green Fields Beyond

Costs are an extremely sensitive issue for both *Origin* and parent company *Electronic Arts*. Richard Hilleman, Vice President of Production, never strays too far away from the hot lights, probing camera and intriguing interaction. His eleven year career started as a pro-

CLICK ME

Back to the Future actor Tom Wilson tells how he's taken a big leap into the future to play the role of Maniac in Wing Commander 3

O.K., I admit it. I'm writing this on a *Mac SE*, the hottest, fastest, computer during the middle years of the Reagan Administration. I'm not up on the latest game technology, and I admit that a few times I've walked up to a bunch of guys huddled around a big color monitor and said, "Hey, you guys playing **PONG**?" But here I am, an actor on the set of one of the hottest CD-ROM games there is. A few weeks ago, my agent called and said, "Would you like to be in **Wing Commander 3**?," and I racked my brain trying to remember a **Wing Commander 1** or **2**. "Did Schwarzenegger do a couple of movies I haven't heard about?" I asked. No, she told me, this is the third version of one of the most popular computer games in history. Since I have a computer that I think might have been used by the Flintstones, with a bird inside who pecks out words on a stone age hard drive, I had no clue what **Wing Commander** was. So I talked to my nephew Jason, who, if he could figure out a way to do it, would strap a 486 to his head with duct tape. "I'm doing this **Wing Commander** game", I said.

"You're in **Wing Commander 3**?!", he shouted, his eyes wide in hopes of scamming a free copy when it's released.

"Yeah, I'm playing Maniac in Wing —".

"YOU'RE PLAYING MANIAC IN **WING COMMANDER**?!

I scored big points with Jason, who told me that **Wing Commander 3** is a giant step beyond even the mega-cool first and second versions. And from the looks of the set I'm working on, I feel like I'm acting in the future.

The **Wing Commander 3** script was so thick it could have been delivered to my house on a forklift. Over four hundred pages of endless tangents and story lines to follow to your joystick's content. I'm playing Todd "Maniac" Marshall and as Maniac, I was happy to see that I'm an ever-present annoyance to the Terran Confederation Ship Victory, and Colonel Blair, played by Mark Hamill, of *Star Wars* mega-fame. Maniac has turned out to be a great character to play, always a goofy thorn in everyone's side, wreaking havoc in the cockpit, blasting the Kilrathi enemy, and nearly blowing away my own space flying comrades in the process. The terrific cast is rounded out with Malcolm McDowell (*Time after Time*, *A Clockwork Orange* - they're good, rent 'em), and Jason Bernard as well as a bunch of eight foot tall, totally life-like Kilrathi warriors, created by some of the premier special effects experts in Hollywood. They've spared no expense to make this game the best that's ever been, and from the looks of things in the editing room, it's paying off. I recently played a brief demo of the game, with rough scenes cut in and fully rendered 3-D ships, and they had to peel me away from the thing to go back to the set and finish the live action. "No!", I screamed, being carried down the hallway of a sound stage. "I haven't completed my mission and I have engine damage!"

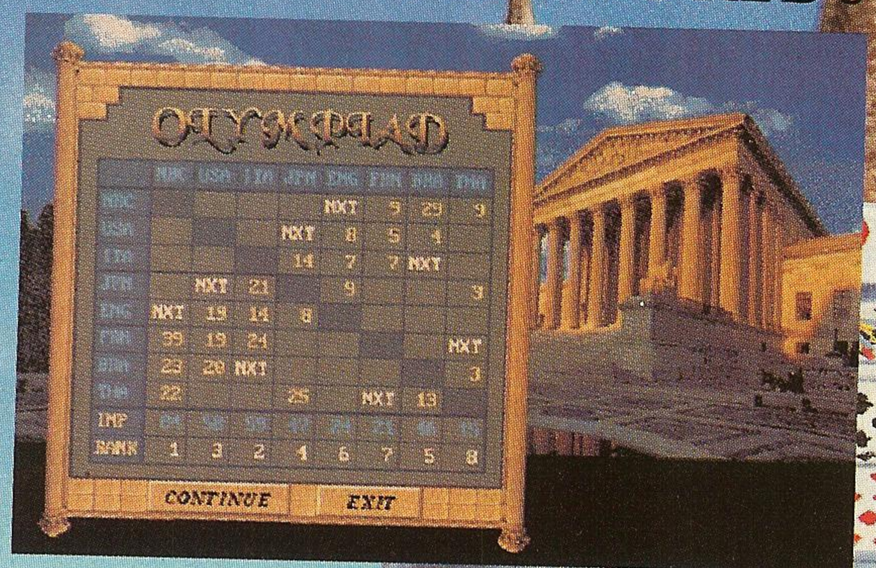


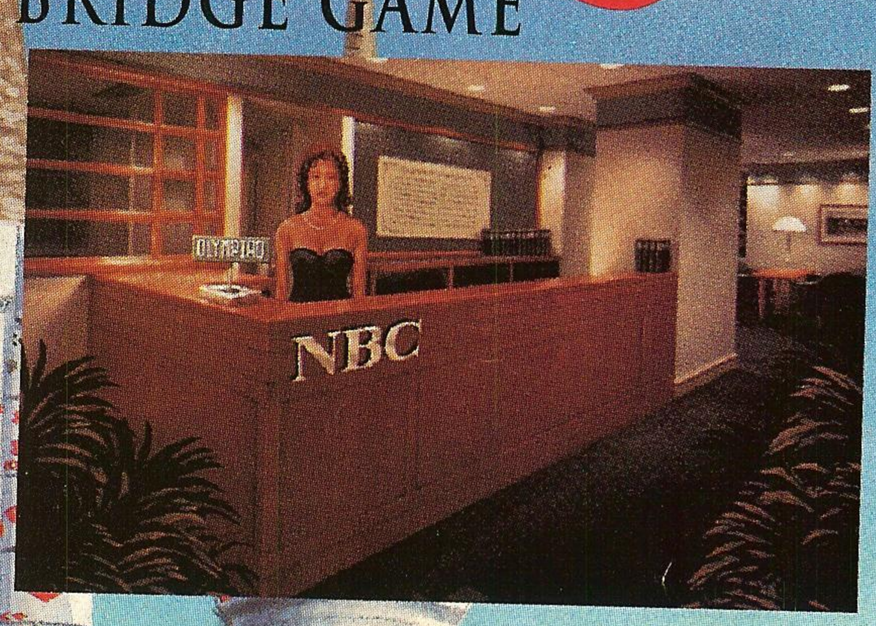
In this movie, when they talk about "The Player" they don't mean Tim Robbins in a movie about Hollywood. They mean *you*, the player, the star in the new **Wing Commander** story, "Heart of the Tiger." I've performed in lots of movies and television, even doing intricate special effects in the three *Back to the Future* movies (you remember me, don't you...BUTTHEADS?), but this is the first time in my career that I've been interrupted in the middle of a scene by Chris Roberts, the designer of the game and director of live action, saying, "Stop. Now recognize the player. Look at the camera", which gives the player the opportunity to click me, and follow my particular story line, or fly with me as their wingman. I've never been a part of a fully interactive CD-ROM before, never been clicked on before, and now I find myself standing in the middle of a group of actors, all of us staring at the camera, thinking, boy I hope they click me. Click me, player. Click me!

I'm just about the furthest thing from a cyberpunk there is, but I'd better get with the program and embrace the future. For my entire career as an actor, it's cost about seven bucks to see my work, a little more if you want popcorn. To play this game I might have to go out and get me a 90 MHz Pentium and a couple of big speakers. Yeah, it's a teensy bit more than a movie ticket. But from the looks of this game, it's worth it. So hand me a joystick and unplug the phone, because I'm spacing out. Literally.❑

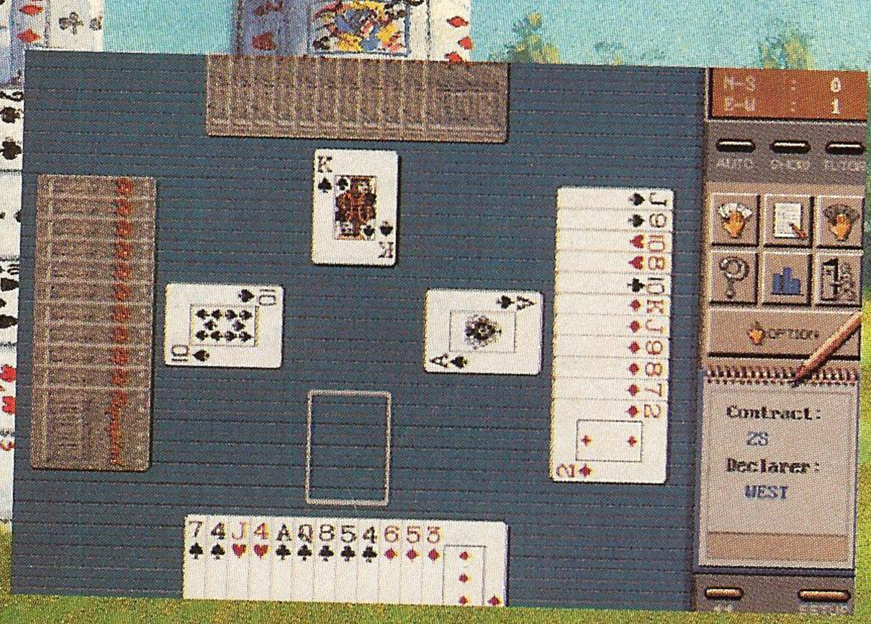
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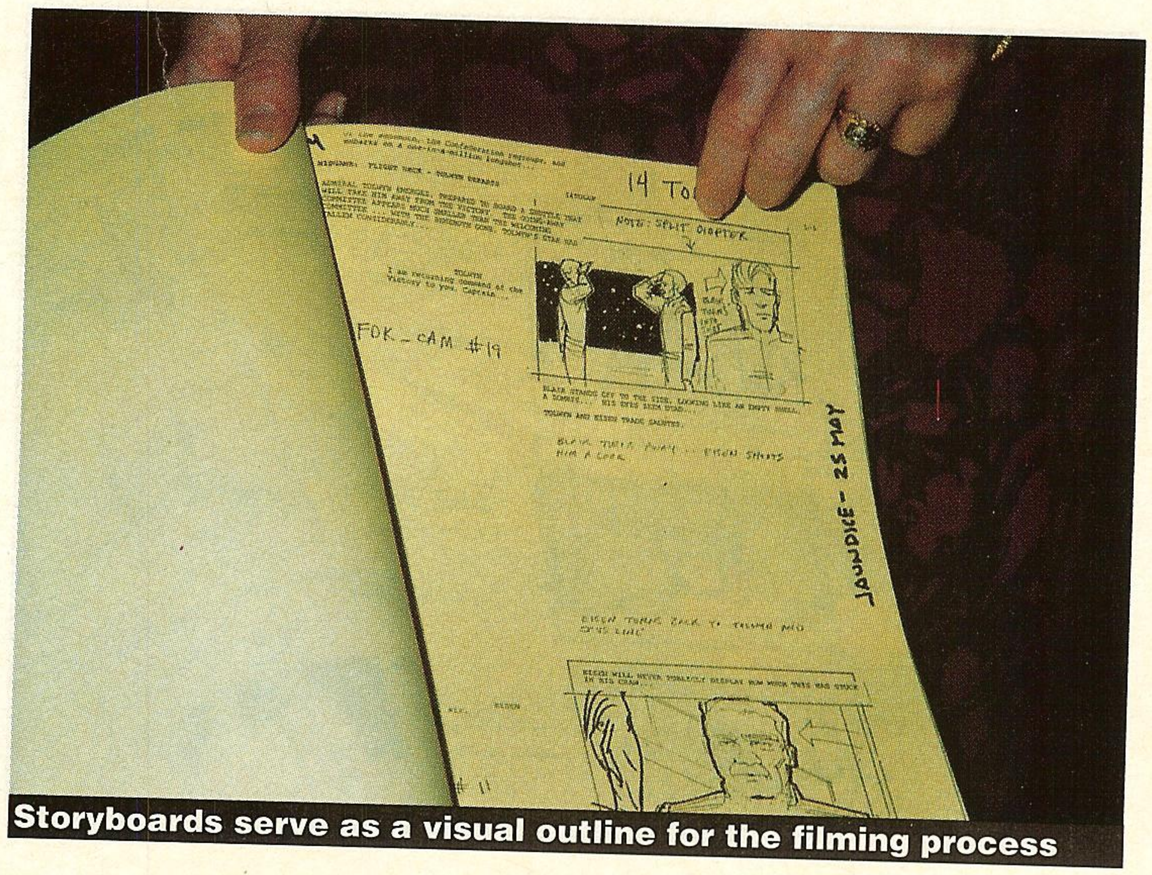
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John Rhys-Davies offers sage advice in the role of Paladin



Storyboards serve as a visual outline for the filming process

ducer with *EA*. His most notable projects include **Chuck Yeager's Flight Trainer** and **688 Attack Sub**. His new job consists of keeping a watchful eye on the bottom line and offering advice to his baptised-by-fire Director. As an example, *Hayvenhurst Studio*, the sound stage used for the five week long shoot, is located on a side street in a light industrial section in Van Nuys, California and is far from ostentatious. In fact, we very nearly drove by the sound stage on the first pass.

Hilleman discusses the cost of picking up the check for **Wing 3** evasively. "I think the budget is probably the biggest in the history of computer gaming. About what the exact number is, I think we'll let other people guess. That seems to be part of the **Wing Commander** mystery."

While insiders aren't discussing the film's budget, best guesstimates are that the film shoot will cost in the neighborhood of $4,000,000. "We are clearly spending money here in a broad investment. What we're doing here is buying content that we'll be using in a lot of platforms, and when you look at it in that context, in content on a per SKU basis, it's actually not much higher than what we currently invest. In slightly different terms, to get a graphic artist to replicate what we're filming here would be prohibitively expensive; so, in fact, I believe this is a way to save money. Not to mention the fact that there are a whole bunch of people who know how to do this who are underemployed, and there aren't enough good computer animators to do the work that there is to do."

According to Hilleman, another four projects are scheduled to go into production within the newly established *Electronic Arts* Stories and Movies Group, and they will probably make use of the same sound stage. Although he preferred not to comment on the titles, none are considered sequels based upon existing games.

Costs associated with producing films, such as the building of lavish sets or filming on location, have always been a sticking point for the motion picture studios. The problem becomes even more acute for a game company, since the return on investment is a fraction of what a film would typically reap. As a result, game companies have relied on more affordable superimposed backdrops, known as Ultimatte backdrops. The process is commonplace for television news programs. For instance, low budget news programs use computers to matte a weather map onto a blue Ultimatte background situated behind the weatherman, enabling the special effects people to change backgrounds quickly without the bother of shadows or props *[this is visible, by the way, in the movie* Ground Hog Day *in one of the opening scenes... - Steve]*.

Speaking of background color, the set literally exudes it. While the typical Ultimatte background is usually painted blue, the set of **Wing 3** has been spray painted a lime green, because the Confederation's uniforms were designed with a royal blue fabric. Left with a blue background, the uniforms wouldn't show up, because the computer would attempt to paint an image on the uniforms as well as the background.

Bob Kertesz, the Ultimatte Technician on the **Wing 3** project, describes the entire superimposition process: "Three separate images are being recorded (in the Ultimatte process). The first set of images is a composite image. We are also recording what is called the suppressed background image, which is the foreground without the green in it. Then we are also recording a high content black and white image, which is called the alpha check. The alpha channel is being recorded so that later on, when this background *does* get to be animated, we then use this black and white whole background to recut the map and reassemble the background." Get it?

The Cat in the (C)hat

Although a great deal of dialogue and character interaction has been interwoven into the plot of the game, the filming utilizes just a single BetaCam. Scenes are shot and reshot from several vantagepoints. Later, the various viewpoints are spliced together seamlessly on nearby computers to give the illusion of a free-flowing dialogue. Within a day's time, the Director can view the footage and make any changes on the spot.

Those actors enlisted to serve in the Kilrathi Navy must don some elaborate wardrobe, somewhat reminiscent of the Beast's costume in the Broadway production of *Beauty and the Beast*. The masks are fully articulated, allowing the actors a full range of lively and animated emotions when delivering their dialogue. *Precision Effects*, the technical geniuses behind the making of *Ninja Turtles*, have created the animated masks. A recorded speech track is married with remote robotic hand puppets (which control eyes, eyebrows and mouths) to maintain the illusion of free flowing speech. Further evidence of *Origin's* painfully accurate attention to detail.

Of the two CDs **Wing Commander 3** will ship on, fully one and a half platters have been reserved for the interactive elements, conversations and segués that are being built into the game.

Back(ground) to the Future

All of the intricate backgrounds have been rendered on *Silicon Graphics* machines. Chris Douglas, the Art Director on **Wing 3**, indicated that some of the highly detailed ships were created and rendered with *SGIs* in a scant five days time. The actors are overlayed onto the backdrop and then retouched with anti-aliasing routines to reduce the character outlines that invariably crop up in composite imaging. If the need arises to alter some of the graphics, Chris and his *SGI* have been deposited on-site and are readily available to modify or re-render any or all of the background shots.

It's anybody's guess where the current rage of mixing live action video footage and interactive gaming will go. *Origin's* approach with **Wing 3** is to build the game first, then embellish it with a Hollywood flair that will hopefully heighten the experience. Thus far, both contingents freely admit that the project has been a learning experience for both film producer and gamemaker alike. Hollywood has a new venue to display their varied talents, while Silicon Valley has a better chance at appealing to a broader-based audience.

Once again, Icarus is aloft, courtesy of the Daedalian efforts of *Electronic Arts* and *Origin*. We wish them all the best of luck and offer this word of advice: break a leg, not a wing!❑



It's splatter time again!

Scott Grant goes undercover in Texas to see this work in progress and finds out Hell really does exist

WORK IN PROGRESS

An ominous seven story building towers over the rest of downtown Mesquite. Black framework. Black windows. How much more black could it be? None. None more black. This anomaly, stark against the blazing Texas sun, seems to whisper to passers by: *"Here lies the gateway to unsavory things."* Here lies *id*.

The lair of **DOOM** is like no other office I have ever seen. Stereos blare. CDs litter the floor. Unprintable words are shouted from one room to the next. People are actually (gasp!) having fun at work.

One of the main tasks today is playtesting a newly created level of **DOOM II: Hell on Earth**. That accounts for the majority of the bodily references being slung about.

For the most part, **DOOM II** will be to its predecessor what **Spear of Destiny** is to **Wolfenstein 3D**. A retail-only game, **DOOM II** will feature thirty or so new levels —horrible twisted things that obviously stem from a disordered mind and some sort of abnormal childhood. **DOOM II** will incorporate the same engine as its father game, but will run on a newer version of the operating system.

Right now, the completed pieces of **DOOM II** run on version 1.4 of the operating system. This upgrade will also be released as a patch to the first game, and may be available by the time you read this. This version fixes some minor bugs most of us have never even noticed, and offers a few tweaks to multi-player sessions as well.

One addition is a new rule to Deathmatch. In days of old, poor sports in bad health could walk into lava or eat a barrel to finish themselves off and deny their opponent credit for the kill. Version 1.4 docks you one frag from your total for such tactics, further proof that Hell ain't for wimps.

Speed Demons Unite

Another feature of the updated system is the inclusion of a turbo mode (somebody call *Capcom*! Half their marketing strategy just got ripped off!). If you just drank a case of *Jolt Cola* to give yourself super-human reflexes, you'll appreciate the ability to dash through **DOOM**'s levels so fast you can barely make out what you are passing. Kind of like piloting Richard Garriot's car down I-35. The origin (insert pun here) of this feature lies in the heated competition within *id*'s walls. When designer John Carmack was recently blessed with a Pentium, his doomed adversaries were forced to play with smaller view screens to get their computers to match his speed. Somebody thought this was a little unfair, and hacked the code to give himself a 50% speed boost, enabling him to outrun rockets. Now it's our turn.

It'll Never be Enough!

Although the main idea of **DOOM II** is to give people new levels to die in, a few perks are being added to the game as well. So far one new weapon is in place — a heavy duty double-barreled shotgun that does twice the damage of the old one. At this point nobody at *id* is sure if any more weapons will be added to your arsenal or not, but crazed cyberpsychopaths like me can always hope. Personally, I'd like to see some sort of microwave gun that you fire continuously until your foe explodes in a shower of blood and internal organs. But that's just me.

When **DOOM** was being developed, network play was a factor from the start. Despite this, John Carmack was taken by surprise when people all over the world flocked to multi-player challenges as avidly as they did. To make sure that people will be killing their friends and co-workers for a long time to come, all the levels in **DOOM II** are being created with Deathmatch potential very much in mind. The one level I saw (or tried to see as John screamed through it like a turbobat out of hell) was loaded with ledges, catwalks, intersections, and dead-end alleyways that practically beg for Deathmatch play. Judging from the verbal abuse at the office, I think it's safe to say that the **DOOM II** production team is their own best test market.

Did I forget about the monsters? No. I've just been saving the most nightmarish part for last, silly person. Of course, your old friends will be back, but this time they're taking you a little more

CD-ROM Today

MEMO

TO: Ilene at Origin

FROM: Lisa Howie, managing editor at CD-ROM Today

DATE: Jan. 23, 1995

RE: Wing Commander III reprints

You have permission to make reprints of the Wing Commander III story that appeared in the August/September 1994 issue of CD-ROM Today (pages 28-29).

Lisa M. Howie

Lisa M. Howie

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In Brief... SOFTWARE

First Take on Take 2

This fall should be a big and busy season for newcomer Take 2. The software publisher will charge out of the gate with its first five titles. *Star Crusader* is a wild romp through the cosmos (officially termed a "space-flight combat simulator"), while the edutainment-oriented *Assault on Everest* carries you to the world's tallest mountain. Also slated for fall delivery are *Bureau 13*, an interactive graphic adventure, and a series of educational products (*Picture Pages*) featuring Bill Cosby. Perhaps most bizarre among Take 2's offerings is *Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller*, starring the computerized talents of Dennis Hopper and Grace Jones. In *Hell*, a futuristic society manipulates its citizens by creating a synthetic netherworld. All titles will be released for IBM CD-ROM, except for the *Picture Pages* line, which will be available in IBM and Mac CD-ROM formats. Take 2... (212) 941-2988.

Desktop Quarterbacks

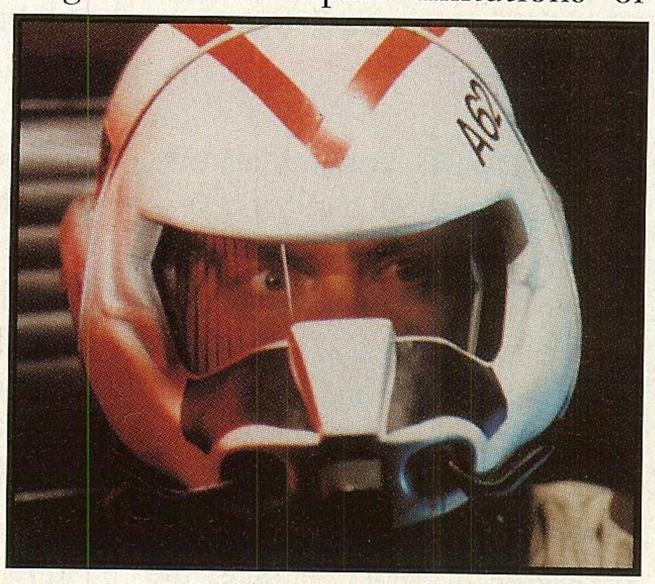
Tired of second-guessing professional football coaches? Ready to take the helm and run your own strategies? If so, Sport Accolade has created *All-Pro Video Football* with you in mind. This football coaching sim ($69.95) is built around an All-Star game and uses the names and stats of real players. Sport Accolade staged and filmed over 600 football plays, using the Orlando Predators of the Arena Football League (standing in for their NFL counterparts). This footage was turned into video clips. (Choose the play, then see it happen.) *All-Pro Video Football* was developed in Script X, which allows the disc to run on either IBM or Mac systems. Accolade...(408) 985-1700.

Wing Commander III Goes Hollywood

If you haven't heard of the Wing Commander series yet, you will soon. The first two installments (with sales currently topping the 1.5 million mark) were top-notch futuristic flight-sim/games, among the most hardware-demanding games for their time. Origin's Wing Commander titles set new heights in PC entertainment technology.

In its first incarnations, the Wing Commander world existed solely in the digitized world of the computer. Today, *Wing Commander III* is being acted out on a sound stage in L. A.'s San Fernando Valley.

Welcome to Hollywood, a universe once more distant from Silicon Valley than the actual 350 miles implies. As the connection between north and south grows stronger, the design process is changing. Computer animation is no longer good enough. Jerky movements and unsynchronized speech are passe, and computer-generated characters are pale imitations of what a digitized environment of real people can offer.

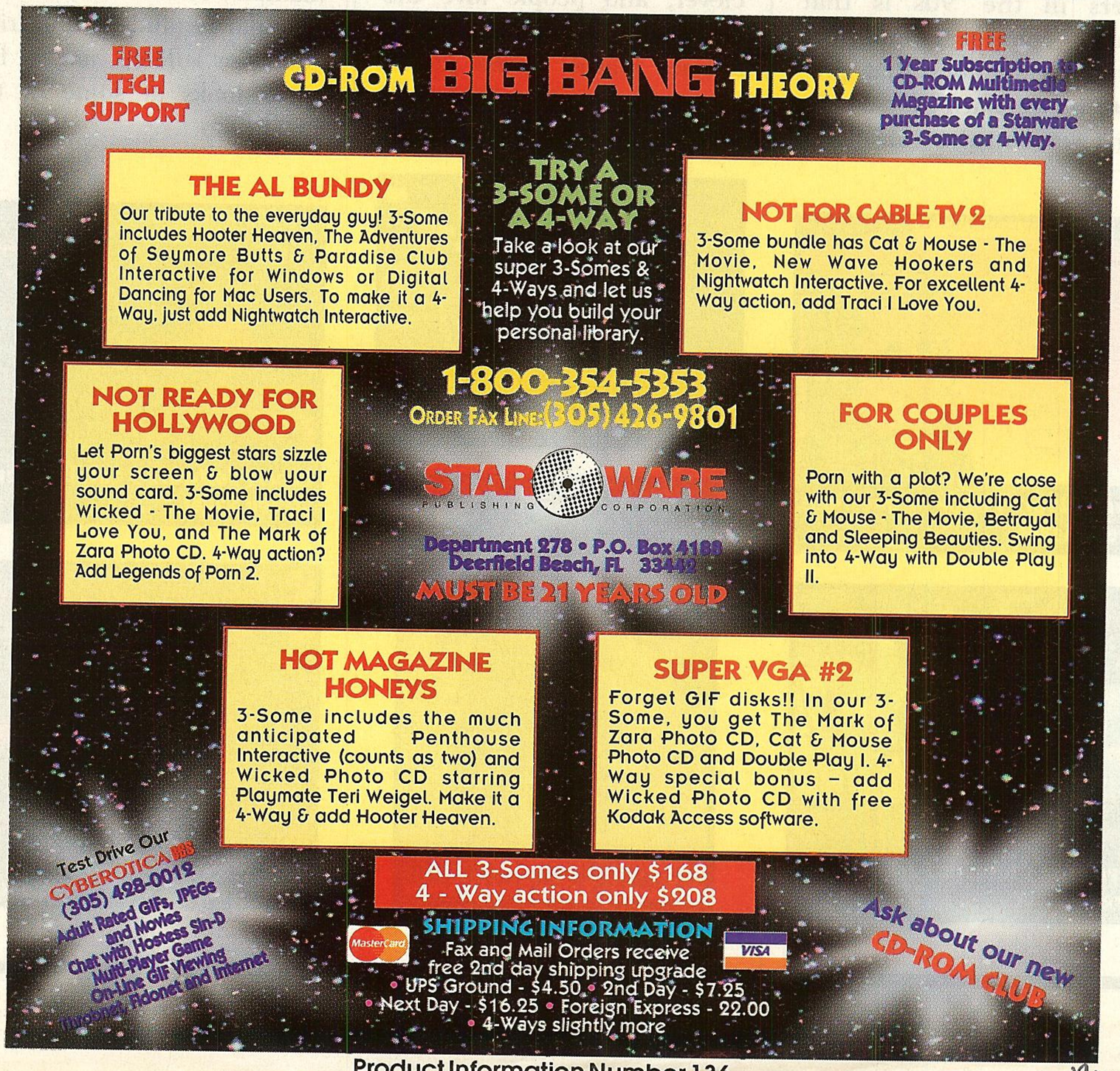


Computer animation...out. Video is in.

Wing Commander's creator and director, Chris Roberts, a 26-year-old native of England, is sitting in a classic folding canvas chair. But what he sees is quite different from a traditional movie-director's view. The sound stage walls and floor are swathed in a covering of flourescent green cloth. There is no scenery, simply an array of lights atop poles and a myriad of differently shaped diffusers. In the middle, actors Mark Hamill and Jason Bernard are preparing for one of many verbal confrontations scripted into the 25-day shoot.

In front of Roberts stand two monitors, and on the screen is a precursor to what players will see on their computer screen — two men in blue uniforms arguing in front of a 3-D rendering of a flight deck. A few brief instructions, a click of the scene slate, and the camera rolls, its output appearing on a battery of computer monitors perched on the sidelines.

The budget for *Wing Commander III: Heart of the*



Product Information Number 136



Mark Hamill leads the cast of WC III.

Tiger CD-ROM is $3 million, a new summit in the computer entertainment industry. The staggering sum doesn't faze Roberts. "I have a name brand," he says. "I am not going to lose money on it."

Roberts takes his Hollywood adventure seriously. He hired a pair of scriptwriters with television experience. They produced a 300-page document which will result in two hours of live video in the game. Actors like Hamill, John Rhys-Davies, and Malcolm McDowell are name brands from the movie world. Traditional film folks like costumers, makeup artists, and key grips mingle on the stage with video producers and technicians.

All the game's backgrounds were rendered before the start of the Hollywood shoot, using powerful Silicon Graphics Indigo machines at Electronic Arts' San Mateo production studio (Origin is owned by EA). Each live shot of the actors is recorded three ways: against black, in silhouette against a white background, and as a composite of the studio take and the computer-generated background.

The silhouetting helps with anti-aliasing, a means of blending edges together to reinforce the illusion that characters and background appear together as in a single scene. Players will be able to study their spaceship from many angles, including outside shots.

Roberts expects worldwide sales to reach 500,000. *Wing Commander III* will be packaged on two CD-ROMs and require Super VGA graphics, a double-speed CD-ROM, and a 16-bit audio card. It will offer more than four dozen flight missions and plenty of opportunity for players to take the story down different paths. And a sense of drama — offend your wing men and you might attend your own funeral.

— Anne Gregor

In Brief... HARDWARE

Card Game

The lowly business card may never be replaced – it's just too good at its job. On the other hand, it's easy for cards to wind up scattered and misplaced. Pacific Crest Technologies understood this when they developed their CardGrabber system, in which cards are slid into a scanner about the size of a Walkman. The captured text is saved in a Windows-based address book. PCT has added a new QuickGrab utility to the product that allows users to capture more complicated images (like logos, signatures, and graphics). QuickGrab is free to registered owners of the CardGrabber system, which retails for $349. Pacific Crest Technologies...(800) 870-3391.

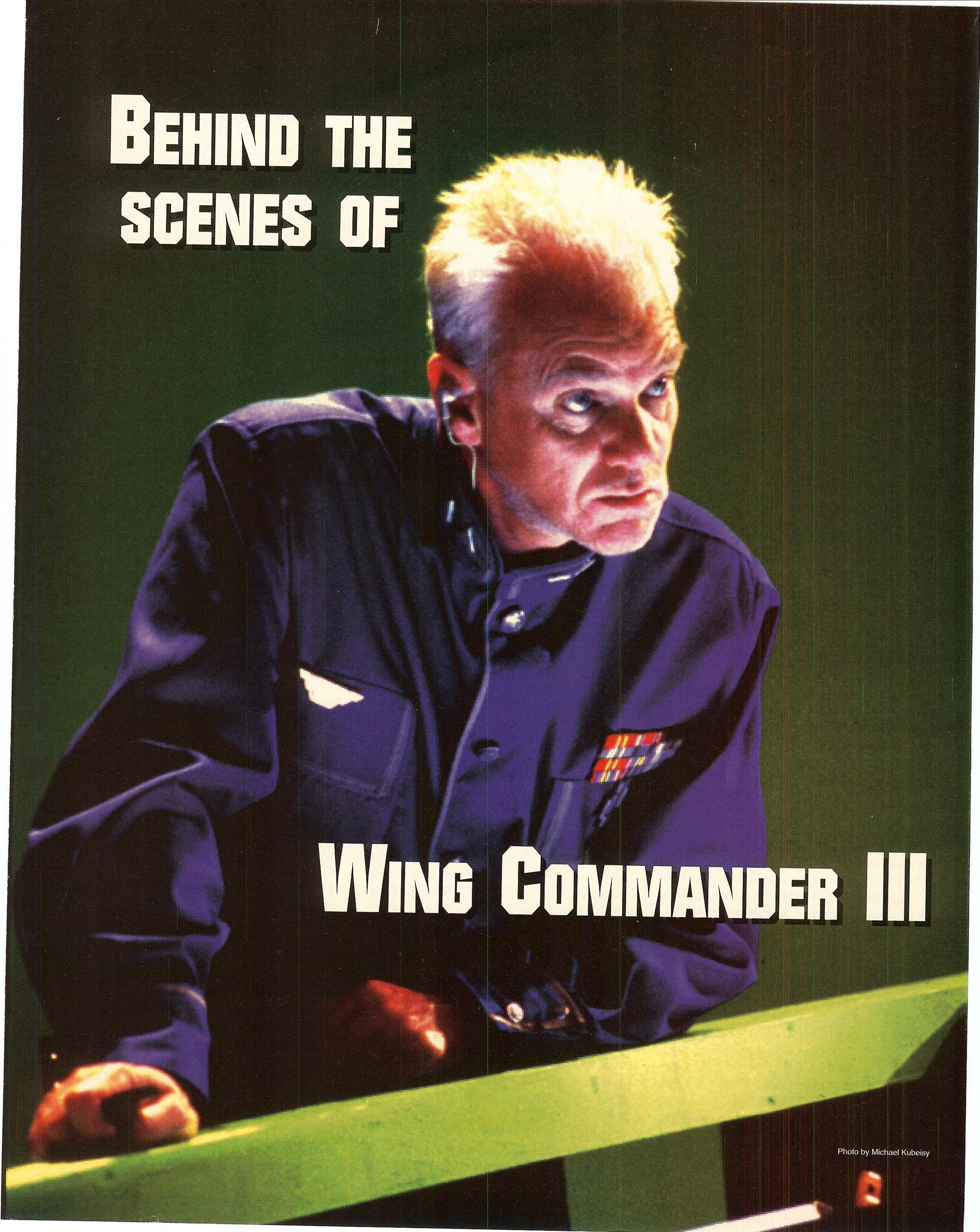
Jan. 19, 1995

Eileen

Feel free to use either black and white or color photocopies of any and all articles regarding Wing Commander III that have appeared in any issues of Computer Game Review and CD-ROM Entertainment and/or Computer Game Review, notably August, 1994; October, 1994 and February, 1995. Use these articles internally or externally. We ask that we be given credit for said articles if you do decide to use them as part of a press kit or other material used by people outside of Origin.

Steve Honeywell
Editor
Computer Game Review and CD-ROM Entertainment

BEHIND THE SCENES OF



WING COMMANDER III

Photo by Michael Kubeisy

In Van Nuys, California, there is a lot that looks like it might have come off the set of a Western. The front gate looks like something out of Fort Apache, the high wooden gates with the name Hayvenhurst Studios spelled out in the wood. One would never suspect that behind those doors, the filming going on was not only of a science fiction piece, but also of a genre that is just now starting to come into prominence.

The style, naturally, is that of interactive movies. The filming at Hayvenhurst studios was for the proposed Christmas release of Origin's ultimate sci-fi sequel, Wing Commander III.

In a dramatic switch from Wing Commander games of the past (WC, WC II, WC Academy and Privateer) and of the very near future (Wing Commander Armada), Wing Commander III will use live actors as well as animatronic creations for the non-interactive, cinematic portions of the game.

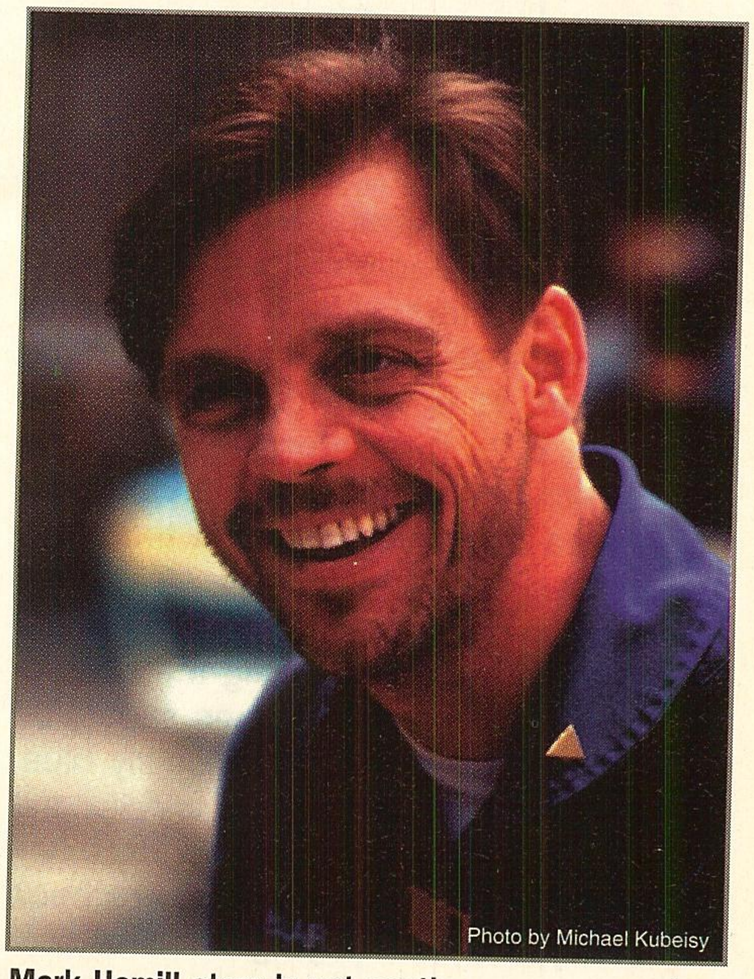
I had the opportunity to travel to Hayvenhurst Studios and spend a day on the set of Wing Commander III recently. The following several pages reveal some of what the game will contain and much more of what it was like to see a movie shoot for something that isn't quite a movie.

One day in early May, I received a phone call from David Swofford at Origin. Dave, in the course of the conversation, informed me that Origin was shooting Wing Commander III around the Los Angeles area through the end of the month. Obviously, the game was going to use full-motion video and actual actors. Naturally, I wanted to spend a day on the set.

Then, Dave told me that among the people that would be starring in WCIII were Mark Hamill, Tim Curry, John Rhys-Davies and Malcom McDowell. Now I really wanted to go. I'm a fan of all four of these actors, particularly McDowell (who I've liked since I saw him in Time After Time) and Hamill, who has been a childhood hero ever since he took the role of a farmboy who once rescued a princess a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

So it was both as a level-headed, cynical reporter and as a fan that I went out to Van Nuys. Neither the hard-bitten reporter part of me nor the star-struck fan in me was disappointed by what I saw.

The day on the set starts much later than I had figured. We arrived on set around 10:00, expecting something of the shoot to be working. Nothing was, however, and many of the actors were not yet at the studio. There were a few milling around on the set which looked like a huge green field surrounded by every piece of equipment that it was possible to fit into the room. Technicians talked back and forth, trying to get all of the machinery ready for the day.

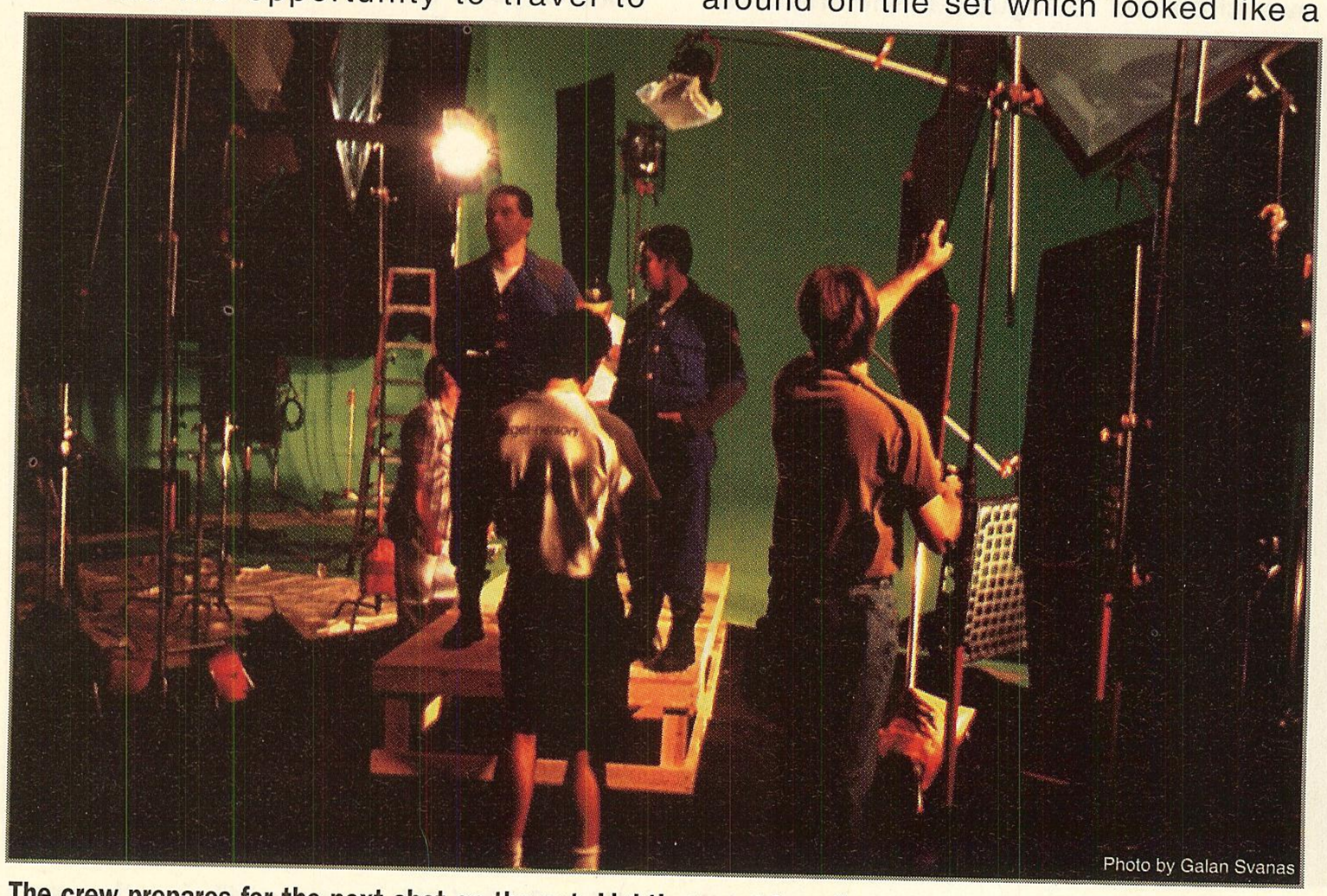

Photo by Michael Kubeisy

Mark Hamill stars in yet another space opera in a career defined by them.

Watching the workers prepare for the day ahead was fascinating. They looked like ants scurrying over a vast hill, an impression not diminished by the massive green backdrop. There was so much movement and activity going on, it struck me that very little was apparently getting accomplished. Workers hollered back and forth, getting the machines exactly the way they wanted them, then went back a few minutes later and did the whole thing over again. Lighting was moved, then returned to its original position and moved again. Word came around that the filming would probably start around 11:00. This statement seemed to have no affect on the assorted gaffers and grips who ran pell-mell around the studio. The 10:00 deadline did not, it would seem, mean they had to get everything done quickly or that they now had more time than they thought.

Slowly, the actors started to filter onto the set. In another part of the studio, work on the animatronic portions of the game, specifically the Kilrathi, began. And true to the earlier statement, at around 11:00 Pacific time, the real work of the day started up, with several actors at a time going onto the green screen set and filming their reactions to the funeral of one of the pilots.

I wondered about the late start; being from the Midwest, 11:00 felt like 1:00 in the afternoon to me. It seemed strange that no filming was done until well after lunchtime, but I was assured that this was a standard procedure, and that the later


Photo by Galan Svanas

The crew prepares for the next shot on the set. Lighting must be adjusted and camera angles determined before the actors can shoot the scene.

much, since his skin is chafed and his nose deeply grooved. In costume, the mask fits tightly over his face, while the Kilrathi hands fit much like extra-large gloves. The feet are slightly different. To make Hobbes and the other catmen taller than the humans in the game, the Kilrathi feet and boots are fitted with stilts that make Hood stand about eight feet tall.

Precision Effects, his company, has been around for about eight years, making the masks and creatures and special effects that have continued to astound movie goers. Among the projects Hood has worked on are The Abyss, Total Recall, Demolition Man, Beetlejuice, RoboCop and more.

Hood's job is to do more than just hold up the mask. While filming, he must move and gesture in the part of the character he is playing. Unlike most actors, however, he doesn't speak the role of his character or move his mouth. The facial expressions and mouth movements of the Kilrathi are controlled several feet away and a console consisting of several high-tech gadgets. The first is a glove-like instrument that allows the animatronic operator to give life to the characters' faces. Lips sneer, eyebrows are raised, the creatures smile, frown and more. The puppeteer's other hand is in something that looks remotely like a torn sock puppet. This controls the various lip movements and speech actions of the Kilrathi head. Thus, the man inside the mask and the one controlling all of the facial expressions of the character must act in synchronization to give the illusion that the catman is one creature, not the combined actions of several puppeteers. Watching the filming, the nature of the Kilrathi is obvious. This is not the case when sitting down in front of a VCR and looking through the rushes of a previous day's work.

A Short Talk with Mark Hamill

Mark Hamill is best known for the role of Luke Skywalker in Star Wars, The Empire Strikes Back and The Return of the Jedi. However, his acting career didn't stop with this trilogy. Currently engaged in voice acting for a number of cartoon series (including the role of the Joker on the animated Batman television series), Hamill took a few minutes out of his hectic schedule to talk about Wing Commander III, Chris Roberts and being the straight man. . .

On getting the role of Christopher Blair, main character of WCIII: "Well, it came more out of my voice over work in the sense that I had done one previous interactive game, Gabriel Knight. . .That was the first time I became aware of interactive [games]. My sons are more up to speed on that. I'm afraid I'm more in the 'roll the dice, board game' mode. But, I was fascinated. It reminded me of books I read as a kid that said 'If you want the detective to go to the attic, turn to page 87, if you want to go to the basement, turn to page 63.'

"To me, I was more interested in playing games than being in one."

On Chris Roberts as a director: "I was afraid I would be on a set in front of the whole crew and be triggered over to the wrong side of the page, so to speak, the wrong scenario. It was a fear of the unknown, I guess. But meeting with Chris Roberts was very positive for me, because he is Wing Commander.

"If you hadn't told me [that Roberts was a first-time director], I wouldn't have been able to pick him out of a line-up of first-time directors. He's very easy to work with.

"Reading [the script] was the scariest thing. Meeting him was the thing that made me realize that not only can it be done, but that I want to do it.

"It's astonishing, the parallels I see between him and [George] Lucas. They know exactly what piece they want and what they need. When he said to me after a take, 'Faster this time, with a little more intensity,' it was scary. We had shirts made up when we did Star Wars that said 'faster' on the front and 'more intensity' on the back, because that was [Lucas'] favorite direction. Another favorite of his was 'We're going to do it again, but this time, do it better.' Chris hasn't said that yet."

On being the Joker: "People are stunned to know that I am the voice of the Joker for Batman. Even the producers have said 'We never would have thought of you in a million years.'

"I went in to pitch storylines with my writing partner and I had a knowledge of Batman that impressed them, and they thought of me when the auditions came out. They certainly didn't hand it to me. They wouldn't have cast me in Amadeus if I didn't go out and audition for Sir Peter Hall."

On his career: "I think I've been very lucky. I've done a lot of what I wanted to do and still have enough out there that I haven't accomplished that I can aim for."

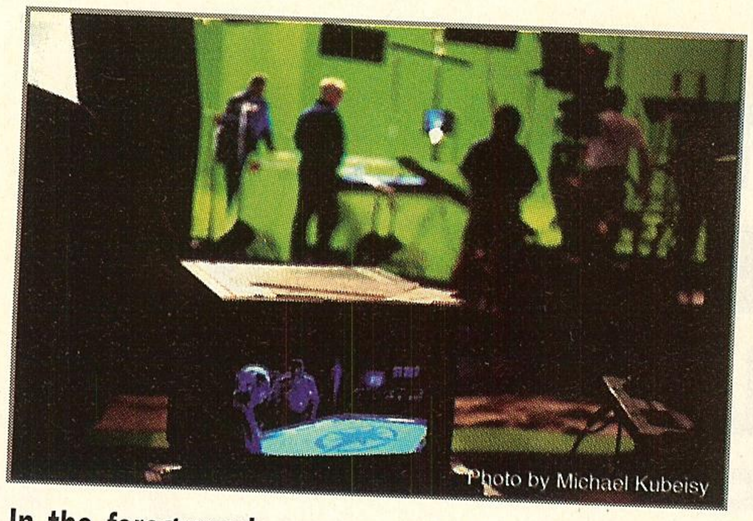
On how this role compares with that of Luke Skywalker: "It's a natural progression, chronologically. Luke was a farmboy. He matured in the movies, but Blair is a man who really knows his stuff. He's the authority figure."

On being that authority figure: "As usual, it's some of the supporting roles that I think are a little bit more showy. Once again, I'm the serious guy, the guy with the agenda. That doesn't allow for humor, really. [Chris Roberts said] to me today, 'Take this opportunity, this is the only time in the whole show that you get to show depth, character and humor.' I'm glad he didn't tell me that when I first met him, I might have backed away. When I read the script, I said 'Maniac is the most fun part.'

"On the other hand, it wasn't seen very much, but I got to do the part of the Trickster for a television series called 'The Flash.' It was a full, 180 degree turnaround. . .There's always somebody that's the protagonist. There's always somebody that's the anchor of the piece, and for once, in 'The Flash,' I got to climb up the walls and chew on the chandelier and roll my eyes and turn cartwheels."

On acting in front of a green screen: "I came the week of pre-production before we actually started shooting to look at all the toys. I walked on the set, and there was that big green screen, and I immediately flashed back to Jabba's palace [in Return of the Jedi] and George saying 'In about ten years, these kinds of movies will be prohibitively expensive. . . What we wanted to do [was] build Jabba's palace puppet sized, put it next door and have you guys all on blue screen and put you in. Save millions.'

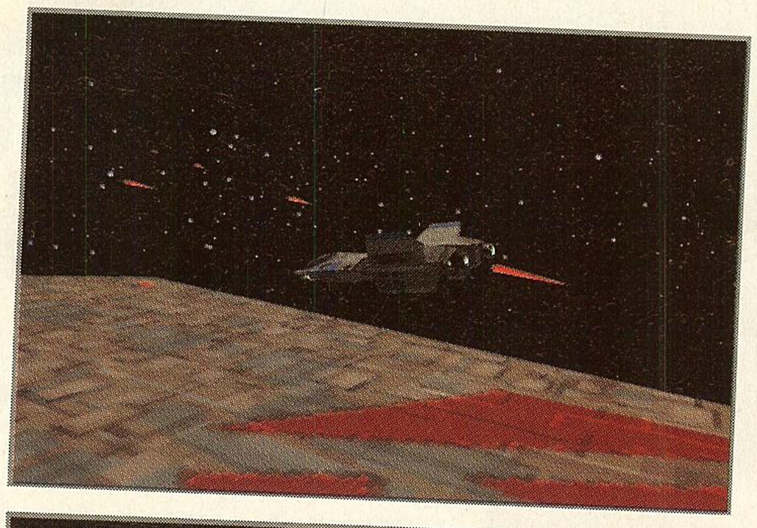
I thought about that, and I jokingly said, 'Good, George. You're going to make it even harder on the actors. Now, we're looking at a piece of tape for our planet exploding. Now you're going to take away the set and the props? You're getting one step further removed from reality. What's next, blue body stockings so you can mat in a new [pair of] trousers?' And here I was, ten years later, doing exactly what he predicted. You're climbing ladders that lead to nowhere, yet you look down on the monitor, and you've got your ship right there. It's the very essence of what actors do. We pretend."



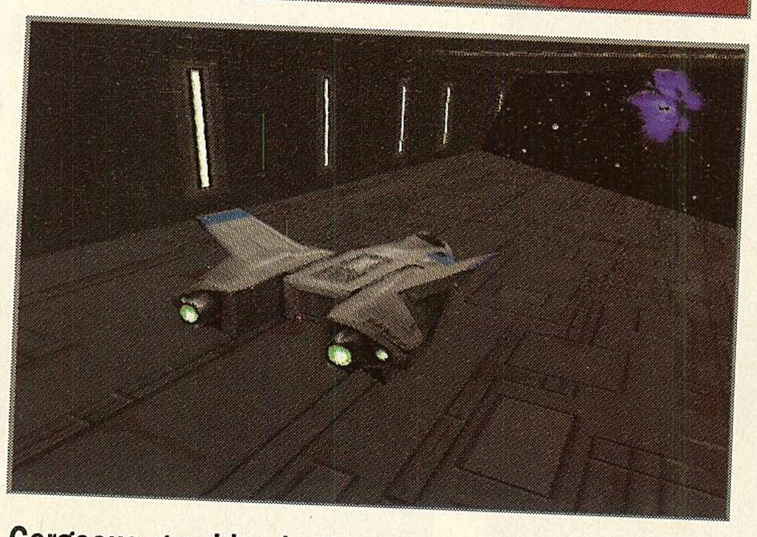
In the foreground, you can see the results of the composited picture as it will look on screen.

each other, smoking the occasional cigarette. Actor Jason Bernard stands on the steps, waiting for a chance to go back on set. I ask him what working on this set has been like, and he tells me that it's been very much like other shoots, except for the fact that there isn't any scenery, there aren't any props and there's nothing really to go off of when acting.

The result of this, Bernard determines after I ask him about what it's like on the set questioned, is that working on Wing







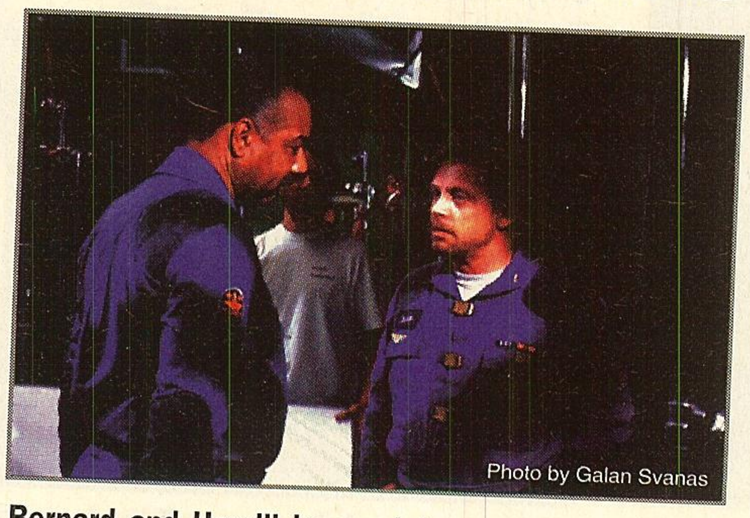


Gorgeous graphics in the cut scenes as well as the live video will help make Wing Commander III a gaming experience to remember.

"It's astonishing, the parallels I see between [Chris Roberts] and [George] Lucas."
—Mark Hamill

Commander III is acting at its purest essence. It's the quintessential thing that actors do in that they make believe, and in doing so, make others believe the same thing. The only things the actors have to rely on besides the direction of Roberts and the uniforms on their backs are each other.

The current trend, of course, is to secure recognizable talent for games. Veterans like Brian Keith (Under a Killing Moon) and Ned Beatty (Loadstar) have chosen the medium as a new form of acting. Kirk Cameron has lent his talents to a title (The Horde) while Dennis Hopper, Grace Jones and Jeffrey Holder all appear as demons in an upcoming adventure (Hell: A Cyberpunk Nightmare). Thus, getting famous actors like Malcom McDowell and John Rhys-Davies, well-known talents like Hamill and recognizable character actors like Bernard and Tom Wilson (Back to the Future) helps bring the game alive for the player. It also helps make the game more accessible to those who don't normally play computer games, since it gives them something familiar in an environment that is new to them.



Bernard and Hamill in a quiet moment on the set of wing Commander III.

Of course, trends in computer games often don't last, but this one looks like it's here to stay. As the medium becomes more and more respected, it's possible that we will see an even further meshing of Silicon Valley and Hollywood, as game directors take chances on unknown or little-known actors to star in their latest piece of gaming.

Back on the set, Hamill rehearses a scene. It looks strange that he is standing on boxes to make him look taller next to the towering Tom Wilson, who plays Maniac. As the actors go through the scene, they run through their basic dialogue several times. Then, everything grows quiet and the filming commences.

After a couple takes, they move onto the next version of the same scene. Everything sounds virtually the same, but the cameras focus on a different character this time. The same process is repeated to focus on a third character.

After this, the different possible variations are filmed. Depending on the choice the player makes, Blair's response is quite different. One possible response has the effect of heartening the other pilots, while another possible answer starts to erode their morale and confidence. Entire dialogue trees are mapped out and acted in rapid succession.

At around 4:00, everyone takes a break for lunch. While on the set there is a constant supply of food, not a lot of people seem to pay much attention to it. Most of it is finger food and quick snacks. This, for many of the actors, is the first real meal of the day.

After lunch/dinner, work resumes on the main stage. This time, the actors are taking turns filming smaller film sequences that will be placed on some of the various scenes on the ship. Each character has a neutral position and several different reactions. Filming these sequences goes quickly—each actor generally finishes his or her work in five minutes or so, with a few minutes in between to get the lighting set for the next actor.

The only exception to this is Hobbes, who has to be carted in with his controls from the other set. By this time, Hood looks to be in pain. His bandages have been replaced, and they seem to help a little. Hood comments that the head is like having a moving bowling ball resting on the bridge of his nose.

After a few minutes, Hood finishes his filming and removes Hobbes' head with definite relief. Outside, Hamill, sitting in his trailer, asks if he can be excused from the shooting to watch "The Simpsons." The shooting goes on well into the evening before the whole process starts again the next day. ***-Steve Honeywell***

BEWARE THE COMING OF THE CD-ROM INVASION!

ARE FLOPPY DISK DRIVES DOOMED TO BECOME AN ANTIQUATED STORAGE MEDIUM?

I suppose I was a little disheartened by the plethora of CD-ROM-only games at the show. I for one have better luck with floppy games, and I tend to enjoy them more in general. I have a real problem with games becoming too realistic. Games are supposed to be entertaining, a break away from real life, not an extension of it, and it seems that from this point on, we're only going to see games with digitized graphics or the equivalent.

Don't get me wrong, I like great graphics as much as the next person, but it seems that we've started to exist under this mindset that thinks every game needs to have stand out visuals and sound. I've said it before, I'll say it again: graphics and sound don't equal game play. I'm worried that we're going to start seeing a lot more instances of flash without substance, something a lot of diehard computer gamers have been complaining about with regard to CD-ROM games in the first place.

Unfortunately, this last CES has done little to assuage my fears. The fact is that everyone and their brother is headed down that CD-ROM alley, and if you want to continue to play computer games, you're going to need to have a CD-ROM drive. If you don't have one, buy one.

Since CD-ROM is the way things are going, I'd like to propose something overheard in a panel discussion I took part in at CES. It was proposed that the term "single-speed CD-ROM drive" be applied to what is now called the double-speed, with the current single-speed being called a half-speed CD-ROM. This makes perfect sense, since in about six months, those of you who jumped on that CD-ROM bandwagon will probably be out of luck. Almost nothing is going to work with the current single-speed (proposed half-speed) CD-ROM drive after Christmas.

CES is always a painful time for me. Being one of the more sedentary people I know sometimes has its benefits—I generally find myself pretty well-rested for those late-night deadlines. Thus I always fear the time of CES, since it always involves spending hours and hours on my feet, walking around, carrying pounds of press kits, materials and toys. I also have a tendency to lose my voice in a matter of hours, and end up sounding like **Tom Waits**.

But I was bolstered by the fact that this show was in Chicago, so I didn't have to board an airplane. I did, however, board a train, several taxis and a couple of barstools in my three days at the show. The following is what I felt was the best that CES had to offer.

As mentioned previously, **Impressions** was handing out the best toys. The Nerf Bow and Arrow sets will come in handy as weaponry to defend our **CGR** offices against rampaging invaders. Speaking of invaders, **Lords of the Realm** looks to be one of the games of the year, with pretty graphics and a nice interface to go with it. Second place for the best toy of the show goes to the multi-colored Slinkys handed out by **Koei**.

On the topic of **Koei**, they had one of my favorite booths, since their meeting room had a roof on it. Smart move! Combining the booth and toy categories, you get the award for the best booth toy, which goes hands-down to the stock car sitting at **Papyrus**' booth.

The best party was undoubtedly the one that **Domark** held for **Lords of Midnight**. It was wild, fun and a great time. Not to be passed up, though, was the rather peaceful, relaxing fest held at Chicago's own **Field Museum**. It featured a good big band, very tasty food and a chance to chat with the good folks at **Nu Reality**, **Maxis** and **Knowledge Adventure**. And, on the party front, both **Sierra On-Line** and **Spectrum HoloByte** had nice receptions on the show floor at their meeting room and booth, respectively.

The biggest announcements, as far as I was concerned, were a couple of game unveilings. **Interplay** showed off **Cyberia**, which, in addition to having a **Thomas Dolby** soundtrack, looks great. Second, and on a more traditional "computer game" front, **MicroProse**'s official unveiling of **Sid Meier's Colonization** drew one of the biggest crowds at the show.

In that same booth, I was pleased to hear that **Alexey Pajitnov** was getting his own line of games from **Spectrum HoloByte**. As a long-time fan of **Tetris**, I am happy that the game's creator will be given a chance to keep me in front of my system for even longer amounts of time.

As a long-time fan of board games, I am greatly impressed by the upcoming line of **Avalon Hill** products. These games are all based on their previously published games, meaning that there is no need to go through and write up all the rules for everything. All that's needed is a straight conversion from board game rules to computer algorithm. With the backlog of titles they have, **AH** could put out a game a month for years. I'm waiting to hear that they're doing **Outdoor Survival**. And the deep, dark secret of the company is quite deep and dark. We won't tell!

I got a chance to play a little bit of **TIE Fighter**. I was frankly worried that **LucasArts** would not be able to pull off the game as well as they had done **X-Wing**, but I needn't have worried. A lot of the problems have been corrected; I particularly like the three-dimensional map and the ability to leave the mission after the primary goals have been completed. All I want now is a copy of the game!

Doom 2, **Doom 2**, **Doom 2**! It would make sense that of all of the games at CES that featured an interface similar to **id**'s mega-hit, it would be the id guys themselves who would do it the best. While there wasn't a whole lot playable, it stands to reason that there won't be significant changes on an interface that's been this successful.

Speaking of interface changes, I heard over by the **New World Computing** booth that a new **Might and Magic** game is in the works. While it isn't titled yet (it would be number VI had New World not dropped the numbering system), the story is that the company is developing an entirely new interface for it. While I understand the need for this, I am a little disappointed to see such a friendly interface go by the boards. Again, with regard to interface, the VR headset revolution (which should be the one after the CD-ROM revolution) was in full-swing at several places on the show floor. The best uses I saw for the sets were with **Doom** and New World's **Zephyr**.

As I come to the end of this space, please note that the games I've listed above are only a very small portion of those that I saw. The games I saw are, in turn, only a percentage of the games that were at the Summer CES. There's a lot I didn't see that I'm sure will be some of the best to come. At least that's what I've been hearing from both Kevin and Ted about some games. ***– Steve Honeywell***

start did not mean that the actors would not put in a full day's work.

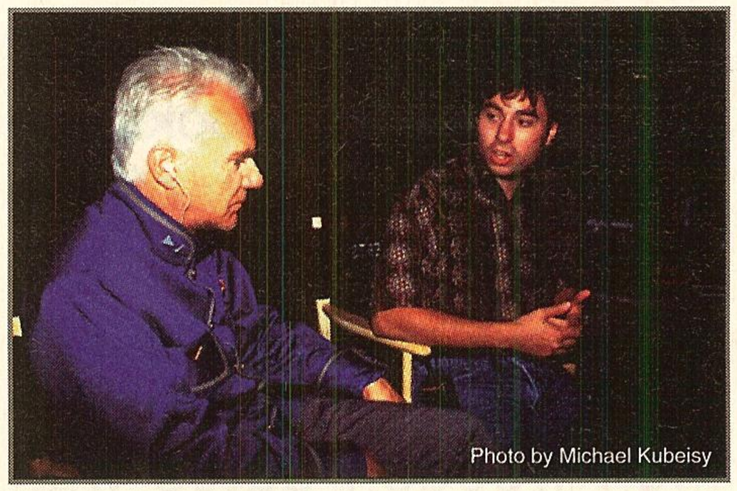
On the massive green set, the actors stand in front of nothing and behind nothing. There are no props on the set other than their own bodies, and there is no scenery to interact with. They have only themselves, their uniforms and each other to rely on. It is acting at its purest essence, only the actors and nothing more. Each must convey a sense of place in an area of no-place and of time in a world of no-time.

The green background is both more and less than a method of filming the characters. The reason for the screen should be known to most people. Traditionally blue, screens allow the film editors to "clip" the actor out of the background and place him or her into another environment. It's been used for years with varying levels of success. The reason for the green screen on the Wing Commander III shoot is an obvious one; all of the character wear blue uniforms, and the green makes for an obvious contrast.

The green background is symbolic of the shoot and of the game. The actors must take a piece of fancy, the notion of a race of cat-beings and a possible future for humanity and make it believable on screen. They must take effectively nothing and make it into something strong enough and powerful enough that we, as game players, will find ourselves caught up in the struggles of the game's characters. At the same time, this flat green background will have to become the interior of a starbase and every place inside of it. Something from nothing. It's a fitting metaphor both for the software that makes the game and the process of the filming. It's an idea of what the pundits mean when they talk about "Hollywood Magic."

The order of the day seems to be filming the various death sequences of the characters. The actors walk out to their places on the green screen. As they do, the crew mills around, adjusting lights, moving cameras and more. It's loud, and it's a wonder anyone can hear anyone else. Finally, as the shot is readied, everyone quiets down and the filming commences.

The actors stand looking slightly down as the mythical coffin glides past their feet. They all turn their heads slowly, watching the coffin slide by. It's tougher than it looks, because they need to keep their eyes looking at the same, moving place, and there is nothing for them to look at. Someone yells "bang" three times, simulating the salute fired for the dead pilot, and the characters react accordingly. Once finished, another group moves up to have their reactions recorded.



Malcom McDowell and Chris Roberts discuss the next scene.

Over on the other, smaller set, another crew is filming the sequences of the various Kilrathi pilots including the one who sides with the humans, Hobbes. In the morning, they start by filming the various taunts of the enemy Kilrathi pilots.

The Kilrathi themselves, while looking like full costumes, are cleverly made pieces of costumes. All that truly exists of them are their heads, hands and feet. The rest of them are covered at all times by clothing, sparing the need of creating the entire body of the cat creatures. A variety of heads and hands are made. This is a necessity since at many times, more than one Kilrathi is on the screen at the same time. Additionally, each Kilrathi looks different.

"THEY'RE GONNA HAVE TO PRY MY DEAD CARCASS OUT OF THE COCKPIT."
—MANIAC, SCENE 30

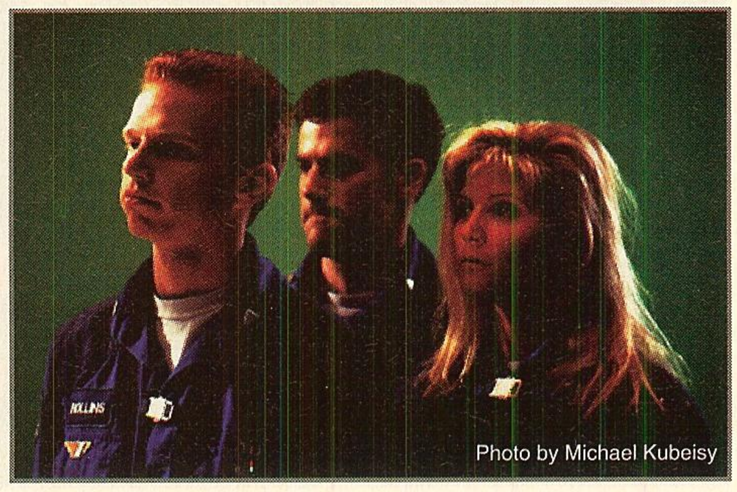
As the filming progresses, the sequence of the first take of the day is repeated endlessly. There is a tremendous bustle of activity for ten to fifteen minutes. Then, everything quiets down and filming commences for about 30 seconds, followed by a decision of whether or not to film the scene again. While the film is rolling, people are watching from virtually every angle. It's deathly quiet when the tape is running, because one extraneous noise over character dialogue can ruin the take.



The animatronic Kilrathi require an actor to sit inside the costume as well as a technician to control the facial muscles and mouth movements.

The Kilrathi masks are lightweight, radio-controlled animatronic devices similar to those used in the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movies, although, according to their creator, they are several generations beyond that. The masks themselves are custom fitted to that same creator, Michael Hood. Hood is also the president of the company that made the Kilrathi heads.

According to Hood, he does the work inside the masks since actors don't like doing it. His face is abraded and sore looking, and he has a pad made of adhesive bandages across the bridge of his nose to prevent the mask from digging itself into his soft flesh. It hasn't helped



When finished, this sequence will show the crew's reaction to the death of a teammate.

The Man in the Director's Chair

As the guy behind the Wing Commander games, Chris Roberts has a huge reputation to live up to with the third game in the series. During a break on the set, he took a few minutes to talk with me about what made filming the live-action sequences of this game different from the previous Wing Commander titles, how it was better and where this was taking us. . .

I asked Chris what getting high-profile actors meant to the project. His answer was that name actors do help at the "box office," but more importantly, good actors bring something new to the characters. A writer can create a great script, explained Roberts, but good acting will always add to it. He went on to compare the filming of Wing Commander III in this regard with the creation of movies, where a great performance by an actor will help elevate the film to a new level.

The hope, according to Roberts, is that actors will start to seek out roles like the ones available in Wing Commander III. As the medium becomes more and more accepted, actors will begin to want to work in this industry, both in acting roles and in pure voice roles.

The major benefit of this style of shoot, explained Roberts, is that the feedback is almost instantaneous. The actors are immediately composited onto the computer backgrounds. You can tell right away if you've had a good take or a poor one.

This is doubly useful to Roberts as the director of the game and its creator. Knowing that a scene needs to be reshot right away rather than finding out later saves the expense of having to redo something that was already done. IN fact, after the WC III shoot ends, it will become impossible to reshoot any footage. Additionally, since Roberts and other crew members can watch the composite screens while the actors are on stage, they can make instant adjustments, correcting any problems with the scene on the fly.



The fearsome-looking Hobbes has a heart of gold. He'll be your best wingman.

Watching the rushes of Wing Commander III is more than a little disconcerting, especially for the videophile. The same scene is played out endlessly, each time from a slightly different angle, from the point of view of a different character or with a slightly different spin.

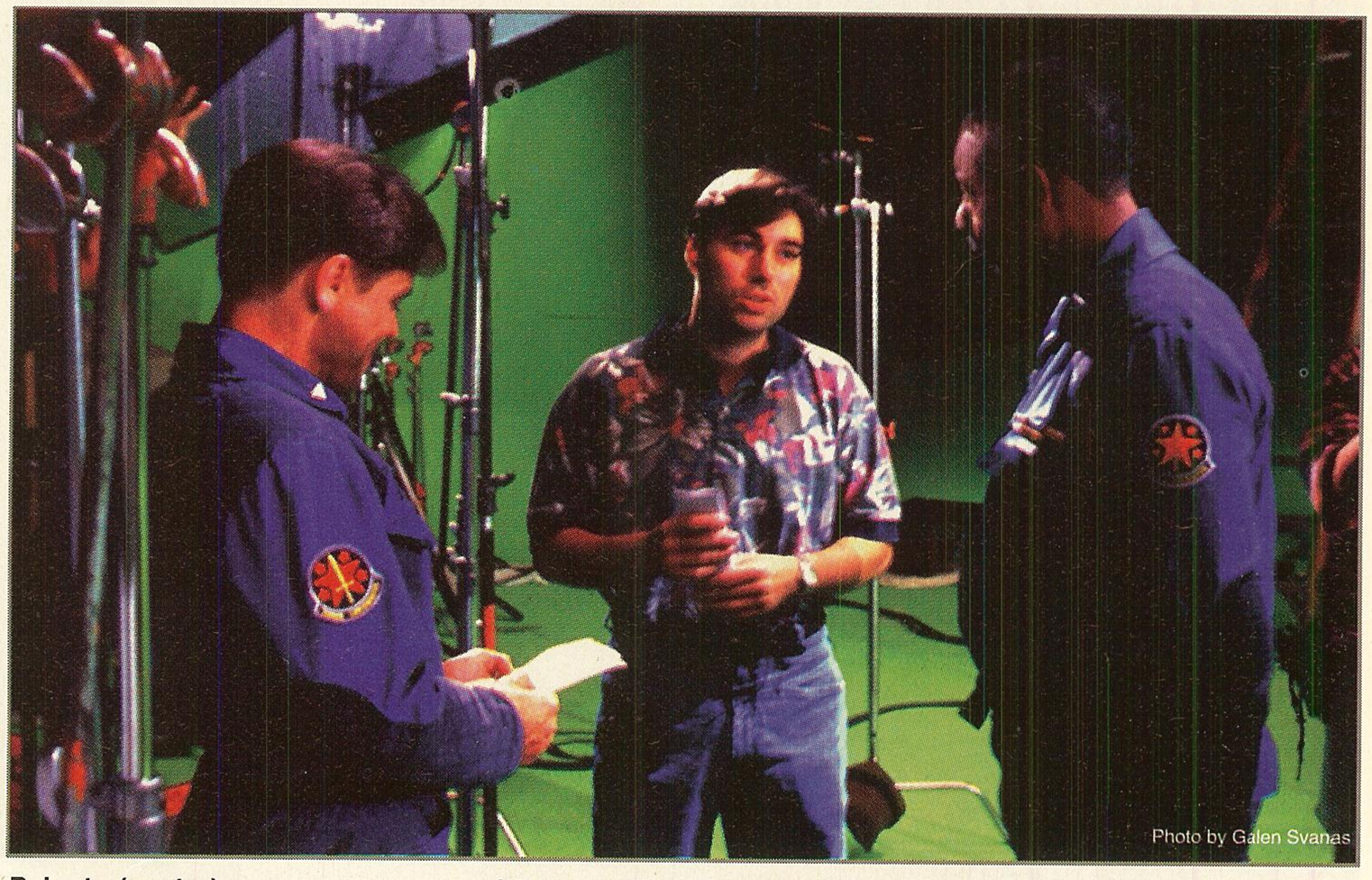
One sequence of scenes shows Hamill as Blair walking from his ship after a mission. In all of these scenes, Blair's wingman has been taken out of the battle but rescued by the humans. The dialogue between Blair and the mechanic, played by Ginger Lynn Allen is different for each wingman. Depending on who Blair was flying with, his reaction on hearing that the wingman survived is either jovial, relieved, amused or a combination of all three.

Mixed in with these scenes are other mission ending clips including one in which Blair is rewarded with the applause of his crewmates and one in which he is taken into custody by the ship's commander, played by veteran actor Jason Bernard. As the clips roll on, several things come to mind. First, it's difficult to tell in a lot of the shots that the characters have been composited into a computer image and are not standing in front of a set. Second, and much more impressive, the Kilrathi, while having occasionally over-exaggerated movements, do not look at all unreal.

The filming is extensive. At the time of my visit to the Wing Commander III set, the clips were being contained on a 9 Gigabyte drive that was full. A second had arrived and was in the process of being filled up with additional footage, much of which would end up on the silicon equivalent of the cutting room floor.

As the actors are on the set filming, others, both stars and extras, spend time milling about outside, enjoying the nice California weather. Several sit on the tables used for the lunch break that will eventually happen at around dinnertime. Others walk between the two sets, stopping outside the massive sliding door to the main stage when the red light that signals filming in progress is flashing.

When that flashing stops, the activity begins anew. Both the large sliding door and the smaller, regular-sized door open up and people stream in and out of the set, intent on their errands. An actor paces outside, trying to learn lines for an upcoming scene. Others sit and talk to



Roberts (center) goes over a scene with actors Hamill and Bernard. Each scene needs to be filmed from different camera angles, different points of view and for different plot paths.

PC GAMER

MEMO

January 20, 1995
To: Eileen, Media Relations, Origin
From: Matt Firme, Editor PC Gamer
Subject: Permission to Reproduce article in PC Gamer

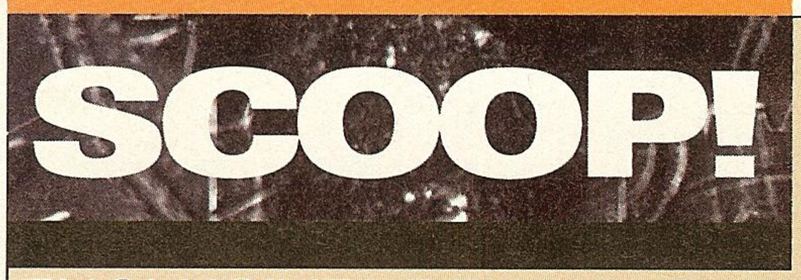
This is to confirm that Origin has full permission to reproduce and distribute the Wing Commander III article appearing in the August 1994 issue of PC Gamer magazine. Please call me if you have any questions, or need any additional approval.

Sincerely,

Matt Firme, Editor

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EXCLUSIVE! BEHIND-THE-SCENES OF THE HOTTEST GAMES

Wing Commander III

Origin Raises the Stakes. Again.

One of the most popular game series ever adds a handful of genuine movie stars. The best just got a lot better.

by Neil West



The new-look Kilrathi, actually human actors in elaborate animatronic costumes, help bring the Wing Commander universe to life. So does actor Tim Curry, who does the voice of Melek.

FYI

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Game: Wing Commander III
Developer: Origin Systems, Inc.
Publisher: Origin Systems, Inc.
Projected Price: TBA
Percent Complete: 50%

In a nutshell:

Origin offers its latest version of Wing Commander to a new generation of game players — those with CD-ROMs, 486DX processors and 8MB of RAM, to be precise. You can run it with less, but just barely.

What's so special?

It's the most expensive computer game ever attempted, it's got history on its side (the previous WC games were state of the art in their day) and it's got Mark "Luke Skywalker" Hamill in it.

Why should I care?

Because, despite the fact that hype's the norm in PC game marketing, there's a very real chance that this could live up to it all — and then some. The gameplay is solid, the interaction really exists (come on, that's praise indeed these days) and this will undoubtedly become the yardstick by which subsequent action/sims will be judged.

And when's it coming out?

Look for the big release right around Thanksgiving this year. That should get the holidays started right!

Big Numbers.

No matter how you look at Origin's *Wing Commander III*, big numbers hit you squarely in the face. The production budget comes in at a whopping $3,000,000 — that's more than for some movies. The amount of game data involved is gigantic: two CD-ROMS, and about a Gigabyte of stuff. The number of man-hours it's taken to put everything together is pretty massive too; a full development team's been working flat-out on the project for the last year and a half. And since it's an Origin product, you'll need a pretty fast machine to get the most out of it: at least a 486/DX with double-speed CD-ROM and 8 MB RAM.

What makes all this ambitiousness worthwhile is the enormous potential audience Origin believes they have for Wing Commander. The line as a whole has already sold in excess of 2.5 million units worldwide, and this new game is intended to take the series to a new level of popularity. At least, that's the theory....

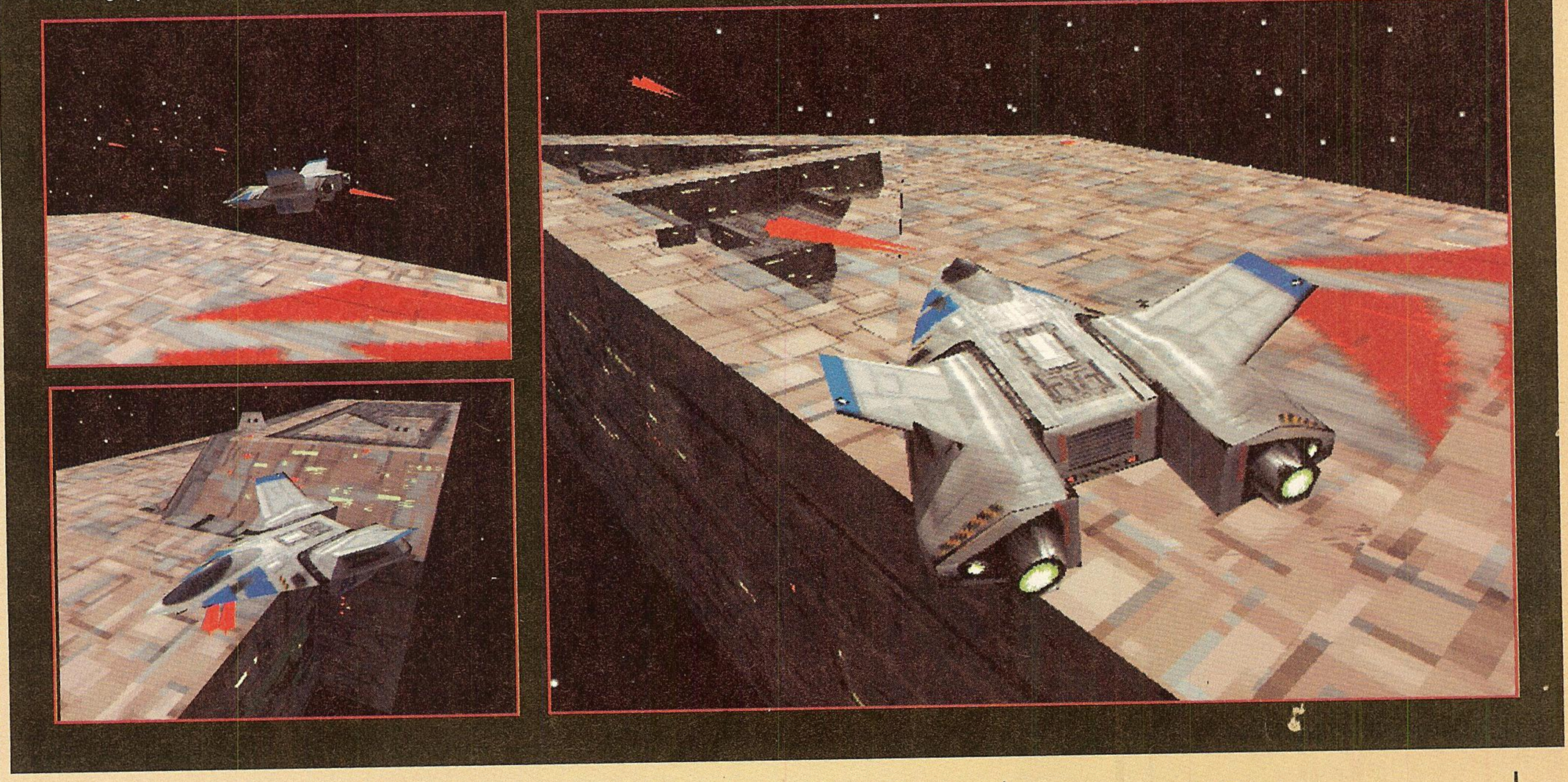
And it could be a viable one, too. When you consider the track record of the development team involved, the caliber of talent enlisted to appear in front of the camera, and the power of the systems destined to run it, *Wing Commander III* might even surpass Origin's own high expectations.

Wing III is important for another reason, too. Origin is confident that this is the game to finally smash the conception that live video footage and involving gameplay can't coexist. Could this be the



John Rhys-Davies (left) and Mark Hamill in a scene from *WCIII*. The actors performed their roles before a green screen, and the starfield and effects were then laid in at post-production.

While the graphics in the first two Wing Commander games were good, objects tended to get blocky once you got up close to them, with huge pixels that reminded you that it was, after all, only a game. That's changed with W*ing Commander III:* Even when you get very close to extremely large objects, the SVGA graphics stay sharp, crisp, and realistic. Check out the texture-mapping on both the Arrow Fighter and Kilrathi transport in this intense attack run.



first genuine (wait for it) interactive movie? Origin reckons so, and there are a few good reasons to believe they might be right:

• It's deliberately designed for top-of-the-line hardware only
When Origin talks about a minimum system requirement, the bare minimum they refer is just that — the minimum you'll need to actually get the thing running. It's no secret that to get the most out of *WCIII* you're going to need a powerful set-up — at the very least, we're talking a DX-4 or 486DX2/66MHz with 8MB of RAM. And with this sort of machine, the designers will have the muscle they need to try some very impressive things.

But is such a machine too much to ask of gamers? Origin's Galen Svanas doesn't think so. "Origin games have always been designed for the cutting edge of mainstream technology, and for people who upgrade often. Now, something like 60% of all new PC systems that are bought are 486-based, include a CD ROM and usually come with 8Mbyte of RAM, so we're really not leading the market too much." As they've done before, Origin also talk about this game actively generating hardware sales.

• *Wing Commander III* is set in space
Well, of course it is, you're probably thinking. But the point we're trying to make here is that if any setting is conducive to making a believable interactive movie, it's outer space. Consider: A major problem with the traditional play-watch-play breed of interactive movie is that the difference in sophistication between the game bits and the movie bits is cruelly obvious. It's not easy to suspend your disbelief when you're constantly required to jump between interacting with what is quite obviously a computer-generated world, then watching a snippet of real-world movie footage. With a game set in space, however, the difference becomes blurred.

After all, few of us gamers have ever been in space. The only frame of reference we have as to what being there is actually like comes from the movies — which often use computer-generated worlds. So a game set in space stands a far better chance of actually appearing "real." The in-game scenes just tend to sit more comfortably with the "live" video footage — especially when the computer graphics used are as sophisticated as the ones that are on display here.

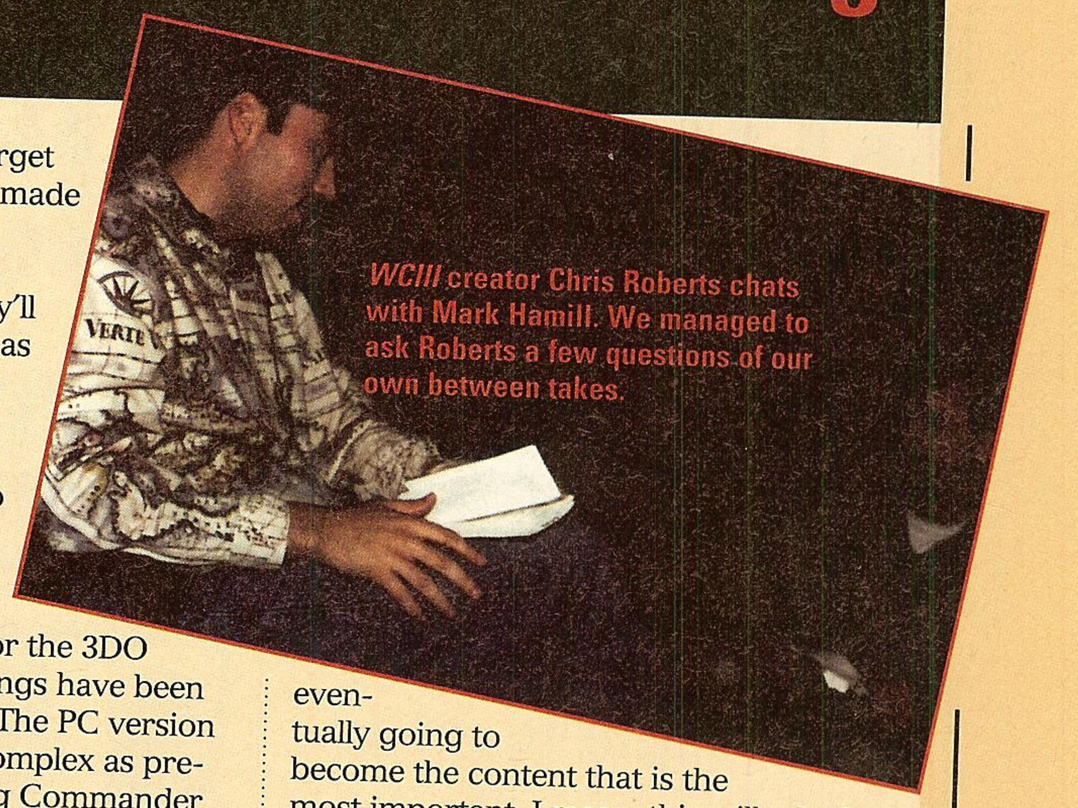
• They've only gone and hired Luke Skywalker himself
I grew up on the Star Wars movies, and the odds are good that you did, too. The kids who idolized



The Pride of the Confederation: Jennifer MacDonald, Mark Hamill, and Ginger Lynn Allen.

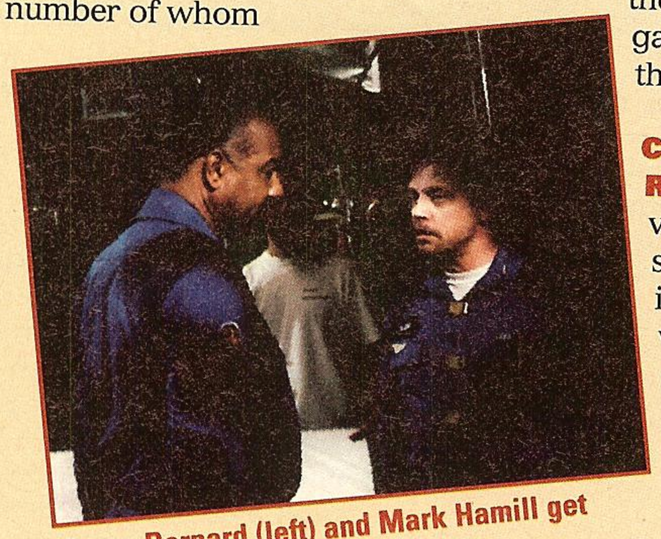
Chris Roberts: The man behind the Wing Commander series

In between shooting scenes in an LA film studio, Wing Commander creator and *WCIII* producer Chris Roberts takes time out to talk to *PC Gamer*:



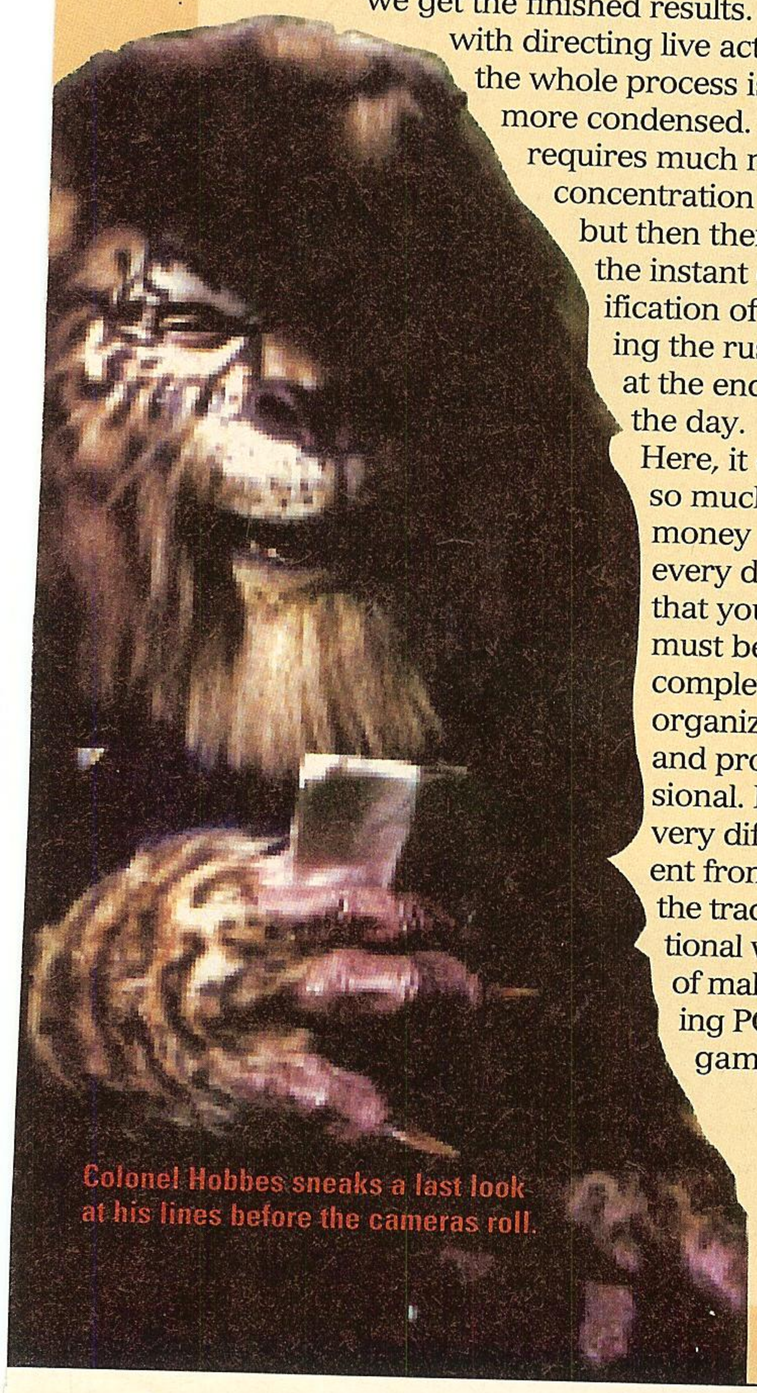
WCIII creator Chris Roberts chats with Mark Hamill. We managed to ask Roberts a few questions of our own between takes.

PC Gamer: Here you are surrounded by a film crew, a large number of whom have just come from finishing off second-unit duties for *True Lies*, the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger/James Cameron blockbuster. Mark Hamill is in the trailer behind us waiting for your next call. How do you like the move from "mere" game producer to being (effectively) a movie director?



Jason Bernard (left) and Mark Hamill get ready for an important *WCIII* scene.

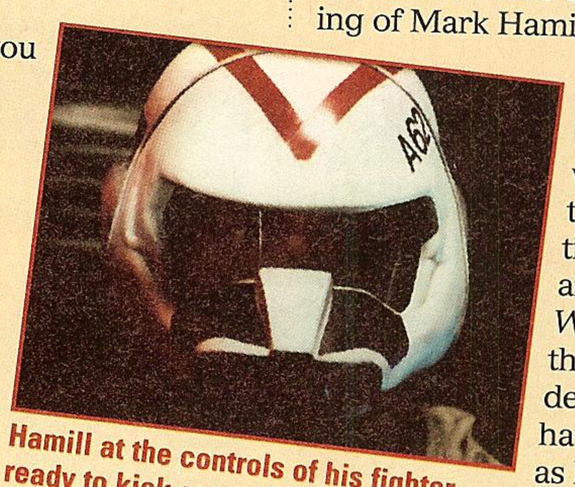
Chris Roberts: I'm having a total blast. Previously, I've worked with 20 or 30 people (artists, programmers and musicians), and it's been a matter of sitting down in a meeting, talking through what we want to do, then sending everyone off. Then, a couple of months later, everyone comes back with what they've accomplished and we get the finished results. But with directing live action, the whole process is more condensed. It requires much more concentration — but then there's the instant gratification of seeing the rushes at the end of the day. Here, it costs so much money every day that you must be completely organized and professional. It's very different from the traditional way of making PC games.



Colonel Hobbes sneaks a last look at his lines before the cameras roll.

PC Gamer: Much of the target audience for *WCIII* will be made up of new PC owners, and there's the chance that this could be the first game they'll ever play. To what extent has *WCIII* been simplified from previous versions to ease these "virgin gamers" into the game?

Chris Roberts: For the 3DO version, things have been simplified. The PC version is just as complex as previous Wing Commander games, but in an optional way: players will be able to tinker around with weapons, explore new strategies and so on if they want to, but that isn't an essential part of playing the game. The computer will make a lot of choices for you if you leave it to its own devices and you'd rather just sit back and enjoy the action.



Hamill at the controls of his fighter, ready to kick some Kilrathi butt.

PC Gamer: You're really upping the stakes of game development here. How easy will it be for "normal" games to compete after the epic production of *WCIII*?

Chris Roberts: It's true that you can never go backwards. Once you've played a game featuring new technology, it's very difficult to achieve the suspension of disbelief necessary to get into older games, be they text adventures or primitive 3D polygons. And with each leap forward in technology, the subset of the population playing games increases. I guess the eventual goal is to come up with a game that will appeal to anyone who's ever enjoyed simply watching TV. We all want to attract the largest audience possible, and I think that this is a really big step toward increasing the PC gaming market.

PC Gamer: So do you see games in the future having to compete on these $3 million terms in order to stand a chance? What will a future games' success rely on? Money? Storyline? Gameplay?

Chris Roberts: Technology doesn't really matter any more. I mean everyone's got texture-mapping, Gouraud shading, all that sort of stuff, and so it really comes down to how well you can tell a story. Content will matter more than technology in the near future. So as we move toward a movie-studio way of producing games, it's eventually going to become the content that is the most important. I mean, this will take four or five years to fully happen, and there will be a swing towards big budget productions in the meanwhile. But eventually, it will all come back down to the people with the ideas and the content."

PC Gamer: Let's quickly go over the casting of Mark Hamill. Why did you choose him for the lead role?

Chris Roberts: Firstly, I wanted to make sure that Hollywood production values were applied all the way through *WCIII*'s production — and that applies to the casting decisions. A lot of people have regarded live footage as being real cheesy because, say, the company got the secretary to be the star and maybe all the programmer's mates are goofing around in the background. So I wanted really well-known actors and a screenplay written by experienced, professional screenwriters.

So, Mark Hamill. To start with, I had real a problem casting the lead because you need someone who you immediately recognize as a hero, but who doesn't have such a dominant personality, or is so overbearing, that it's impossible for the player to identify with him. You need what I call a "reactive" movie hero, someone like Harrison Ford or Kevin Costner who don't really project a personality when something happens, but somehow give the feeling that a common man has triumphed over adversity.

So, anyway, I originally had Mark Hamill in mind for the Maniac character, but Tom Wilson came in to read for the role (he's the guy who played Biff in *Back To The Future 1, 2* and *3*) and he nailed the role so completely — the character was so funny — that we had to give him the part. We realized that Mark was too nice to play Maniac, and started wondering if he'd be interested in playing the hero instead.

PC Gamer: Chris, thanks very much.

PCG

Luke Skywalker 15 years ago are exactly the same people who form the core of 1994's game players. So Mark Hamill is the perfect man to cast as the hero of *Wing Commander III*. Few other actors (and probably no other even vaguely affordable ones) can jump-start the emotions and passion of a gameplaying generation like he can. Don't underestimate this — it's not been disclosed how much Origin is paying him, but you can guarantee they're getting a mind-blowing bang for their buck.

• It's 100% interactive

Back on the space station, in between the space battles, the characters played by actors Mark Hamill, Ginger Lynn Allen, Malcolm McDowell, and so on do their video-taped thing: mainly, talk over the last mission and move the plot forward. But you don't just get to watch, you get to interact. No, really. Origin's David Swafford:

"Within each conversation, you'll be able to have your character respond positively or negatively to what's being said. These responses will, in turn, affect other conversations, and so on and so on. So you might want to go through the game being positive, soothing everyone's egos and generally playing the role of the peacemaker. Or you may choose to react negatively to situations and be a real hard-core, strict commander. These different approaches will reveal nuances in the way you're treated by your fellow wing men, and hence affect the outcome of the game. This also means that there are several endgame sequences — not just a win or a loss, but different variations of winning and losing."

But enough about how great *Wing Commander III* should turn out to be. Let's take a couple of paragraphs to put it all in context. For a start, what's the storyline all about this time?

David Swafford: "*Wing Commander III* is set in the same universe as *Wing Commander 1* and *II*, and picks up where the last game left off. The humans are on the losing end of it now, and mankind is pretty much on its last legs. So, in a last-ditch attempt they decide to develop a big planet-buster known as the B.M.F. (*I have an idea as to what this might stand for, but I'm not sure I should say — Neil*), and the plan is that since the humans are so outnumbered and so outgunned, this B.M.F. can provide them with one last chance. The plan is to take it to the Kilrathi homeland and let the B.M.F. get to work, in the hope that by chopping off the Kilrathi head, in a manner of speaking, the body will also die. But, as is so often the case in the Wing Commander universe, someone betrays the humans, and the Kilrathi are able to steal the prototype B.M.F.. So it looks as if mankind is pretty much S.O.L."

Just the way we like it! Time, then, for a hero:

"At the game's start, we have several sub-stories and plot lines to tie together, including a rescue mission to free the B.M.F.'s designer from a Kilrathi prison, find out who in the human camp has betrayed mankind, and then see if there's a way to recover the weapon or destroy the Kilrathi homeland by other means."

It sounds exciting, especially for those of us who've thrilled to the other Wing Commander games. Of all the games I've seen in development over the last six months, *WCIII* comes the closest to being a sure-fire winner. It's difficult to see how it can be anything less than spectacular. I, for one, can't wait...



Wing Commander pioneered the use of cinematic cut sequences. With the new graphics technology in *Wing III*, players will now, more than ever, feel like they're in a movie.

"Origin games have always been designed for the cutting edge of mainstream technology, and for people who upgrade often."

— Galen Svanas, Origin

The Stars of *Wing Commander III*

Wing Commander III **combines live-action sequences with that great Wing Commander feel we all know and love. And this isn't cut-rate video production, either. Just look at the cast Origin has assembled for this thing:**

Mark Hamill (Blair) — You know him best as Luke Skywalker, of *Star Wars* fame. Now, he gets to tackle an all-new role in one of PC gamings most enduring series.

Malcolm McDowell (Tolwyn) — The star of *A Clockwork Orange*, *If...*, *Time After Time*, and many others. You've just got to love that McDowell intensity.

John Rhys-Davies (Paladin) — Harrison Ford's buddy in all three Indiana Jones movies, his recent work includes the TV series *The Untouchables*. He's also the host of The Learning Channel's series *Archaeology*.

Ginger Lynn Allen (Rachel) — Ms. Allen's recent credits include *Bound and Gagged — A Love Story*, *Young Guns II*, and *Skin Deep*. You might also have seen her in such TV series as *NYPD Blue*, *Silk Stalkings*, and *Super Force*.

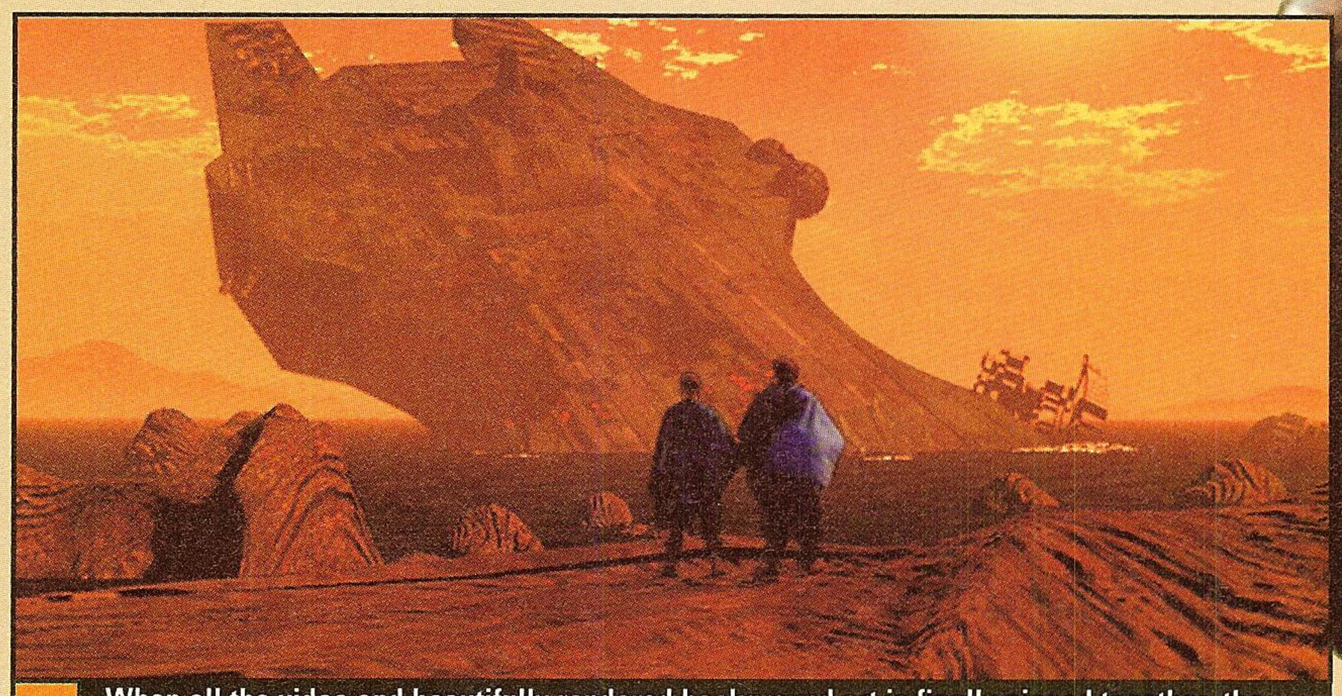
Jennifer MacDonald (Flint) — MacDonald starred as a cyborg in the recent *Terminal Force*. She can also be seen in *The Collector*, *Shades of Black*, and *California Dreamin.'* She's also a student of martial arts.

Thomas F. Wilson (Maniac) — He was the bully you loved to hate in all three of the Back to the Future series. His other credits include *Action Jackson*, *April Fool's Day*, and *Let's Get Harry*.

Jason Bernard (Eisen) — Bernard currently co-stars on the FOX series *Herman's Head*, and has acted in films including *No Way Out*, *Blue Thunder* (with McDowell, oddly enough), *War Games*, and *Car Wash*.

Courtney Gains (Rollins) — Gains has been seen in *Memphis Belle*, *Children of the Corn*, *The 'Burbs*, *Colors*, and was also in *Back to the Future*.

Joshua Lucas (Flash) — Lucas is a regular on the series *The Man from Snowy River*, and has been seen in *Jake and the Fatman*, *Life Goes On*, and *Parker Lewis Can't Lose*. His film credits include *Alive* and *Class of '61*.



When all the video and beautifully rendered background art is finally pieced together, the results can be nothing short of amazing. *Wing Commander III* does an excellent job of creating the illusion of an entirely alien, yet realistic and believable, game world.



The enemy in furs...

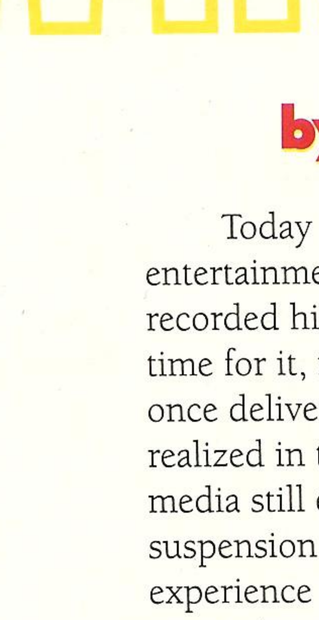
CD-ROM Gaming's Most Ambitious Project

Wing Commander III

by Michelle Farrar

Today the world is more concerned with entertainment than at any other time in recorded history— and now that we have the time for it, it's never been as good. The impact once delivered only by storytelling is now realized in television and film; however, both media still exclude the viewer and require the suspension of disbelief. We all want the experience to be even more real. Now, by importing the story into your personal computer, interactivity can take you along for the ride.

So far, computer games remain inferior to other visual media, lacking multi-dimensional plots, intriguing narratives and believable screen images. CD-ROMs are upping the ante. Currently available in three to four per cent of American homes, CD-ROMs can store the equivalent of 500 floppy disks. When this technology is taken full advantage of, almost any medium can be incorporated into the final product. So what happens when you create a double disk CD-ROM game? It's called *Wing Commander III: The Heart of the Tiger*.



he Kilrathi unmasked.

Computer Gaming World calls the original 1990 *Wing Commander* the ultimate action game. Produced by Origin Entertainment under Electronic Arts, *Wing Commander III* is the most ambitious, expensive game ever. While CD-ROM games are normally produced with budgets between 1.1 and 1.5 million dollars, *Wing Commander III* took three million dollars to wrap. This was no risky investment, though; after selling a record 1.5 million units of previous *Wing Commander* installations, Origin has a built-in audience, all former commanders of the spacecraft carrier *Tiger's Claw*.

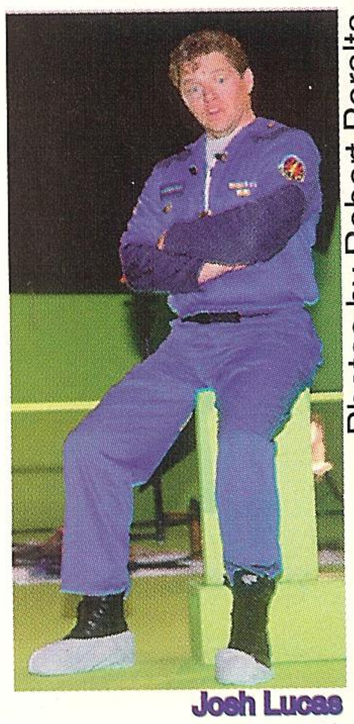
In *Wing Commander*'s universe, mankind is fighting a losing battle for survival against the tiger-like Kilrathi. The Kilrathi are not cosmetically altered humanoids with green pancake make-up, but ten-foot-tall creatures of fur and claws; unfortunately, animatronics puts them deceptively on the wrong side of cute. They make up for this stigma with their brutal behavior. In the game you command a fighter squadron, leading missions to rescue prisoners of war, combat the Kilrathi, and retrieve stolen weapons plans, doing whatever it takes to bring the war to a definitive end. Your time with your crew affects their morale, their decisions, and even affects their battles. You may even fall in love.

Wing Commander III takes the concept of the interactive movie to new limits, giving the player control over ship selection, weapon choice, dialogue, and even the direction the point-of-view character Colonel Blank faces as he talks to his pilots. New proprietary ORIGIN polygonal technology allows for smooth resolution while maintaining a sense of speed. *Wing Commander III* also uses video technology that will enable full motion, full screen playback of actors— with television quality picture. HMI sound drivers, combined with a General MIDI soundtrack, will allow digitized speech and sound effects with up to 32 different samples to be played simultaneously. The graphic sequences and computer generated sets were created on Silicon Graphics workstations, the hands-down high-end computers of the visuals industry.



Monitoring the digitized sets.

The film sequences for *Wing Commander* were filmed against a green



Josh Lucas
(*Back To The Future*'s Biff)

Photos by Robert Peralta

ntinued from page 36

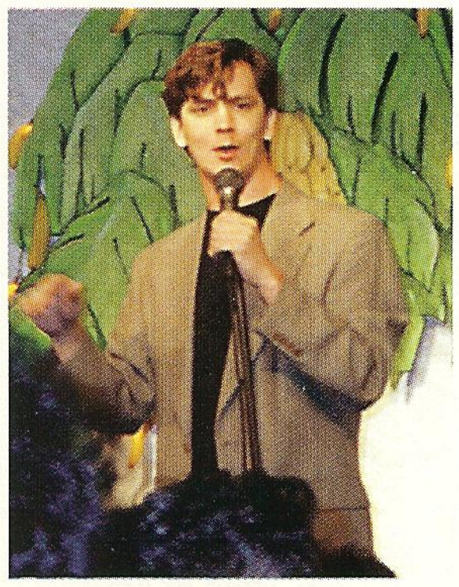
es are the ones who taste the freshest, so those are the ones he wants.

u've really expanded on the fact that the mutants have become a ted minority.

vas talking to one of the other writers and he said, "You know, it really doesn't ke sense that all of a sudden people of the world would hate mutants. Why uldn't they hate other superheroes? It really doesn't make sense." I thought out it, and that's really the key to the X-Men. You know it doesn't make sense, t like it doesn't make sense that people hate blacks or Jews or gays just cause they are blacks or Jews or gays.

n really fascinated to note that you've done and-up, that you write comedy. How did this ppen?

vas the middle kid in a family of seven. They say e middle child needs the most attention. Growing , I was an exceptionally sickly child. I had really d asthma. As a result, I had to stay in this air nditioned room overlooking my backyard while y brothers and sisters played outside. I think cause of that, on a psychological level, I always served how things were done, even if I didn't get do them. I think comedy and comic book writing are very similar in the nse that you're trying to grab something that people can identify with and esent it in a way that's entertaining. In that aspect I don't think comedy and mic book writing are as dissimilar as one might imagine.



t's talk about the future— any movie deals or TV show deals?

Hollywood, until everything is actually signed, it doesn't count for anything, t I can say that their response has been really positive. When I went in there eryone told me not to expect anything from the meeting, but I've gotten good dback.

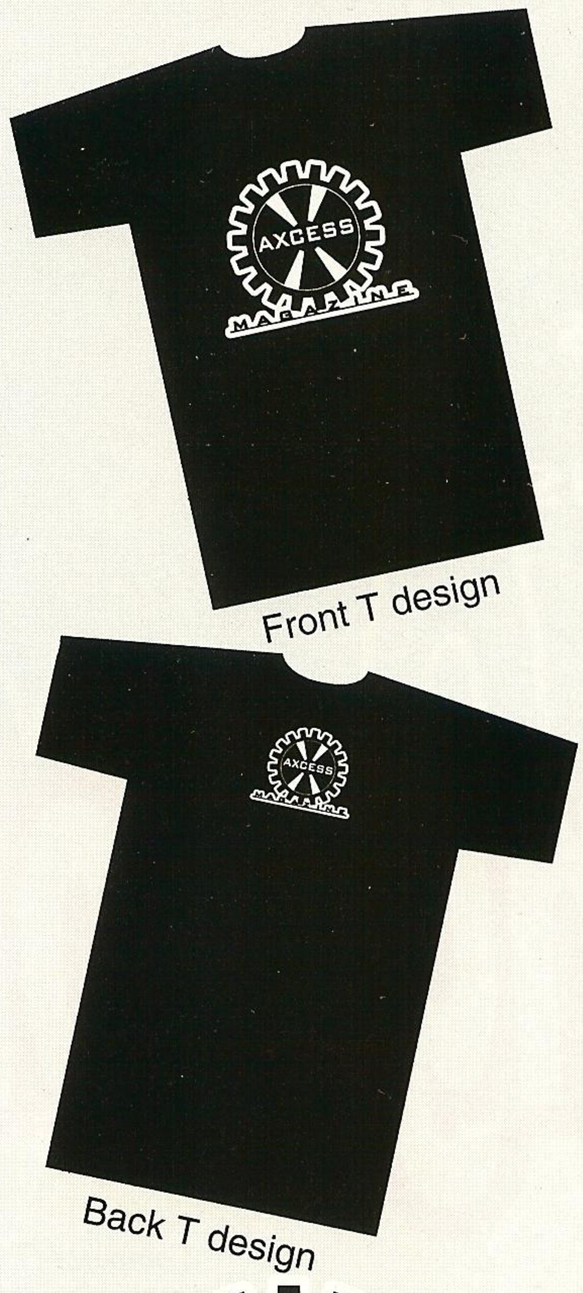
n you say if these shows are related to your comic work?

ey are superhero related. All original ideas. Keep your eyes peeled.

***Generation X** is scheduled for release in September.*



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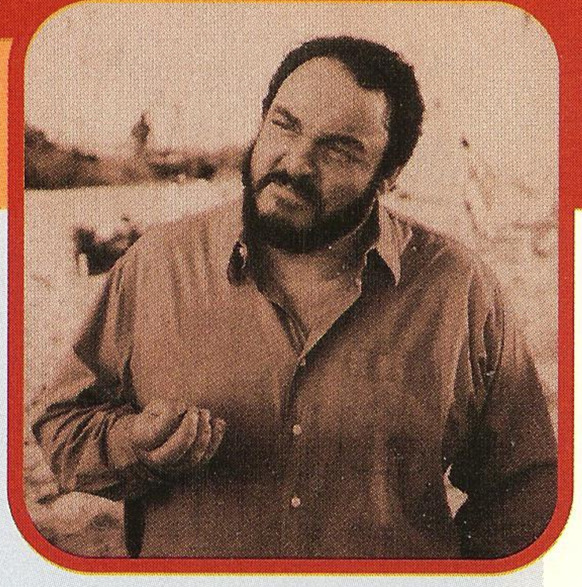
SCORING: This quiz appeared in its entirety in the Summer Fun issue of BLT. If you either giggled or dignified this question with a response, you need a subscription to BLT along with **Lunch with an Edge**, the giant new anthology of the best of BLT.

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John Rhys-Davies



Best known for his role as Harrison Ford's trusted sidekick in the first and third Indiana Jones films, John Rhys-Davies plays a key role in *Wing Commander III*. "He's a Scotsman, the protagonist's ex-wingman, a father-figure type," he explains. "Now a general and a bit desk-bound, he has more information than the protagonist. At the same time, he has to use and manipulate the protagonist in order to get the best performance out of him." Rhys-Davies sees his move into interactive media as a logical extension of his stage and screen career, just as actors of earlier generations once took their first steps into film and television.

"It's getting more and more like a standard television show," he muses. "But it has different rules, because it has alternative actions. If the protagonist's morale is high when he discovers that I have known for some time that his girlfriend has been executed by the enemy, he swings a fist at me and hits me hard. If his morale is low, he doesn't even take a swing at me. Increasingly, those different options will become wider and more extravagant as the art form develops."



John Rhys-Davies may be the first CD-ROM performer with classical training: his career includes study at Britain's Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and a stint with the Royal Shakespeare Company. His most notable television roles include one in the BBC's *I, Claudius*, where he held his own against John Hurt's deranged Caligula. More recently, on the other side of the Atlantic, he spent two seasons on *The Untouchables*.

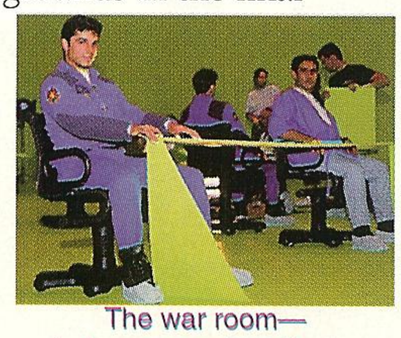
When asked about his stint on that series, Rhys-Davies adopts a rueful tone. "*The Untouchables* is a dead issue— I'm dead, and it's dead. I never got to consummate my marriage with Karen Valentine. I died on our wedding day." But even Al Capone can't keep a good man down. Rhys-Davies is hard at work on *Sliders*, a science fiction pilot for the Fox Network. "*Sliders*," he reveals, "is about a brilliant young student who develops a machine that looks awfully like a Motorola portable telephone, which opens gates into parallel universes. He takes his girlfriend, and his professor— whom I play— and a passing soul singer who gets swept up when the gate opens suddely a little bit wider than they intended. That's the premise of the show— they're sliding from parallel universe to parallel universe."

As for his most recognizable role, Rhys-Davies offers some intriguing news. "There's a possibility of a fourth Indiana Jones film. A script has been written, and the powers that be are wondering whether they get to do it or not, so it's all up in the air. But rumor has it that 1995 or 1996 might just see another one."

That should leave plenty of time to find out how many different scenes John Rhys-Davies shot for *Wing Commander III*. Load those discs and start playing now.... —*Paul Sarton*

---

screen, which was later transformed into computer rendered backgrounds in the final effects. (The traditional blue screen was not used because the flight suits of the combatants were also blue.) While the actors gave their delivery on an empty soundstage, the production crew simultaneously added them to the computer-rendered background. For one scene, the actors sat on neon green benches and looked into imaginary consoles while the running monitors projected them into a detailed war room, where they appeared to type on computer simulated keyboards and react to their busy monitors. With the camera set high on a crane, spacial depth was exaggerated; actors walking five steps deeper into the soundstage appeared to move ten feet deeper into the scene, as well as becoming proportionally smaller. As on a normal feature film, the editors would later run the actors' reactions backward and edit their dialogue.



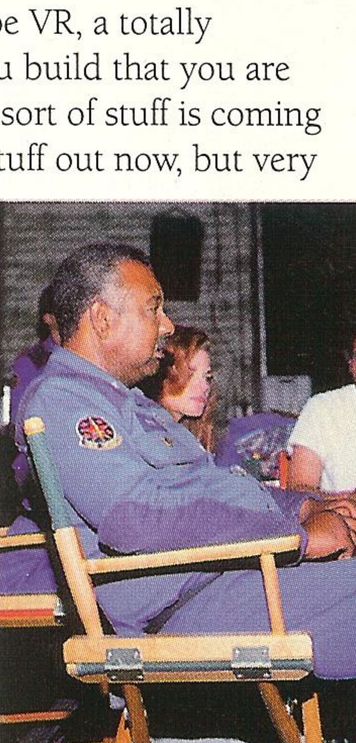
The war room— before computer effects.



In the past, the performers on CD-ROM games were usually designers, programmers, and other staffers at the game studios; increasingly, the characters are portrayed by real actors— good, bad, or just badly paid. The actors in *Wing Commander III* are familiar veterans. Mark Hamill is the tireless Colonel Blank. Malcolm McDowell is his superior, and John Rhys-Davies his trusted advisor; Ginger Lynn Allen (*Young Guns II*) and Jennifer MacDonald (*Terminal Force*) play his mechanic and pilot. Courtney Gains (*Biloxi Blues*), Josh Lucas (*Back to the Future*'s Biff) and Jason Bernard (Mr. Bracken of *Herman's Head*) are members of the crew. It's Hollywood's biggest interactive experiment to date.

The keeper of the *Wing Commander* universe, director/executive producer Chris Roberts, wrote his first computer game at age thirteen. "The first two games I wrote for a magazine. Back in those days computer magazines used to publish a game of the month." To be precise, they published the code for the games; in those tough days, players needed programming skills. These days, games are well-designed and scripted before they are coded. Chris wrote the story for *WCIII*, which was then scripted by two Hollywood writers. Accustomed to scripts an inch thick, they soon discovered the new demands of interactive media: *Wing Commander III*'s branching storyline yielded a script thicker than a telephone book.

While CD-ROM interactive movie-games may teach us a lot about entertainment today, all these advances hint at future possibilities. "Give it three or four years and the visual and audio quality will be like sitting in the movie theater or watching a movie on TV," predicts Chris. "At that point there are certain things I'd like to do, in terms of leading the camera, that I'm feeling constrained while we're shooting now. I don't move the camera on this, so I get a higher image quality playback. The other thing that would be cool would be VR, a totally immersive universe that you build that you are inside of. The price on that sort of stuff is coming down. There is really cool stuff out now, but very expensive. In the computer industry things change so fast, every year there is a new set of challenges." While the programmers may think they've had difficulties, you're left defending your way of life against the vicious Kilrathis. Trial by fire— now *that's* entertainment.AXS



Jason Bernard discussing his motivation.

Luke Skywalker
The Joker
and
Colonel
Blank

The many faces of

MARK HAMILL

by Michelle Farrar

Okay, I'll get it over with: this talented theater and film actor has had his face all over bedsheets, all over the world. In 1977 he became the hero of a modern age fairy tale, and while he was acting out the adventures of Luke Skywalker, devoted fans were buying their own little piece of *Star Wars*: posters, figures, books, and bedsheet art. If there's one thing Mark Hamill has over his character counterpart, it's a sense of humor. He has entered the world of cartoon noir as the voice of The Joker on *Batman: The Animated Series*. He also plays the point-of-view character Colonel Blank in the Hollywood-meets-the-future CD-ROM project *Wing Commander III*. Mark Hamill has been inside the American consciousness for seventeen years. Mark and I got together on the *Wing Commander III* set to talk past, present, and *Playboy*.

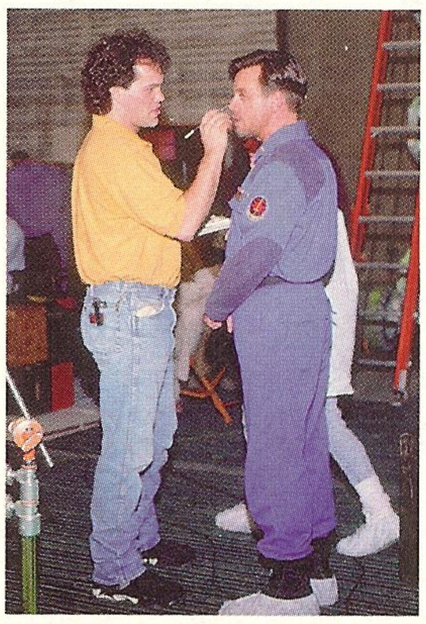
Did you know your wife was being shot for Playboy before or after you met her?

Before. She was a dental hygienist, and that's where I met her. She had that whole *Playboy* thing going on the side. And of course that got me going all crazy... every man's fantasy, and all that.

In that dental hygienist's uniform, of course...

We've played out the fantasy, gone down to the office on Sunday.

Was growing up a Navy kid research enough for playing Colonel Blank in Wing Commander III?



Both my father and the character I was playing were career military men. The whole situation was reminiscent of people I had grown up with as a kid, the type that I don't really understand; I'm not anti-military, it just doesn't strike a chord with me. It was something I could never do. But that's the fun thing about being an actor. You don't have to be a lawyer... you can play a lawyer. I probably got influenced too by various war movies. On *Wing Commander*, if it works out right it's going to be one of the more interesting games out there.

It's your first foray into the world of tech.

What they can do on these games is amazing. Since I'm the p.o.v. character, you can turn my head left or right. Make me your puppet, why don't ya?

Do you collect your own action figures?

I collect everything but my own. Don't you think there's something wrong with collecting your own action figure? I've got the Batman Animated collection figures. I've been collecting Ren and Stimpy, the Simpsons, X-Men, Aliens...

Did you get to see the Predator-Alien crossover?

The double pack— I've only got one of those, those are hard to find. In fact the only reason I've got that one is because of a friend. Sometimes at Toys R Us I'll get recognized and strike up an acquaintance with the workers, and I'll get a phone call. But I'm looking for another one. I want to open it.

RETURN OF THE JEDI was filmed under the assumed name of BLUE HARVEST. Did you have to fool the locals yourself?

Not really. I don't think anybody bought it, you know. I think maybe just for preparation and all that. By that time, it was assumed that those two words, star and wars, equal big and cash, so they're gonna jack up the price of everything. It's got a ripple effect, you know, when I try to collect. The other day I was trying to buy a comic book and the guy wanted $3000 for it, which was way too much. Then I let a confederate go back, and the price he quoted for him was $2300.

How did you discover you were the Joker?

I think what put me on top was the laugh. I didn't go out on the initial audition. They had cast someone else who changed their mind, and so the first six that I did were completed animation. Normally they animate to your voice. This I had to dub to the animation. It may have been called "The Last Laugh." It's the one with Captain Clown, the robotic creature, and there was a garbage scow in the harbor. There's one scene I remember where he rocks back and holds his sides and laughs his head off on a barrel, and so I just let it rip.

Have you ever taken your role as the Joker with you?

Well, I'll be on a radio interview, people will call me and the D.J. will want me to do the Joker voice. It's a real gift to be that egocentric, that cocky. You can insult them— as the Joker, not as Mark Hamill. And people love it.

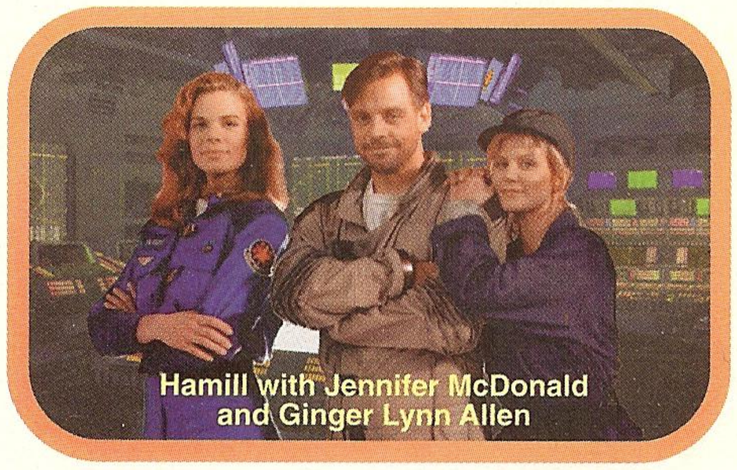
Does your son Nathan want to follow in a creative line of work?

Did you see Howard Stern's show on E! Television? They took a three hour show and cut it down to twenty-two minutes, and he was featured heavily on that show. He's always been artistic; he's an artist, he draws; and Griffin [Hamill's other son] too. But he plays guitar, and he's really, really good, I think. He was raised on a high protein rock and roll diet of the best of my era: the Rolling Stones, the Kinks, the Who, Motown. In fact, when he was fairly small, like seven or eight, he was *the* Beatlemaniac. Of course, he's your major, major Kurt Cobain fan. Music is what separated my Dad and I, but it's what Nathan and I share. I like Nirvana, NIN, Pearl Jam. And now he's got his own group. He's funny, real funny, but he's not quite as outgoing as I was. So far he doesn't have the personality where he wants that kind of attention. One actor type in the family is more than enough. Funny, I went and did a benefit for his school and I was surrounded by girls asking, "Where's Nathan? Where's Nathan?"

And you're thinking, "Wow, this is my son!"

The quiet guitar player cool guy.

I heard you held your own on Howard Stern.



Hamill with Jennifer McDonald and Ginger Lynn Allen

Howard Stern is probably one of the most thrilling comedic minds of the last two decades. Unlike the standard comedian who hones an act and tells jokes, he's spontaneously funny, and that's just pure gold. He takes just everyday conversation and finds humor in it.

What was your first acting job?

Professionally, I did a show that was a ninety-nine seat house in Los Angeles, like an actor's workshop musical. Michael Plankes wrote the music and he's still making albums, still touring. He's got a cult following along the lines of Rogers and Wainright. A lot of the people in the business came and saw it, and that's what led to me getting an agent. I stayed in school, but I started going out on auditions and the first thing I got was the Bill Cosby show. It ran a few seasons but it wasn't that t.v. juggernaut that was on in the eighties. It was the seventies and he played a basketball coach. It was a couple of lines, a small part.

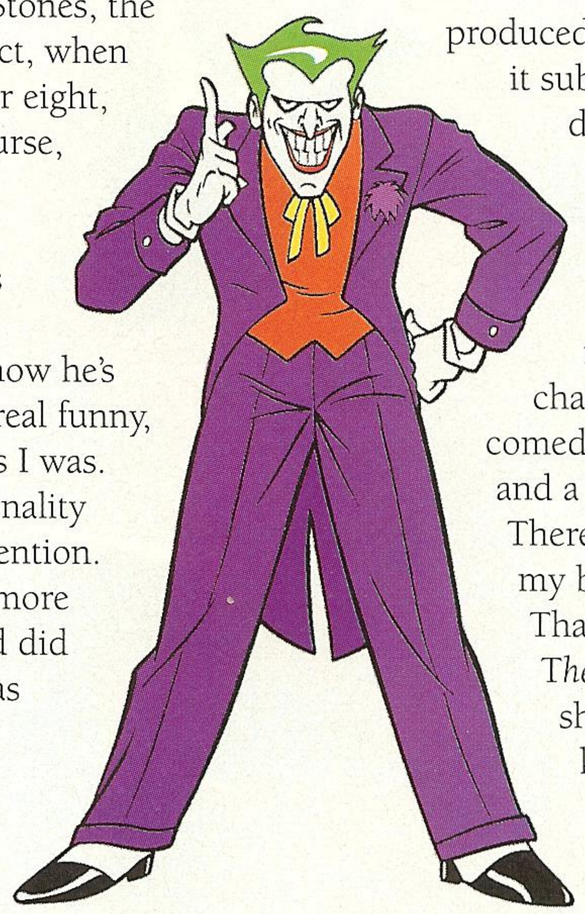
Were you a basketball player?

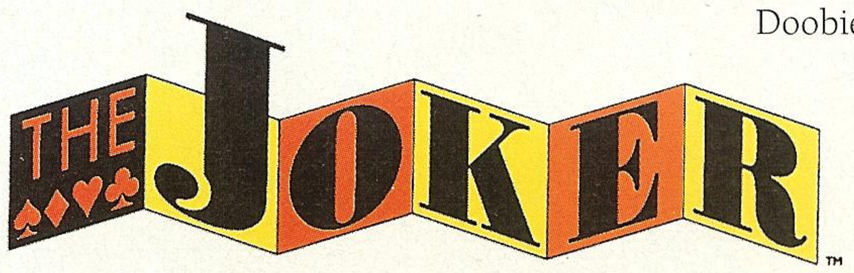
No, no, I was a little nerdy, got kinda beat up at the beginning of the show.

What are your favorite shows you've been in?

Well, a couple that really stand out in my mind include *Harrigan and Hart*; it was a musical produced off-Broadway, until they changed it subtly, creatively; they changed directors and it flopped on Broadway. It did get me a nomination for outstanding actor in a musical. It had a little bit of everything. It was a musical biography, and the character I was playing was a comedian who was very gifted on stage and a very unhappy guy off stage. There was comedy and drama. And my best shot at a breakthrough role. That, and there was a show called *The Texas Wheelers*. It was an MTM show without a laugh track. It was kind of like an anti-Walton's show, a family of liars and drunks who fought with each other. It was ahead of its time. I played Doobie Wheeler.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 143





The Heaven of the Animators
continued from page 87

God was producing His dream project, His epic, eighteen-hour, puppet animation of Gormenghast—screenplay by God and Mervyn Peake.

You can imagine how the angels and the seraphim reacted to all of this. They were horrified.

In private chambers, the Arch-Angels held emergency sessions. God's image was in serious jeopardy if word of this nonsense ever got down to the material plane. The core of Heaven had been given over to Caucasian males, mostly Jews, who had died in Southern California! It simply didn't look right. The whole thing was a public relations disaster waiting to happen.

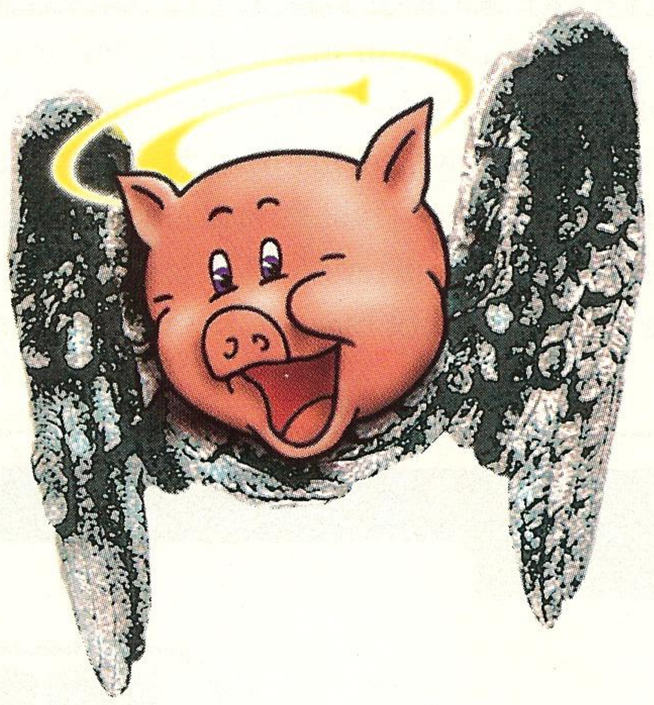
Walking among the younger angels, they would say, "Oh, He's an eccentric old thing, but He's earned it. If cartoons are what please Him in His second childhood, let Him make cartoons."

But in private, they said, "It's too much! It's got to stop!"

When the anime thing took off like a rocket in Tokyo, the racial and gender mix in Heaven Seven became somewhat more politically correct.

But suddenly, the Arch-Angels had something far more serious to complain of. The humans blew up the Earth.

Not to bits. But they set off so many thermonuclear warheads that the planet became uninhabitable for anything more complex than a bacterium. By rights, all the humans alive should have been melted down to their souls. This in itself would have saddened the angels. But what outraged them was God's reaction.



God decided to spare Los Angeles County and the Precinct of Tokyo. He was unwilling to lose all his source material for future generations of animators. Hollywood and Tokyo had produced the best cartoons, therefore they were spared. In much the same spirit, God had once firebombed Sodom and Gomorrah for producing the worst sinners.

In other circumstances, the angels would have rejoiced. But to spare two cities for such a frivolous reason! It was intolerable!

A delegation including Saint Peter went before God and resigned. God told them all to go to Hell.

Heaven trembled on the brink of a palace revolution.

Oh Pilgrims of Righteousness! Pray no more! Oh ye Unrepentant Hacks and Writers Of Optioned Screenplays Yet Unborn! Pray not to the God of Cartoons! He is mad! He cares nothing for the likes of you!

Speak not unto God of your bleeding feet, or your leaking roof, or the robbers on the road, or your venereal diseases. God doesn't listen any more. He hasn't heard a word you've said.

God is too busy watching Toho Studio's *Mothra Versus The Sun Beast* for the second time today.

God is in His heaven, laughing His ass off. AXS

Mark Hamill- continued from page 129

Should I spell that like the Doobie Brothers?

It's spelled that way, but they all had weird names like that. Gary Busey was Trucky Wheeler, there was P.J. and Boo... they were white trash. There's been talk about reviving it again—not with us, but with another cast. It was a step towards oddity in television. We got incredible reviews: *Time* magazine called us "the greatest bucolic comedy since *Tobacco Road*." I guess I have a special affection for these two projects because they weren't wildly successful and therefore weren't widely seen.

[Hamill takes a look at Axcess #4 and pauses at the Star Trek section.]

You know, William Shatner and I were at the same awards show once, an awards ceremony for science fiction entertainment. It was announced that William Shatner was going to get up on stage and sing Elton John's "Rocket Man." "Rocket— *Man*... And I think— it's— going— to be a long— *long*— time." I thought that was hilarious, and I tapped my friend underneath the table to see if she got it. She was laughing too. It was a televised awards show, and the cameras caught us and put us on-screen. I didn't think he liked that.

How did you feel about playing Luke Skywalker? He must have evolved for you when you were playing him.

That's it, you know. Of all the characters he went through more changes. My character was a callow farmboy who grew up in front of everyone's eyes. When you have something that's got that kind of scope of time you can evolve. And he did. The original *Star Wars* was intended to be a children's movie, and they identified with Luke Skywalker's purity of heart. They weren't yet adult cynics who might identify more with the character of Han Solo.

Would you do another Star Wars movie?

But they're going backwards. Well, to work with George again would be a dream come true. That's something that would work out for me, but unfortunately the chronological order is going the wrong way. He had mentioned something— and this was years ago so I don't know whether he's changed his mind— but way back when he asked me whether I'd be interested in doing the final three, where there would be a place for the new young hope finding the old. It would be like a repeat of the first one except me in the Obi-Wan role.

That would then have to be way, way, in the future.

It's nothing I'm holding my breath for. In general, I'd probably do anything George wanted me to do.

Can you explain George Lucas' Wookie philosophy?

It's a sensibility, it's a pure-of-heart thing. They say in the thirties there were people that were "pixilated." You either have a kind of Wookie spirit or you don't. George was a Wookie, he thought I had what it took to be a Wookie. It's the fact that George believed that there were Wookies in real life and animals could be Wookies. His dog Indiana was a Wookie. I thought at first, "Hello? You might be a little demented here," but I started to see what he meant. And we started to realize that the Wookies walk among us. AXS

Jan. 19, 1995

Eileen

Feel free to use either black and white or color photocopies of any and all articles regarding Wing Commander III that have appeared in any issues of Computer Game Review and CD-ROM Entertainment and/or Computer Game Review, notably August, 1994; October, 1994 and February, 1995. Use these articles internally or externally. We ask that we be given credit for said articles if you do decide to use them as part of a press kit or other material used by people outside of Origin.

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• Jennifer McDonald

When you were first approached about doing this, what did you think about getting involved in a computer game?

JM: "I was excited about it. I thought it would be great. I had never heard of Wing Commander, sorry to say. The closest I'd ever come to a computer game is Pac-Man. That's as advanced as I've gotten. I wish I had known that there are all these books describing the Wing Commander universe."

Has it met your expectations?

JM: "Oh yeah, way beyond. This is the first interactive [game] with live actors of this quality that's been done, so nobody knew what was going to happen. I had no idea that there would be nothing on the set—ever—not even a basketball. I didn't know we were going to have to fake everything."

Did anybody give you that impression when they talked to you about it?

JM: "No, they said "you will have computer animated backgrounds," but I thought there would be more of a set and just a background. . .I wasn't aware that the whole set was going to be generated by a computer. So that's been really interesting to do that, to walk up a ladder into wherever and try to have to imagine it."

How about the forming of several scenes in different variations?

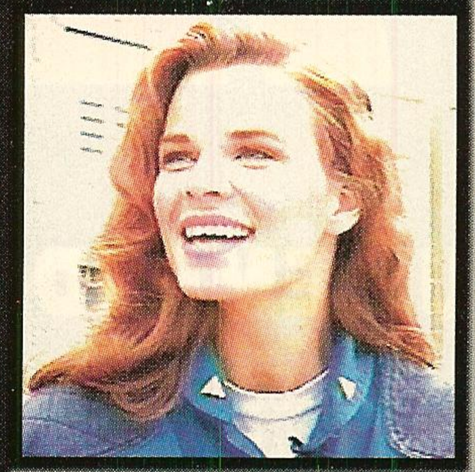
JM: "Oh, that's the worst! I hate that! It's fun, but I hate when we shoot twenty five scenes on the right side and we go back and shoot the same scenes with my close-up. That's really difficult, because generally you learn to get into one idea and then you film that and you go onto the next thing. [Here] you might have a love scene, a scene where you kill someone, a scene where you're angry and a scene where you are happy all in rapid succession."

Do you think this is something you'd want to do again?

JM: "Yeah! Are you kidding? I'm interested to see how they're going to get into films like this that aren't necessarily games. I'm interested to see how it's going to branch out into feature film-type stuff with the same generated sets and the same interactive quality. Tape is cheap—Tom can have his little fantasy takes and we can do whatever we want and don't have to worry that it costs $7,000 a reel. And the quality is great. That's one thing that surprised me. The quality of the image is a lot better than I thought it was going to be."

How has Chris been to work with?

JM: "He's great. I really like him. I think it's great because he has an emotional investment in the material and he wrote it. That's the best thing you can have as an actor is someone who is really familiar with the material and who knows what he wants. He has an exact take on what he wants. He's straightforward. He's very fond of saying 'Do it better.'"



1 2 3 4 5

• Ginger Lynn Allen

The first time you were approached about doing something like this and you found out what it was all about, what was your reaction?

GLA: "Confusion? This was something that I really had no clue as to what it would be like or how it was done or who watched it. I just recently bought my first computer and I learned how to play solitaire, and this is a little bit bigger than that (laugh). I guess I was excited, a little nervous. I was working in a medium I had never worked in before, so I turned my nervousness into excitement and used it."

Personally and professionally, is this a new challenge for you?

GLA: "I think it's challenging as far as the way scenes are shot. Normally on a shoot, you have a couple of actors and the scenes are done back and forth. You work on one scene. This is shot primarily from one angle with all of the different scenes consecutively and then you turn around and shoot the other way. At times, I've been a little confused as to which scene I'm shooting. It's been a really nice shoot as far as the ensemble cast and the whole attitude of the crew. It's been one of the more pleasant shoots I've worked on."

A lot of people are saying this is the new media. How does the acting community view what you are doing here?

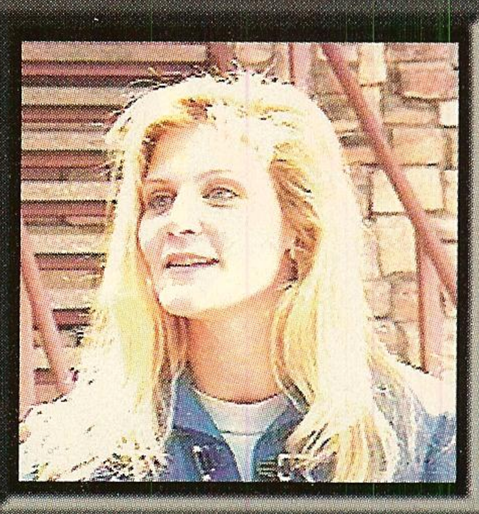
GLA: "More and more people that I've spoken to are really into this. I had no idea that so many people played these games. I went around to the different stores and checked out what was available and I went to the convention center when they had the big interactive convention, and it was huge! There were directors and producers and big studio people that are completely into this because it is a new medium where you can become involved. It's not like watching a movie. A lot of people will see this as an alternative to just plain old movie watching."

Any hesitations at all getting into this?

GLA:" I was very attracted to the character—I loved Rachel. She's spunky, she's feisty, she's a mechanic—and for the most part I haven't really played those types of roles. I wasn't quite sure what to expect, and it's been a pleasant surprise. I think any reservations I had were about shooting a scene with several different endings."

Have you done anything where you didn't have the sets out there, and how difficult is that?

GLA: "When I first walked on the set and there was no set, I thought I was in the wrong place. Working on a green screen is. . .green. It's very green (laugh). Playing Rachel, I work with a lot of the aircraft. and the weaponry, and to physically not have those in my hands or to see what I'm working on. . .is bizarre. At first you feel completely out of place—you're out of your element, everything is completely different than you're used to working with and then you kind of fall into the whole fantasy thing and let your imagination run. I think that's been the most fun."



Please turn to page 108

• Tom Wilson

So, you were hanging out one day and sombody came up to you and said "You wanna be in Wing Commander III?". . . what was your first impression?

TW: "There I was at the counter at Schwab's drugstore in Hollywood, much like Lana Turner was years gone by. Chris Roberts comes up and says "Hey, how about being in an interactive-CD-ROM-computer sort of entertainment-style-game-film-experience?" My first reaction, of course, was to say "What?" Then I agreed to do it. It's a lot of fun, actually. It's a very interesting thing for me, who's done a lot of feature films and a lot of different kinds of entertainment."

What kind of challenge has it been?

TW: "Well, it's a challenge that I've been presented before in the Back to the Future movies, where it's pretty heavey technical requirements, which pin you in a bit."

What about being on a set where there is no set?

TW: "Yeah, the set that is not a set. I've done a lot of green screen work, so I'm sort of used to it, but the first time you walk in there and just see giant green wall, you think "Is this some kind of kid's Nickolodeon show? When is the slime gonna come down from the roof?" It's really interesting to watch through the monitor. You can see what the ship looks like, and then it's just pretending. Basically it takes you into more acting because you have to pretend more."

What is your view on this medium as an entertainment vehicle? Are we going to see more actors involved in computer games?

TW: "I think that more and more actors will be involved with the computer and computer games and interactive things, because you can't deny that it's the future. This is an interesting opening for me into the world of CD-ROM and interactive games. I almost lose my words because the possibilities are endless."



Has it been difficult at all to have multiple version of the same scene?

TW: "Sometimes it's a memorization challenge because a lot of the lines are sort of similar but have little spins to them. You're saying something not totally opposite but a bit different and leading the scene in another direction. As far as knowing what direction the scene is headed, as an actor, you just do your job. That's why we're hired; because we are supposed to be able to learn this stuff and do it right."

What's it been like working with Chris Roberts?

TW: "It's really a lot of fun to work with a director, and Chris is definitely one of them, who is the guy you come to when you are lost. When you are doing a story that changes into two, three four, directions, there's a guy that you come to where you know he's the guy who understands exactly what's happening. Chris has this 200 megabyte hard drive in his head where he just turns and explains "Why, of course! SIlly Rabbit! It's easy if you'd just had a brain stem as large as mine!" So he always knows the answers, and that's his job as the director."

1 2 3 4 5

• Jason Bernard

You've been doing this two and a half weeks. What's the general feeling about what you are doing here?

JB: "I enjoy it. It's challenging as an actor, because you get to play things two different ways depending on the outcome of the game, and that makes it even more interesting."

Is it challenging compared with what you've done with much of your career.

JB: "Well, it's more challenging than sitcoms, but all forms of acting are basically the same, but they have different ways that you go about doing them. . .They all have a different approach. The approach that you have here is that you have to be more flexible because you are going to play two different things. So you can't be as staunch one way and then not be able to recover from that."

Any concerns when you went into this about getting into uncharted territory?

JB: "Not at all. I was looking forward to it. I think that this medium is going to be the movies of the future and that a lot of (projects) will be made this way. They will build movie houses where you can interact with the movie."

What about the set itself and working without any backdrop or set? Does that make it any tougher for you?

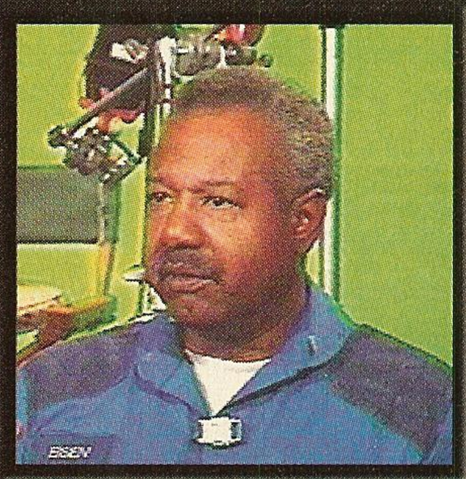
JB: "Not really, because you see what it looks like on the monitor, so you know where you are and what you are dealing with. You are dealing with enough of reality in whatever props you are using to justify whatever it is you are doing. It's all imagination. I don't find it any more difficult. I can see where some actors would, but I don't find it more difficult."

You were talking about how any time you are acting, you have to put yourself. . .

JB: ". . .In a certain frame of mind, or you have to imagine that this is going on anyway, so to me it's the same."

How rewarding is acting in this mode for you?

JB: "Well, the reward is. . .if you can accomplish doing this two different ways, I just find that rewarding, when I feel like I've done it. It feels good. It's a reward in itself."



What's the feel in the acting community about this medium?

"I don't really hang out with that many actors, because they are a strange breed and jealous of one other. There is a snobbery about this kind of work, that a real actor wouldn't do this kind of thing, just like there used to be a snobbery about doing commercials."

Is this refreshing to you since it is so new compared to what you've done?

JB: "Extremely."

How so?

JB: "The unreality that you have to deal with, in a way, enhances more reality, because the actor has to bring so much more to it, so much more believability. You can't look around and see the spaceship. You have to carry it in your mind. When you are on a set and you can walk around and touch it, that's one form of reality. It's harder when you're on a set and you can't walk around and touch it. But you have to remember that it's there."

Please turn to page 110

• Malcom McDowell

Have you done anything on a computer game before this?

MM: "No. My kids started on a Nintendo and we have now progressed to a Genesis. When I was approached to do this, I was intriuged. Absolutely intriuged by the whole idea of doing this computer game. It uses such cutting-edge techniques—putting scenery behind you when it's just green screen. I have a feeling that this is the way the movie business is going to go in the future. This may save the movie business, per se."

Was there any hesitation on your part?

MM: "No, not at all. I knew the rest of the cast and they're good actors and it's fun to do. And it's only three days of my life."

Have you done anything like this where you don't have a set?

MM: "No."

What has that been like?

MM: "It doesn't make any difference, really. You don't look at the sets when you work, you look at the other actors' eyes. You have your own imagination going—you're in the middle of this incredible starship—and out the window is another galaxy.

"I'm doing Star Trek at the moment, the movie, and they've built the sets. What we see here on the computer, they've built, and they're up to $35 million."

You see this as a new medium?

MM: "It's not a new medium, but it's certainly on the cutting edge of new technology for bringing down the enormous costs of film making. An average film costs $40 million in Hollywood right now: that's ludicrous. It has to be a huge hit to make this money back. It's a very expensive business. It means that a small, more modestly budgeted film gets caught in the middle and is not made. So if there is any way we can make the more interesting scripts that will not be just mainstream movies using this technology, I'm all for it. There's room for everything."

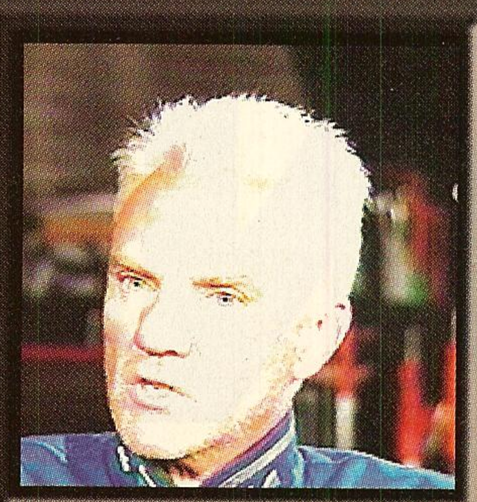
How do you view Chris Roberts as a first-time director?

MM: "You'd never know that. He's very precise in what he wants. He's got vision. I think all really good directors have to have vision. His communication skills are pretty good—he knows what he wants and he tells you. That's really good because then I can deliver for him, and the other actors can."

Can you see yourself doing another computer game?

MM: "Well, I don't think my future career is going to be computer games. Having said that, I'm an actor. I work in any medium. I'll do radio, TV, movies, stage, of course. This is yet another branch of our business. I would do another game if I liked it."

What kind of rewards does this sort of project have for you?



MM: "It goes back to the origins of when we were in drama school and we had to do improv. And improv, you don't want to do the same thing repeated, so you change it here and there. So, it goes back to that. That's fun to do. I don't mind doing that."

1 2 3 4 5

• John Rhys-Davies

What did you think when you were first approached about doing this?

JRD: "I said 'What? It's an inter-what?' And then I chatted 'round and someone wised me up about it. No, seriously I did know a little bit about it before. Not a great deal. One of the attractions of doing it is because I want to know what the heck it is you guys do for a living. It's a new game in town, and I think its potential is enormous. It's interesting to see that every six months, the quality and the potential grows geometrically. This, for instance, is a world apart from anything else I've seen out there, and yet in two years time, this is going to look very primative. It's going to look like watching the special effects in the Twilight Zone. They can still hold you with stories, but of course, our special effects are far greater. But it's a good yarn."

What sort of challenge has this posed for you?

JRD: "It's very much like working on a radio play, in a way. You have to imagine the background and where you are and the context. There are no props—there's just green and actors. I don't have any problem with that: I grew up with radio, and I've always had a fairly strong visual imagination. I'm very at home with it. It's a bit tiring on the eyes after a bit, but it certainly gets around a lot of problems in terms of the expense of designing sets. It's probably the way we'll be doing things in the future.

"Basically, the truth of acting is in the listening. When you have one set of possibilities, what the listening does is produce a response that is different each time. With the interactive conversation, it goes to [a point], then it splits. One way, you're angry, you're morale is high, you hit me. The other way, your morale is low, you don't hit me. Then, it comes back again and continues. What you have to do as an actor is find the piece that works with [either possibility] identically."

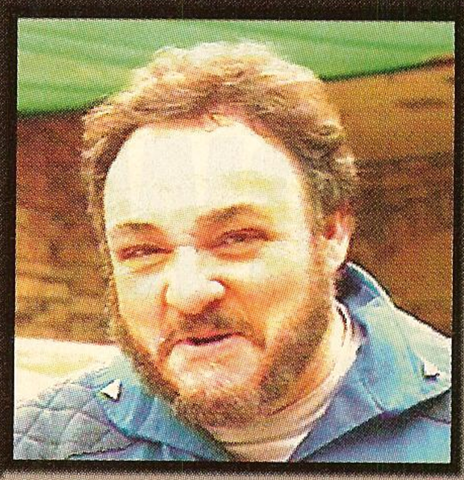
How has it been working with Chris Roberts?

JRD: "He's a very remarkable young fellow. Obviously knows what he's doing, knows what he's about. He lives and breathes these things and is certainly bringing it to life for this outsider, anyway.

"It's really been a rather happy experience despite the fact that you don't have wonderful sets."

Would you want to try this again?

JRD: "Oh, I have no doubt that this is where the future is going to be. I personally have a couple of projects. . .one is a factually-based thing I've been privaleged to be allowed to co-produce—a show based on a fine series of books on human evolution. We shall be looking at the interactive market as one of the ways of presenting this very rich and very complicated material. I also have another project, a wartime-based comedy that is very rich in terms of character. My guess is that you could build a game around it—that you could play any one of the characters. That way of exploring the life of those characters is going to be one of the tools that writers are going to use in the not-so-distant future."



COMPUTER GAMES

STRATEGY PLUS

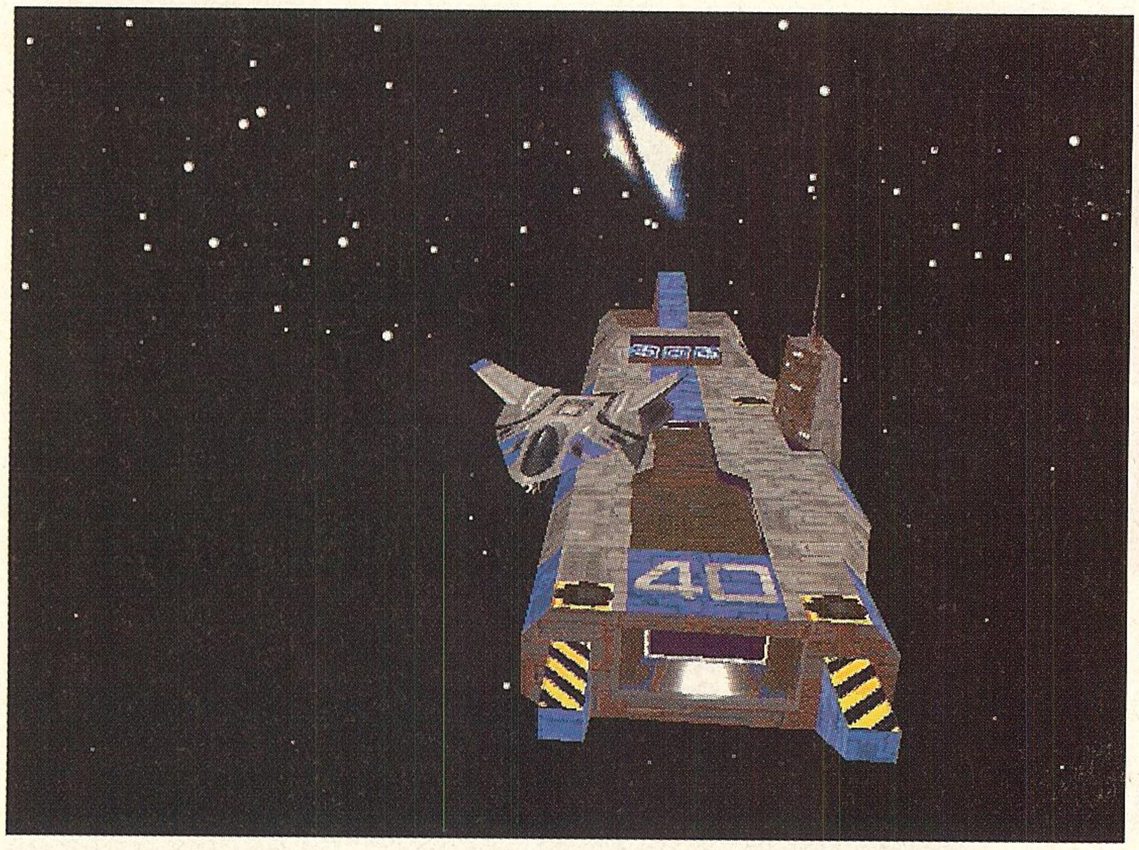
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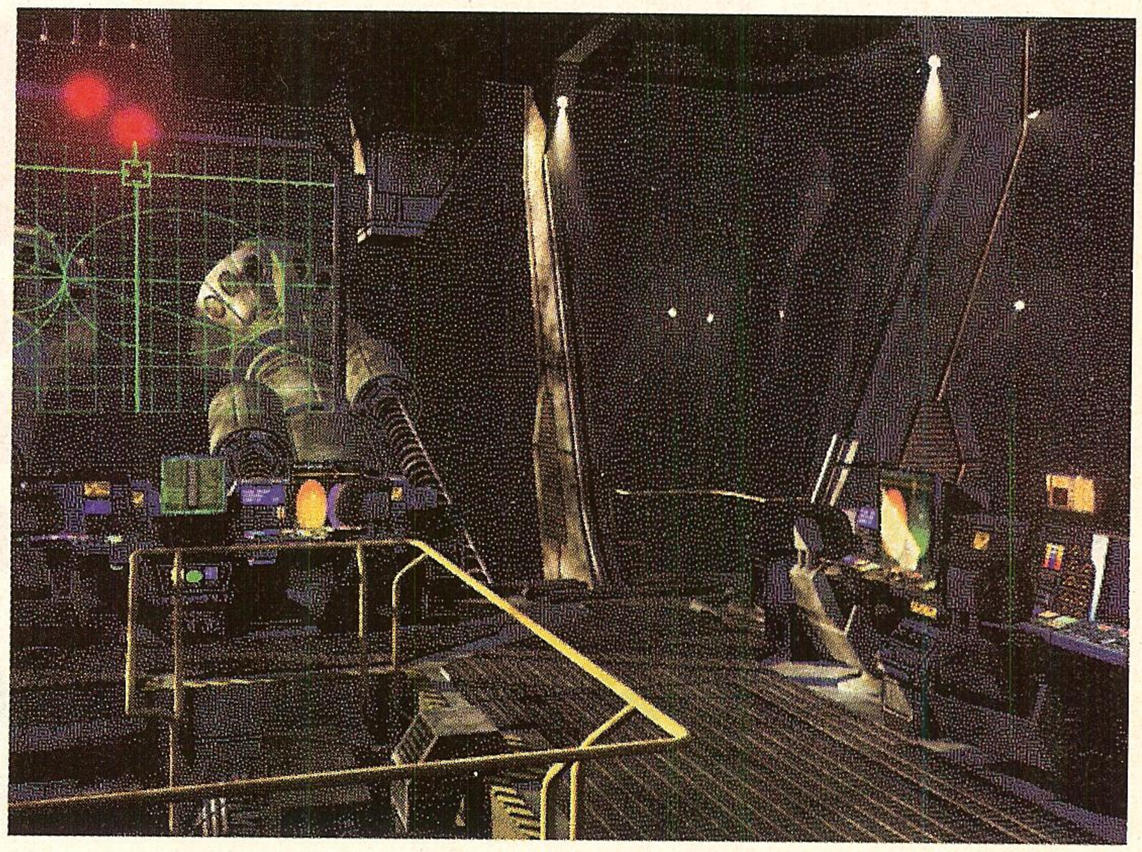
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Cordially,

Marc Dultz
Executive Editor





: HEART OF THE TIGER

stigate Origin's cinematic epic

it went through four rewrites during the development of **Strike Commander**). The speed gain in the engine is nothing short of astonishing. The scenes in deep space are nearly as smooth on a non-Local Bus 33 MHz 486 as they were on a 60 MHz Pentium. They were achieving 15 frames per second (fps) on the 486 and 24 on the Pentium. Only when you approach one of the massive Kilrathi capital ships do you notice a speed hit, and it's a considerable one on either machine. When flying the ground missions, you will notice that the odd curvatures in the terrain present in **Strike Commander** have been fixed.

All of the background art, objects, and set designs are being done on *Silicon Graphics* **Workstations** running **Alias**. All of the artists have **Indigos** on their desks, and the main art department has a mighty **Iris Crimson**, which was not only used to create dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* but could also house a family of three (it's rather large). The cut scene animations are created on these machines in 24-bit color (16.7 million colors) and then dithered down to 320x160x256 colors (a cinematic aspect ratio, which means that the screen looks letter-boxed). The art and set designs are uniformly excellent, from storyboard to computer screen. Credit for this must go to Art Director Chris Douglas and his talented group of artists.

Sound

The sound of a space opera like this is of utmost importance, and once again **Wing Commander III** delivers in spades. For dramatic scenes of dialogue you will have 16-bit 22KHz digital sound that is remarkable in its clarity. During the flight scenes the sounds will be in 8-bit 22KHz digital stereo, which will provide the player with audible cues on which direction the enemy ships are attacking you from.

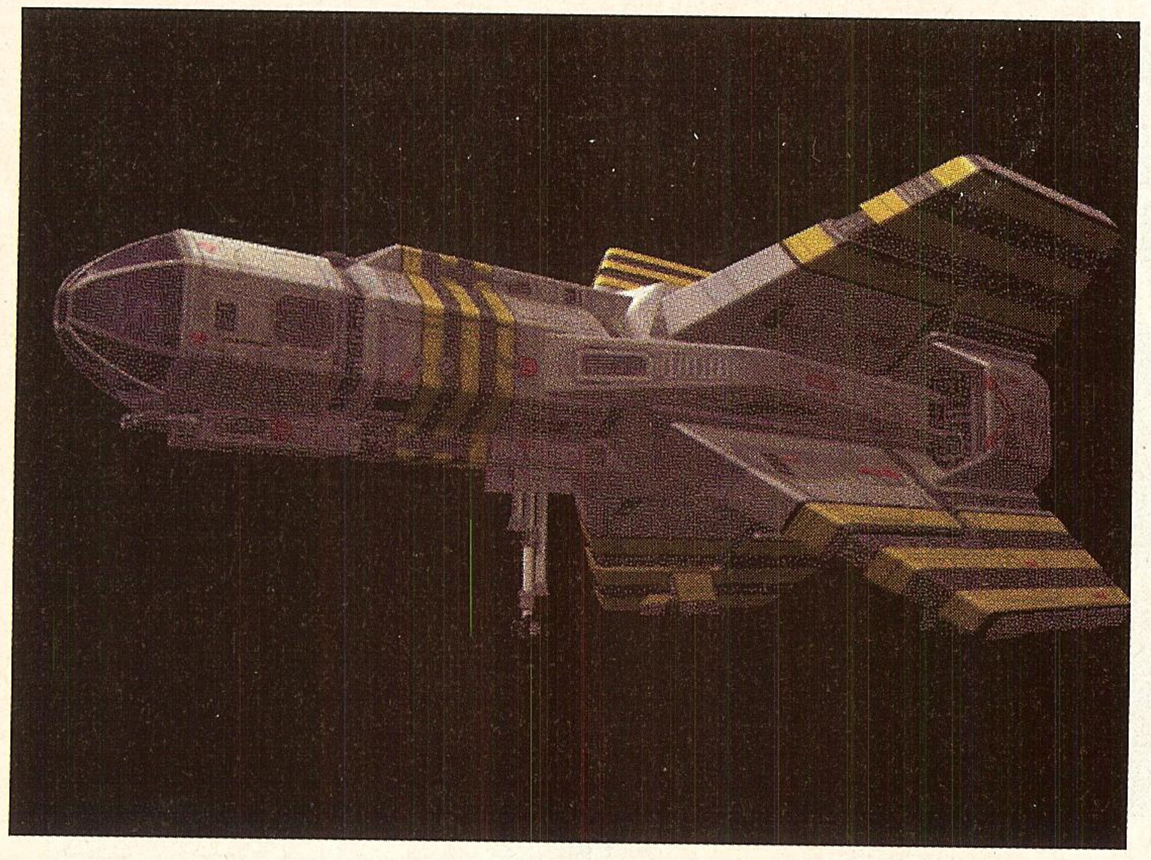
All of the in-flight sounds are pre-loaded into memory in order to keep the game from ever accessing the CD-ROM during play. This is one of the reasons the game requires 8 megabytes of RAM to run, as there are over 700K work of sounds to load per mission, plus all of the SVGA graphics to deal with. Users with over 8 megabytes of RAM will be happy to know that this game will load even more things into their machine's RAM, with 16 megabytes or so being the maximum the game will use. The more RAM you have, the faster the game will play, due to the speed (or lack thereof) of the CD-ROM.

The full orchestral-quality score will be General MIDI compliant, and sounds fantastic on a high-end *Roland* card such as the **Sound Canvas** (on lesser cards the music will be less impressive). The music during the introductory sequence is all digital, which allows the designers to properly mix the voice and music, and will therefore sound identical on all machines. They are also using new third-party sound drivers on this project which will allow them to provide native support for almost every sound card on the planet, from the *Gravis* **Ultrasound** to the *Ensoniq* **Soundscape**.

Cut!

The end result of any game is to provide enjoyment for the players, whether that is via a visceral kick in the butt or a more cerebral experience. A game like **Wing Commander III** will be a pure entertainment product - an action/adventure game with pretenses toward being one of the first true epics in its field. Chris Roberts emphasized that he wanted **Wing Commander III** to be "a complete experience," and for once I am inclined to agree. *Origin* may have actually accomplished their goal of creating the first truly interactive cinematic experience, an action movie where you actually get to be the hero, and one where the long-promised marriage of Hollywood and Silicon produces something that both can be proud of.❑







WING COMMANDER III:

Steve Bauman flies down to Austin, Texas to inve

PREVIEW

Wing Commander was one of those products that marked a turning point in the gaming industry. Designed and programmed by Chris Roberts, it introduced technologies that had not been used with such great effect before; it was one of the first games to incorporate "cinematic" cut scenes and effects; and it forced people to upgrade their machines in order to play it (perhaps every turning point has its downside). **Wing Commander II** was more of a refinement of the original, and from the looks of it, *Origin's* $3 million dollar baby known as **Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger** may mark the next turning point. I spent a hot and humid day at *Origin's* Austin, Texas home to get the lowdown on what may be the game released in 1994 that everyone will be shooting for in 1995, and perhaps beyond.

You probably know that **Wing Commander III** stars Mark Hamill, Malcolm McDowell, John Rhys-Davies, Thomas F. Wilson, and Ginger Lynn Allen. It has a huge budget (by gaming, not Hollywood, standards), it was shot in Hollywood (actually Van Nuys, but close enough) and they had a bunch of Hollywood puppeteers making the Kilrathi come to life. This game also aspires to be something of an interactive movie-like experience.

Of the numerous current "interactive movies" that use live actors with computer rendered backgrounds, none come even close to **Wing Commander III's** level of integration. It is usually quite obvious in such designs that actors have been superimposed on a computer generated set. This is due in part to poor video and inexperience with the medium on the part of the designers. Director Roberts explains: "I've seen game companies try to do things Hollywood has done for 90 years by themselves, causing the bad acting, scripts and poor video. It should be in the middle. If you get experience from both sides then you get the best of both worlds."

Action!

Wing Commander III continues *Origin's* pioneering branching storyline, where failing to complete a mission does not lead to a "game over" but merely makes your path to the end different, and more difficult. There is no possible way to see all the missions and video in one pass through the game, which lends itself to replay value for those who need that sort of carrot dangled in front of them. The game also has the same style of scene depiction, where you click on different characters to talk to them (though they are of course actual actors this time). Unlike the previous games in the series, you can actually interact with the other characters, and what you do can have an effect later on in the game. For example, you may have to choose between two possible romantic encounters which will affect how those characters react to you later in the game. There are many of these forms of interaction promised, which may make the cut scenes themselves more interactive than many others' self-proclaimed "interactive movies."

Once you make your way out of the plot and into the action, you will be rewarded with the best looking space simulation ever created. This part of the game has been up and running for the year it's taken for the video parts to be completed. Talking with the various members of the team, it becomes obvious immediately that most are hardcore gamers, and many were fans of the first two games before they came to work for *Origin*. Because they were fans, they are working on the things that they feel needed improvement in the first two installments. Many are working weekends to add their own subtle new touches to the game, such as enemy ships distorting when they pass in front of the damaged glass of your ship when it takes hits.

You now have the option of playing the game with your cockpit in view, or in a full screen mode with pop-up displays. The latter will be the preferred method of playing, as it allows you to see so much more of the world. If your machine is capable enough to play the game in SVGA, you are in for quite a treat, as the graphics in this mode are truly breathtaking. The action is fast and furious — in typical **Wing Commander** fashion — and the improved enemy AI should prove to be a challenge for expert pilots. The game will also include a few ground missions for variety, which will only be playable at VGA resolutions, due to the amount of ground detail necessary in the design. A new 3-D map for locating the enemy and finding waypoints is available, one which is not only visually impressive but also quite useful.

A number of difficulty settings will be adjustable by the player, from beginner to expert, which will control how the enemy flies and will simplify the gamer's ship control. A built-in cheat mode will allow the most novice user to be able to see the whole game, which I think is always a good idea. However, the team promises that this ease of play will not come at the expense of complexity for hardcore **Wing Commander**s.

Effects

Wing Commander III is using a highly modified version of the **Strike Commander** graphic engine. It has been modified to use SVGA graphics and has been switched from 16-bit to much faster 32-bit code. It has also gone through numerous rewrites (Roberts said that

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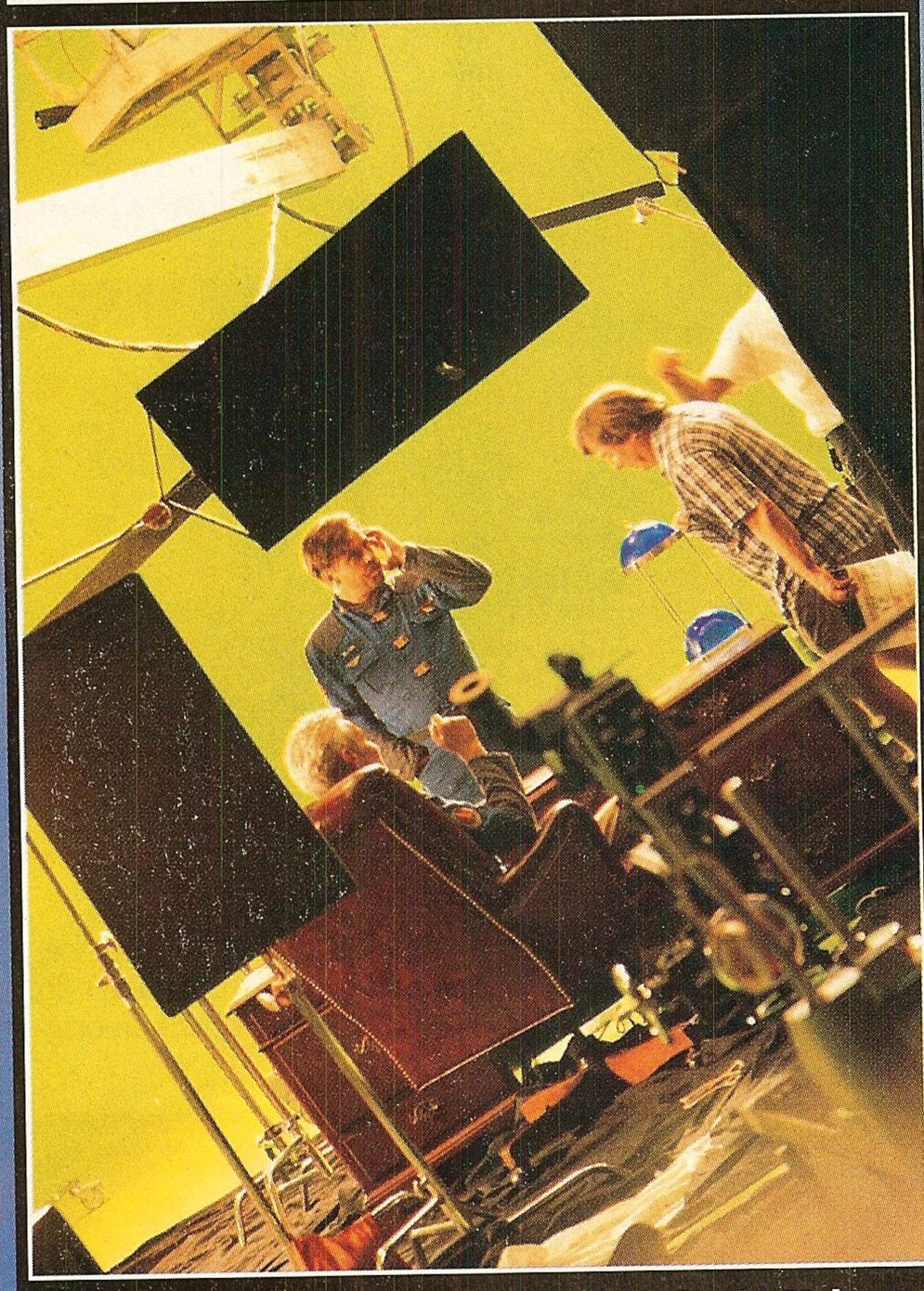
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ON A WING AND A PRAYER

The Making of Wing Commander III





STAR WARIOR: Hamill is briefed on a mission by Malcom McDowell. CG-backgrounds will be composited digitally over the green screen.

Interactive is *the* buzzword in Hollywood these days, with veterans like George Lucas and Steven Spielberg devoting their current energies to developing CD-ROM games and every studio in town creating "interactive game" divisions.

But no one seems interested yet in putting together comedies or dramas in the interactive format. No, what CD-ROM and other formats seem destined to do is create science fiction and fantasy experiences—taking viewers and players to other worlds in as realistic a way as possible.

Creating that sense of reality is bringing artists and technicians from the video-game and filmmaking industries into a new, sometimes awkward marriage. And no one seems to have a clue what the offspring will look like.

However, the people at Origin Systems hope it'll look a lot like their new interactive game ***Wing Commander III***: ***The Heart of the Tiger***, which combines the science of CD-ROM video wizardry with old-fashioned movie making.

Genre veterans Mark Hamill, Malcolm McDowell and John Rhys-Davies bring life to characters already familiar to anyone who has played either of the two previous ***Wing Commander*** games or read one of the novels set in the ***Wing Commander*** universe.

Set in the year 2654, ***Wing Commander III*** centers on Col. Christopher Blair (Hamill), a veteran pilot who's seen his share of victories and defeats against the intractable Kilrathi (one of whom—Paladin—is voiced by Rhys-Davies). His mission continues to be to protect the starfleet, defend the innocent and take the offensive against the enemy.

As the adventure begins, the Kilrathi seem to be gaining the upper hand in the long-fought Galactic War. With his old carrier blown away, Blair is reassigned to the *TCS Victory*, an aging tub in space, where he confronts Admiral Tolwyn (McDowell) and a hot-shot pilot who's as likely to shoot Blair as the enemy (Thomas F. Wilson from the ***Back to the Future*** films).

These live-action sequences will merge with computer-painted landscapes, "virtual" sets, and a fully-orchestrated musical score in a seamless tapestry of traditional movie footage and video game magic—an entertainment that Origin's Production Manager Adam Foshko calls "interactive movies."

"This game explores what people are really interested in in terms of interactivity. No one really knows what interactive multimedia entertainment is—right now, we're all just feeling around in the dark," Foshko says.

By Kevin Stevens



COOL FOR CATS: The evil Kilrathi antagonists of WING COMMANDER make the jump to live action in the new interactive game.

But with ***Wing Commander III***, 26-year-old Chris Roberts, director and creator of the previous ***Wing Commander*** games, wanted to define interactivity in a new way, by creating an interactive movie that employs all the conventions of film to tell a story, and also allows the viewer/player to become part of the action by interacting at key points in the plot, thus advancing and changing the course of events throughout.

As the interactive player, you are Blair. During the adventure, you'll alternately participate in filmed scenes with other characters and then move on to fly seat-of-the-pants missions in a variety of advanced spacefighters.

Almost two hours of live-action footage were filmed, with computer-generated backgrounds taking the place of any actual sets. Later, this footage was married with "virtual" sets, backgrounds and the game-play environment using Silicon Graphics workstations and state-of-the-art software.

Mark Hamill has had a little more experience than some of his colleagues in the interactive medium, having recently provided the voice to a computer-generated character in another interactive game, ***Gabriel Knight***. "It's an interactive game that I only did the voice to," he says. "I did it in two four-hour segments, all by myself. So I didn't have any scenes really with the other performers. The imaging was all computer-generated, but it was a foreshadowing for what's happening with ***Wing Commander***."

Of the current project, Hamill says, "There are so many eventualities in the script that making this is a whole new ball game. I have the feeling that I may look back in 50 years and say, 'Hey, I was in at the beginning of this phenomenon,' just like actors at the end of the silent film era might have felt when they began doing talking pictures."

While Hamill and McDowell may at least be on the same soundstage together for ***Wing Commander***, rather than simply voicing their characters alone in a recording studio, there's still enough "virtual" filmmaking to keep everyone on his toes.

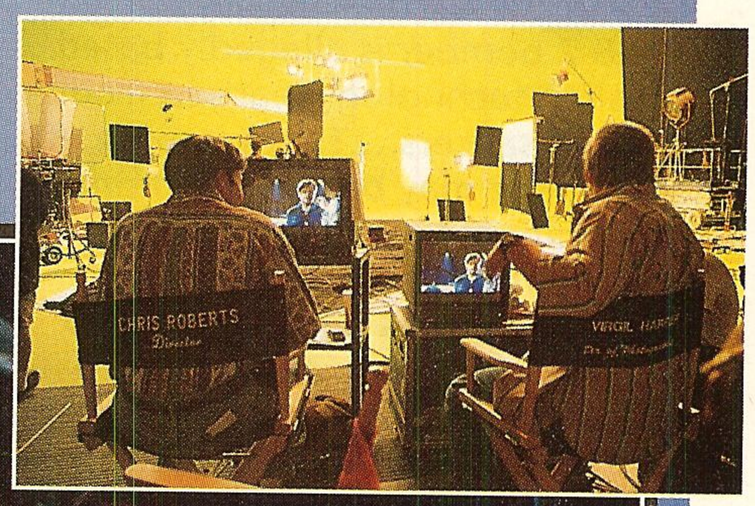
The set that Hamill and McDowell are working on in the final week of production—Admiral Tolwyn's office—is completely bare, except for a beaten-up wooden desk, which is itself masked out of the final scene. Everything, including the furniture, is a special effect to be added in later. Burkons likens the task of acting in this environment to "performing in minimalist theater."

Says McDowell, who is shooting his role of Admiral Tolwyn while on break from filming ***Star Trek: Generations***, "I don't act to scenery, I act to character. So it really doesn't matter from an actor's point of view what's on the stage and what isn't. And my character doesn't have a lot of different story arcs. It's Blair—the player character—who does all that, so my job is rather easier."

Producer Donna Burkons says that the budget for ***Wing Commander III*** is "in the neighborhood of $3 million—including all the promotion budget, everything. Everyone's a little nervous. First, they're nervous because it's the most anyone's ever spent, and second, they're nervous because if this succeeds, then they'll have to spend this much on *every* project," she laughs. "A new benchmark will be established."

"When I first did ***Wing Commander***," director Roberts says, "I wanted an experience like those movies and TV shows that I loved when I was younger—like ***Star Wars*** and ***Battlestar Galactica***, but I couldn't, because I was working with video-game technology. Now, I find it's coming full circle: the games I'm designing are more like movies than games."

Wing Commander III: The Heart of the Tiger is expected to be available in the late fall, and will be distributed by Electronic Arts.



SPACE ACE: Mark Hamill (r.) and Jason Bernard in a scene from WING COMMANDER III. (INSERT) Director Chris Roberts oversees the CD-ROM action.

PHOTOS FOR SFU BY ILLONA LIEBERMAN

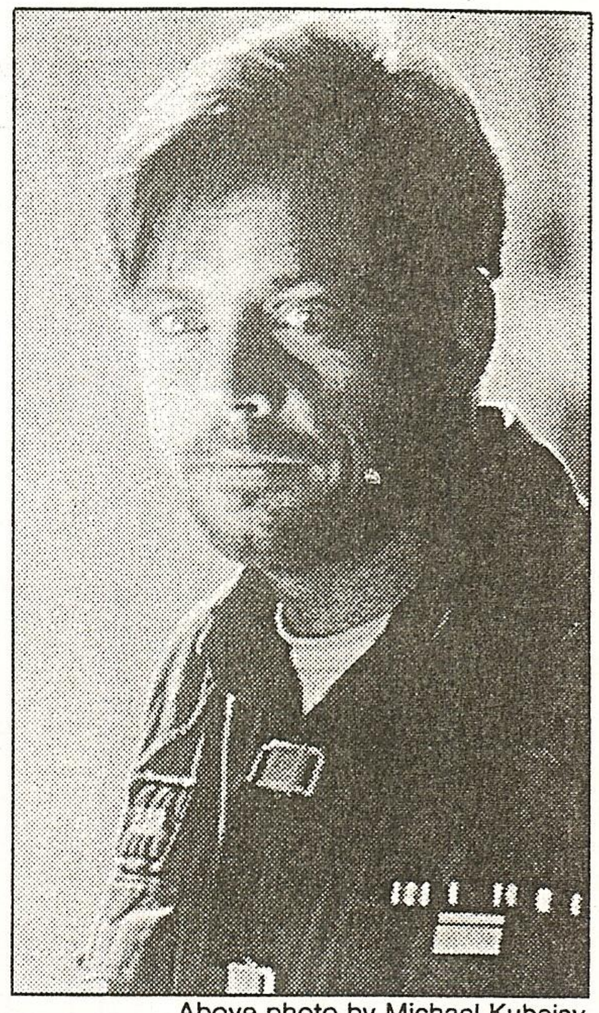
HOME TECH

Creating a cyber blockbuster

'Wing Commander III' flies high on big budget

By Bernard Yee
Special for USA TODAY





Above photo by Michael Kubeisy
STARS OF OUTER SPACE: 'Wing Commander III' features Malcolm McDowell, left, and Mark Hamill combatting aliens to save humanity.

If you're a Hollywood producer, $4 million doesn't buy much of a sci-fi epic these days. But if you're a computer game maker, it gets you perhaps the most expensive epic ever made, and a little bit of Hollywood in the bargain.

The production is *Wing Commander III*, latest in a successful line of PC outer-space games created by Chris Roberts, a visionary designer at Origin Systems in Texas.

The cast is notable, though not quite marquee: It includes Mark Hamill (Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* trilogy); Malcolm McDowell (*A Clockwork Orange*); John Rhys-Davies (Sallah in the *Indiana Jones* series); and Ginger Lynn Allen (*Young Guns II*).

The game, due out around Thanksgiving (at around $60-$90 in stores), comes on multimedia CDs for computers. Even though CDs hold enormous amounts of data for video and sound, this game is so big it takes four CDs.

And the production's cost is "far and away" the most ever spent on a game, says Origin's David Swofford. "It's probably twice as much as has been spent on any other product."

Players pilot a starfighter in simulated 3-D space combat against evil ailens. The survival of humanity hangs in the balance.

Hamill plays the pilot. And, although he didn't want to do Luke Skywalker over again, he says the new format intrigued him: "I thought, 'I can't miss this opportunity. This is the ground level.' "

The bulk of the budget went toward filming the live-action video. Writers collaborated on the screenplay as cinematographers consulted with computer programmers on lighting and action.

Unlike Hollywood productions, *Wing Commander III* had no sets. The actors performed in front of a matte screen, and futuristic backdrops were generated by the same Silicon Graphics workstations used to create the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*.

"It was disorienting," says co-star Allen, who went to mainstream film and TV nine years ago after two years in adult films.

Her experience working without clothes didn't prepare her for working without sets: "I was supposed to be a mechanic working on this spaceship, and all I saw was this green screen. But the final results were amazing."

Rhys-Davies, a classically trained actor, likens it to working in radio, "except you still have to *act*," he laughs. Like Hamill, Rhys-Davies was drawn to this production because of its potential. "It is a new craft that will develop into an art as this tool is refined," he predicts.

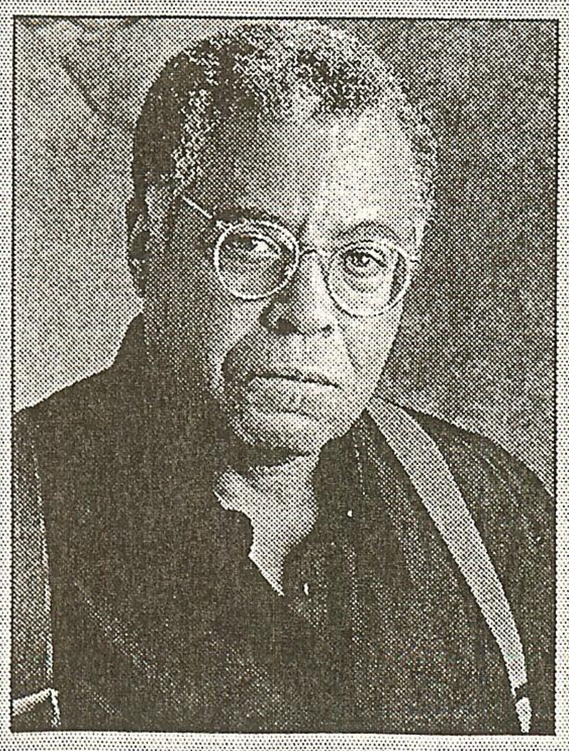
Hamill remembers when George Lucas predicted the impact of this technology on Hollywood while walking in Jabba's palace on the set of *Return of the Jedi*.

"This is what George is doing with the *Young Indiana Jones* series, pioneering these cost-cutting techniques so that he's able to do an epic-type film that would be prohibitively expensive if he were constructing sets," says Hamill.

This new medium presents other acting challenges. Since the story changes with the gamer's actions, the script has to provide for all options, such as which character to befriend or to pursue as a romantic interest. "There was much more preparation for each scene than a 'normal' film shoot," says Allen. "I had to approach the same scene in response to all the possible story choices."

The screenplay's length — more than twice as long as an ordinary feature film — reflects the many possibilities. More than three hours of video is seamlessly integrated into *Wing Commander III's* action sequences, and the final product is stunning.

"My goal is to provide an interactive experience that draws viewers in," says creator Roberts. And, for *Wing Commander IV*, he says, "I'd like to film a feature film along with the production of the game — and a much bigger budget."



JAMES EARL JONES: His is the voice of God in 'Killing Moon.'

Others with familiar faces

Other big-game productions with recognizable faces:

▶ Hack into computers and prevent the coming of demons on Earth in ***Hell,*** a "cyberpunk" thriller by GameTek ($79.99). The game maps 3-D models of its stars faces and voices (Dennis Hopper, Grace Jones, Stephanie Seymour and Geoffrey Holder) onto the animated characters. Hopper (surprise!) plays an insane pornographer and demon.

▶ ***Voyeur,*** a cyberspace *Rear Window* starring Robert Culp and Grace Zabriskie, allows you to peer into your neighbor's life — and it's more *Twin Peaks* than *Father Knows Best*. Murder, sex, blackmail, political intrigue are all involved in this CD-ROM for mature audiences. Originally for the Philips CD-i interactive disc system, *Voyeur* is being released on CD-ROM for PC by Interplay (approximate street price $60).

▶ Access Software's ***Under a Killing Moon,*** just out, is the first game to provide a "go-anywhere," realistically rendered 3-D environment. This four-disc extravaganza was filmed using matte techniques similar to *Wing Commander III*, with stars Brian Keith, Margot Kidder and Russell Means. And how can you go wrong with the voice of James Earl Jones as God? ($99.95).

PC GAMER

M E M O

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Wing Commander III: The Heart of the Tiger



A Hands-On Look at Origin's Biggest, Boldest, Hottest Game Ever

William R. "Scourge of the Kilrathi" Trotter





Two lovely crewpersons (Jennifer MacDonald, left, and Ginger Lynn Allen) vie for Blair's affections. *Looks* like a win-win deal, but one these ladies is your mechanic — spurning her could lead to trouble. Like the rest of Wing III, the acting here is some of the best ever in a PC game.

Wing Commander first blasted its way into my life at the summer CES of 1990. Almost from the opening bell, there was a palpable buzz in the exhibit hall about one of the games being demonstrated at Origin's booth. Colleagues from other magazines would stop by our booth and say, in tones as reverent as tones could be when competing for audibility with an out-of-tune and deafeningly loud Japanese karaoke singer one aisle over, "Have you *seen* what Origin's got?"

Since the summer of 1990 marked the high tide of the Nintendo phenomenon, an exasperating amount of our time had to be devoted to looking at videogames; so unfortunately, it wasn't until the third day of the show that we dragged our weary heads and aching feet over to the Origin booth.

From a bank of very large speakers there came a thunderous, shuddering roar, punctuated by the zap and crackle of laser guns and the electronic "splat!" sound that denoted a hit. Between the speakers, on a home-theater projection screen, was the best damned dogfight scene I'd ever witnessed. Realistic spaceships of several kinds dived and twisted, loosing bolts of plasma and volleys of torpedoes, exploding in napalm-bursts of flame and spewing debris. It was PC magic; a defining moment, when the programmer's ability to suspend our disbelief approaches the level of Art.

We stood there with our collective editorial jaws hitting the floor, our sense of wonder — utterly novocained after three days of watching arcade-game demos and listening to the same old sales pitches — roaring back to life with a surge of adrenaline. This was hot. This was sensational. This was *unique*.



To the Victors go the Spoils: The *Wing III* production team poses with the author (center), who has returned from battle with a Kilrathi trophy to hang over his fireplace.

It was *Wing Commander*. Conducting the demonstration was a very young fellow with a charming British accent and a messianic zeal about the future of PC entertainment — a future he was already staking out for himself and for Origin. He was, of course, Chris Roberts, and he seemed to have the metabolism of a humming bird — sparks shot out of his ears when he began talking about *Wing Commander*, and he moved his hands in energetic parabolas, like a fighter pilot describing a victorious dogfight.

Even then, Roberts was committed to an ultimate merger between movies and PC games. He made no secret of his passionate desire to be the Cecil B. DeMille of computer entertainment, and the cinema-style cut-aways in *Wing I* were his first modest, hesitant, steps toward the hybrid phenomenon now known as "interactive movies."

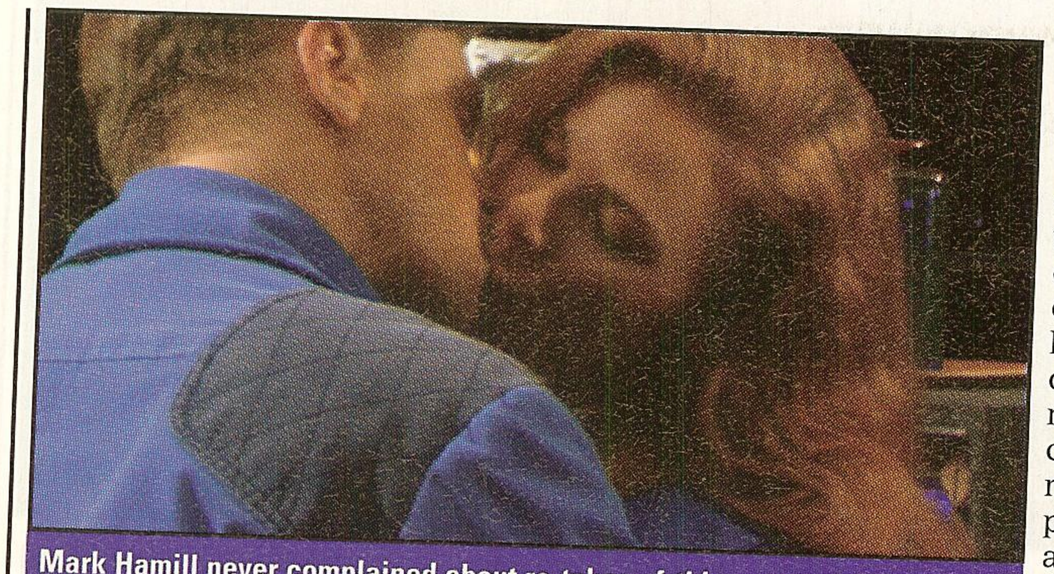
To reviewers who had grown terminally bored with peering down dungeon corridors, *Wing Commander* was a hurricane of fresh air, a game so different and so successful that it was almost an avant garde product. Most of the editors became fans of the game, but I was truly addicted — playing mission after mission until my joystick hand began to tremble and my eyes started seeing fuzzy colors that weren't really there.

As the resident Origin-addict, I was sent to the company's Austin, Texas, headquarters in the summer of 1991, mostly to gather information for a cover story about *Strike Commander*, but also to get an advance look at *Wing Commander II*.

The Origin offices had the atmosphere of a command post under siege. The vibes were intense and close to hysterical; you could almost smell ozone and sulphur. Baggy-eyed programmers, fully dressed, lay crashed-out on sleeping bags in the corners of offices. The place was in Full Crunch Mode, trying to complete *Wing Commander II* on schedule.

I went back to Austin in September of this year, to get a hands-on look at *Wing Commander III: The Heart of the Tiger* — and much had changed in the intervening years. *Strike Commander* had been so late, and so plagued by problems, that for a time it looked like Origin was on the ropes. In fact, the company was purchased outright by Electronic Arts in September 1992, and it was that sudden infusion of capital that put Origin back in the thick of things.

Through all its time of troubles, Origin had never wavered from its tradition of issuing software that was ahead of the technological curve. Nor did the scope of its ambitions diminish. While the rest of the industry was trying



Mark Hamill never complained about re-takes of *this* scene.

to figure out just what "interactive" meant, Origin's people were making a major effort to become the MGM of PC gaming, secure in the knowledge of what that term meant for *their* company's future.

So yes, things were different when I went out to visit this past September. The firm had moved into a 54,000 square-foot building after the merger with E.A. — and now, only two years later, this space is insufficient and Origin is designing a brand new headquarters. Growth has been explosive, and the number of employees has risen to more than 200.

As soon as you walk into the place, you can tell that this is no ordinary corporate HQ: Many of the walls and corners have been built out at odd, jutting angles, totally breaking up any sense of boring, predictable rectilinearity. Finding your way around this building is only marginally easier than exploring a dungeon in an *Ultima* game, and the bizarre shape of some of the asymmetrical walls gives you the odd sensation of walking through a set from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

The first thing I noticed, as Media Relations chief David Swofford took me on the grand tour, was the *absence* of tension. Everyone looked industrious, but there was none of the frazzled exhaustion that filled the place during my first visit. I remarked on this contrast to Swofford, who attributes it to the fact — *mirabile dictu*! — that *Wing Commander III* is *on schedule* and has been since day one. I'm dumbfounded by this knowledge, which I saw confirmed on every side during the day.

Once the tour was complete, I settled down with Project Director Frank Savage to actually see and play parts of *Wing III*. It's already on record as being one of the biggest, most expensive, and most ambitious PC game ever produced: But is it good enough to be the "best," to set a new standard for the industry?

Let me say up front that it's certainly one of the two *best-looking* PC games this reviewer has ever laid eyes on — only Access's *Under a Killing Moon* boasts comparable graphics (although the two games are so different that further comparison is meaningless).

Let me also state that Origin's decision to pay top dollar for a professional cast was absolutely the right thing to do. Like every other *WC* addict, I had long ago developed imaginary voices for the characters (I was never too impressed with the add-on speech packs), but the instant I heard Mark Hamill, Malcolm McDowell, and John Rhys-Davies speak their lines, their authority and polish swept away all preconceptions.

Hamill plays the protagonist, a veteran pilot (you, the game player) named Christopher Blair. He's aged into the part gracefully; he's no longer the boyish and smooth-cheeked hotshot of the *Star Wars* films. His lined face and scruffy beard, the thousand-yard stare in his eyes, the way he carries his shoulders and moves his head, all combine in a characterization suggestive of a man who has fought many battles, and seen too many good comrades die.



Malcolm McDowell's portrayal of Admiral Tolwyn is utterly convincing. In fact, all of the supporting cast turn in fine performances.

Malcolm McDowell's Admiral Tolwyn is also a masterful characterization. As soon as he moves and speaks, he *becomes* the admiral. All the supporting cast, in fact, is terrific, including ex-porn queen Ginger Lynn Allen as Blair's attractive mechanic. A special treat (and a surprising one to most players, I'll wager), is the half-crazed intensity brought to the role of Maniac — the hot-headed pilot who flies by his own set of rules — by Thomas F. Wilson, who played the bully Biff in the *Back to the Future* movies. Wilson steals every scene he's in.

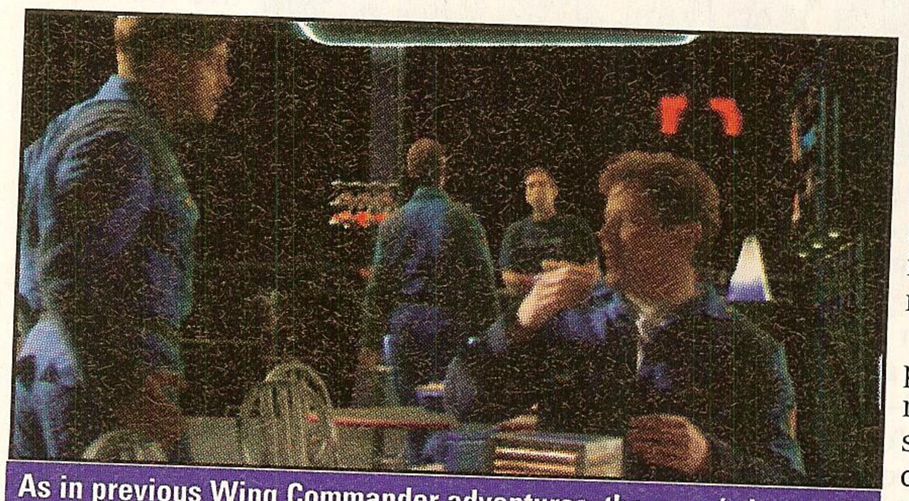
Not surprisingly, the Kilrathi characters — portrayed both by actors-in-cat-suits and hydraulically controlled puppets — don't look quite as realistic as their human counterparts. But they do project a sense of savagery barely controlled by discipline, and their lip-syncing is at least as convincing as that of the simian characters in *Planet of the Apes*.

And talk about hooks! An 11-minute introduction sets up the story, and also provides a quick tour of the game's drop-dead gorgeous graphics. Things are not going well for the Confederation. The initiative has passed to the Kilrathi, and the Confederation now routinely under-reports its casualty figures. Pilot Blair, whose former ship, the carrier *Concordia*, has recently been destroyed, is transferred to a rust-bucket ironically (or maybe not — it's up to you) named *TCS Victory*. He is reunited with his Kilrathi friend Hobbes, and flies many missions, (including a couple of ground-attack sorties), before the grand finale (not yet, alas, available for viewing), in which he goes on a "suicide mission" to deliver a secret weapon capable of blowing up the cats' home-world.

Throughout the segments I saw, the blend of cinematic footage and computer-generated sets was extraordinary. From the gloomy depths of a vast hangar deck to the spartan confines of the pilots' barracks, space and scale are manipulated with the greatest virtuosity. Only rarely, and most of the time in footage that was obviously not complete, did I see any trace of the pasted-on quality that characterized some earlier hybrid graphics. In most of the scenes I witnessed, the integration of digitized and computer-generated images was utterly smooth and convincing, including such touches as the use of shadows, light-sourcing, reflective surfaces, and textures.

Using a new program developed in-house, Origin has set a high standard indeed with regard to texturing. Textures don't break down into big, pixelicious clumps as they tended to do during close-ups in the earlier *WC* games. This was especially noticeable when capital ships were on-screen — the illusion of *mass* was uncanny, even at collision range.

Frank Savage is proud of the 3D programming, one of his major responsibilities during production. "We've had 16 enemy ships on the screen at once without any loss of frame rate — that's you,



As in previous Wing Commander adventures, the crew's lounge is a great place to hear scuttlebutt and pick up gameplay tips.

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A Conversation With The "Other Chris"

Chris Roberts, creator of the *Wing Commander* series and Executive Producer of *Heart of the Tiger*, was still in Hollywood, wrapping up the final cinematic sequences, so I decided to pay a visit to "The Other Chris," the very gifted Christopher Douglas, who as Art Director bore one of the heaviest responsibilities of the entire *Wing III* project. Below are excerpts from our conversation.

PCG: Define your responsibilities on this project.

C.D.: I'm Art Director/Production Designer. I'm in charge of all the graphics production, all the conceptual design, stuff like that.

PCG: How'd you go about it? What were some of the problems you had to face?

C.D. Well, this was actually the first game we've produced in which somebody was designated to do that. Previously, we've had four or five artists working on the same project, and some times they didn't all have the same vision of how things were supposed to look, and the finished game's graphics could look fragmented as a result. Take *Privateer*, for instance — the space flight scenes were uniform, because they were all done by myself and by Jake Rogers, whose style is very much like my own. But in the other parts of the game, you saw glaring differences between one artist's work and another's.

What I'm trying to do is to ensure a consistent style all the way through *Wing III*. It turned out to be a lot harder than I expected. In a project like this, people get going in such high gear that you don't always have the time to go around and tweak everything that everyone's doing. In *Wing Commander III*, I think we've done as good a job as anyone can in a game with this much artwork.

PCG: Everything I saw this morning looked of-a-piece, and there are enough visual fingerprints from the earlier games — the sputtering overhead light, the grungy interior of the spaceships with shafts of grainy light in the background — that veteran players will know this is still the same universe.

C.D.: Yes indeed. Yes, indeed. I did a lot of thinking about the overall design conception, the stylistic *look* of the game. Look at the Star Wars productions: whatever class they may be, the Imperial ships all share a certain look, and the instant you see one, you *know* it's an Imperial ship. I wanted it to be the same with the Confederation and the Kilrathi. Kilrathi ships tend to look like they all have claws; they're asymmetrical and designed in components — a crew compartment, a weapons' module, engine modules, and they do tend to have a sharp, spikey look to them. Above all, they are menacing and *alien*. I've even written a historical essay, tracing the evolution of Kilrathi ship-design and explaining why they have this distinctive appearance. It may be included in the manual.

PCG: Please do so — that sounds very interesting!

C.D.: The Terran ships, on the other hand, look as though they were evolved directly from late twentieth-century aircraft. The Broadsword bomber, for example, has a nose rather like a B-29, the heavy fighters have an intake like an A-7 Crusader, the Excalibur is reminiscent of an F-23, and so on. Recognizably human, however advanced their inner technologies may be.

PCG: From an artistic point of view, what's your favorite element in *Wing III*?

C.D.: The capital ships! I think they're the coolest thing in the game, at least visually. We've rendered them so that they seem to have enormous *mass*. In the first games, they just broke up into big pixels when you got close to them, but in this game they look *big* in the medium shots and as you get closer, they just look bigger. The Kilrathi dreadnought is two miles long, and in the game, it *looks* two miles long! You can fly down the length of it, with full afterburner, and it still takes about 30 seconds to pass from bow to stern.

PCG: Tying all of this background and scenic art into the cinematics must have been an enormous task...

C.D.: I'm amazed we got so much done, and done on schedule. We had to learn how to use a new computer platform and an operating system that none of us were used to. The SGI-graphics units weren't even tied into a network when we started, and "Alias" isn't the easiest package to pick up, either; it's very complex. Our technical support people did an outstanding job.

PCG: How else did *Wing III* differ from some of Origin's past projects?

C.D.: Well, usually it's the *programmers* who are tearing their hair out and working 60-70-hour-weeks, while the artists usually keep normal nine-to-five hours. This time, it was completely reversed. Our artists have been working 70-hour weeks for eight solid months. It was different, too, because the production process was really very movie-like, and you don't get to see the final effect of all that work until the art is wedded to the cinematics, the sound is dubbed in, and the music coordinated.

When we saw the rough tapes, the composite quality was pretty glaring — the actors had been rendered on super high-resolution D-1 video tape, while the backgrounds were just regular old 640x330 renderings. And there was a real clash between the two images. But once we put it all through the compressor, and then layered on the sound — which does so much to sell the scene — all those glaring contrasts leveled out and it all looks like part of the same world. The process worked better than I'd hoped.

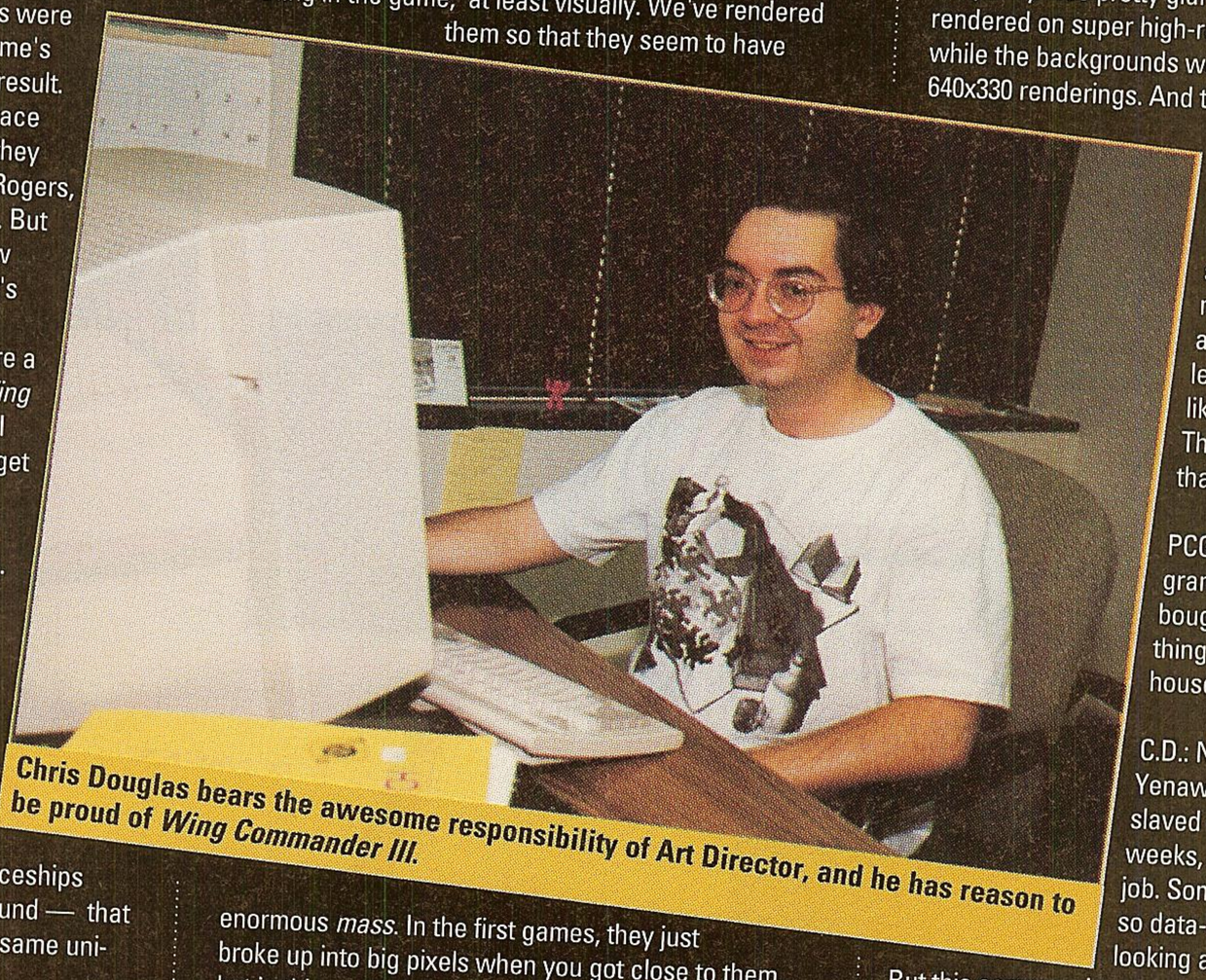
PCG: This compression program, was it something you bought off the shelf or something Origin developed in-house?

C.D.: No, it's ours. Jason Yenawine and Frank Savage slaved over that thing for weeks, and did an incredible job. Some of the scenes were so data-heavy that we were looking at one meg per frame. But this compression program brings it down to VGA resolution at 9K per frame.

PCG: So how do you feel now that the project is wrapping?

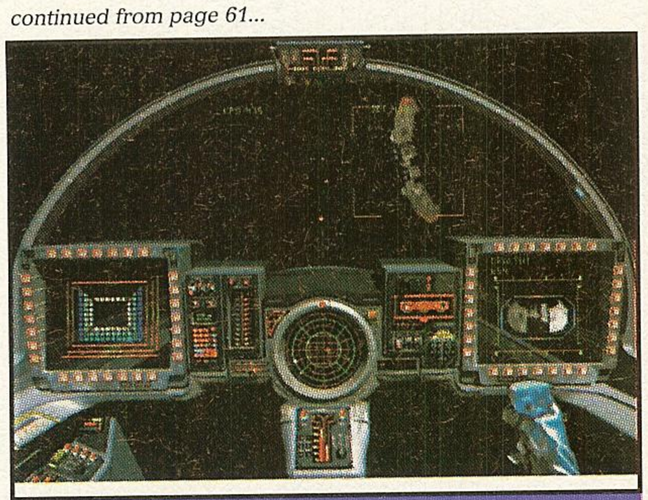
C.D.: The way I felt when I first saw the film's opening fully edited and assembled, with full sound support: awestruck. The whole enormous undertaking suddenly sprang to life!

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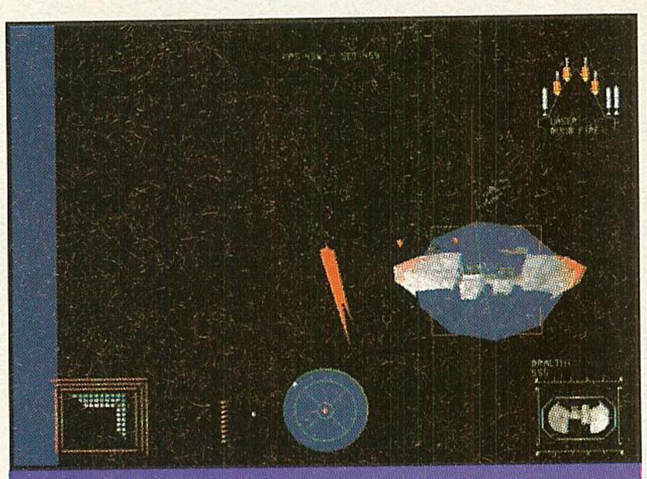


Chris Douglas bears the awesome responsibility of Art Director, and he has reason to be proud of *Wing Commander III*.

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In combat, you can fly using the familiar full-cockpit view...



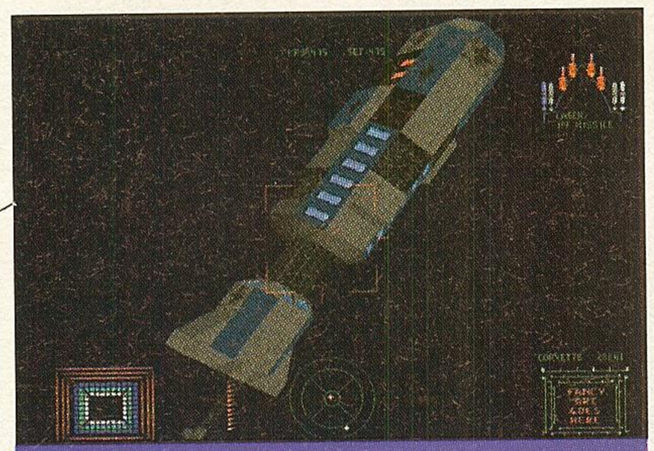
...or you can get inside the action with an optional full-screen view.

your wingman, plus 16 Kilrathi ships, plus a capital ship."

Combat, already one of the series' greatest virtues, has been spiffed up for this game. Debris from an exploding ship is now ship-specific rather than generic (gone, apparently, is the spinning horse-collar that became so familiar in *Wing I and II*). When you hit a target's shields you see the force-field flicker — a nice touch of visual feedback — and some hunks of shot-off debris spit angry blue sparks as their electronics short out.

In the numerous combat screens I saw, the animation was always smooth and convincing. If the consumer experiences slowed or choppy animation, however, a single keystroke changes the mode from SVGA to VGA, which should correct that problems.

"We've done a lot of speed testing," continues Savage, "and a 486/25 is the low end machine you can run this game on. The drawback is the number of 486/25 machines that do not have a local-bus video card, which is essential for playing back that kind of frame rate. We also recommend eight megs of RAM, and ten megs of hard drive space. But with a triple-speed CD ROM, a local bus, and a Pentium, you can run most of it at thirty frames per second. In fact, we're seriously thinking of doing a Pentium-only version, on four CD's, for those who want the ultimate experience."

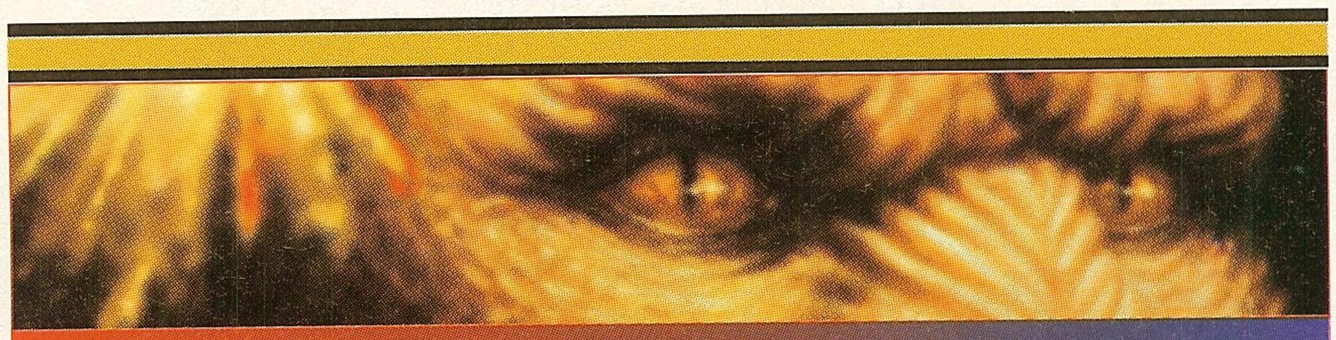


Carriers and dreadnoughts in Wing Commander III really look BIG, and their images convey a vivid sense of mass.

During dogfights, the player can select the same cockpit view as was used in the earlier games, or opt for a full-screen view that only displays tracking and targeting information, and reveals far more of the battle environment. There's also a new option that enables you to fire a multi-warhead broadside of all your missiles at a dense cluster of enemy ships (or one very big one), the results can be spectacular.

New ships are included, of course, and I particularly enjoyed the sleek, swift, highly maneuverable Arrow inter-

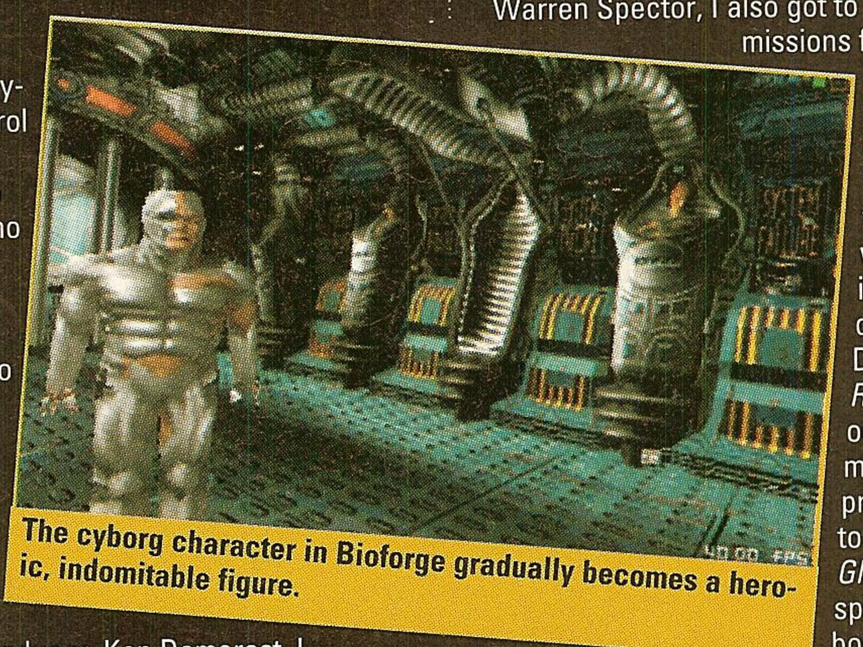
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Coming Attractions

Wing Commander III is not the only heavy-caliber arrow in Origin's quiver. Two widely anticipated games (*Wing Commander Armada* and *System Shock)* should be in stores by the time this issue of *PC Gamer* reaches the stands. Although both games are expected to do well, Origin considers them "intermediate" games, programs that reflect the technological and conceptual transitions taking place as the floppy disk phases out and the CD-ROM becomes the norm.

Just beyond the late-November releases of *Wing III* looms the incredible action/adventure saga *Bioforge*, in which the player takes control of a cyborg creature who wakes, with no memory, in a sinister alien environment, and sets off to find out who he is and what has happened to him.



The cyborg character in Bioforge gradually becomes a heroic, indomitable figure.

In the company of *Bioforge's* producer, Ken Demarest, I watched the first twenty minutes of the game in their entirety, and several five-to-ten-minute segments showing important scenes from the rest of the game. *Bioforge* opens with one of the most chilling intros I've ever witnessed, and the extended scene in which the cyborg wakes is a fine example of visual story-telling.

Even though *Bioforge* is entirely computer-generated, it makes even more vigorous use of cinematic techniques than *Wing III*: in the opening scene alone, the on-screen action triggers several different camera angles, and the four-channel digital sound generates a really audible sense of depth — noises are louder the closer they are to the active camera.

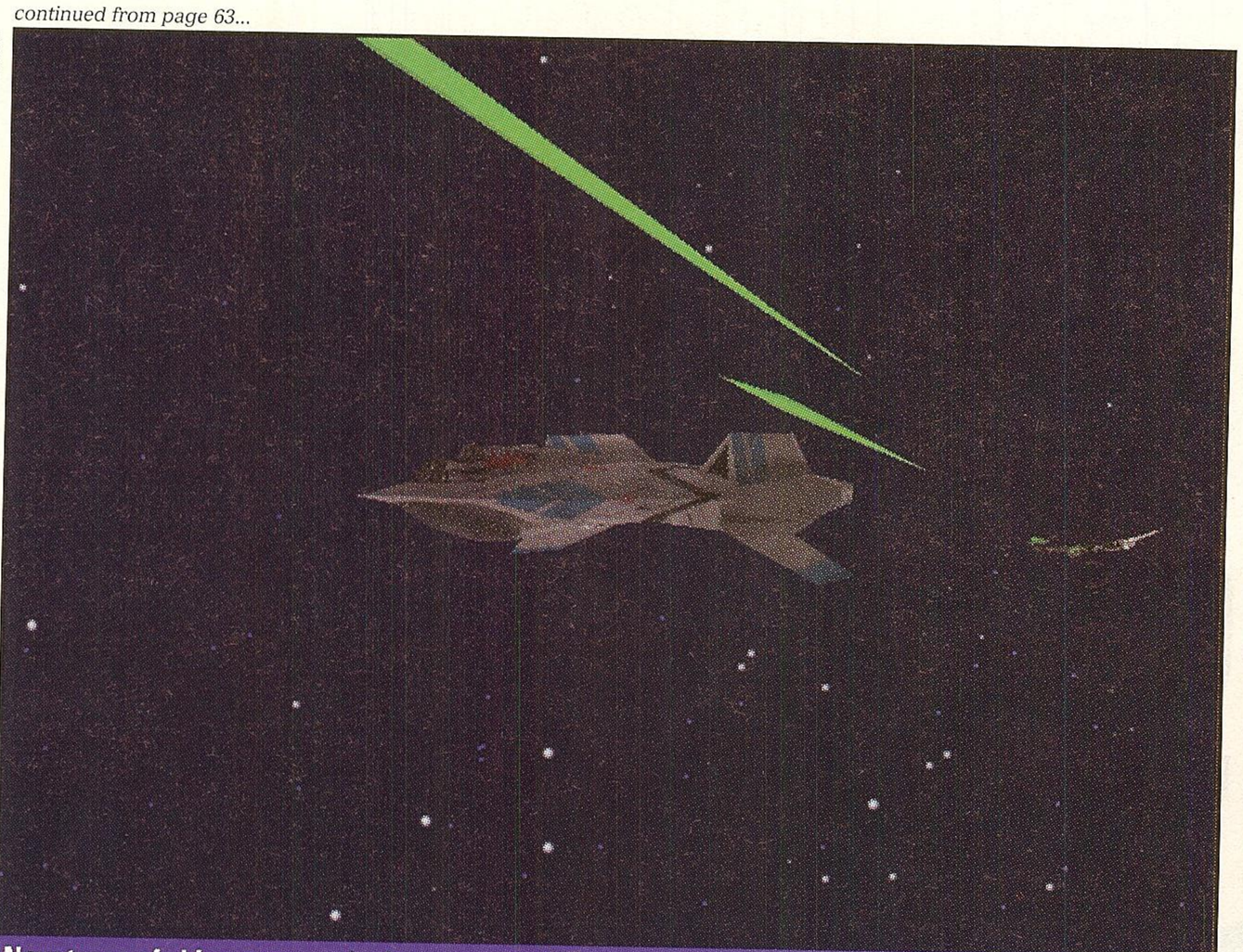
From what I saw, the graphics — especially those that delineate a long-dead alien civilization — are powerful and moody, making extensive use of somber purples, cold metallic glints, and deep, layered shadows. The cyborg becomes a compelling, heroic figure; there is something indomitable about him, especially when he's wounded and drags his half-synthetic legs in movements of slow, heavy, pain.

Bioforge hooked me from the opening scene; it is a highly original and savagely dramatic tale, told with bold narrative vigor.

Under the watchful eye of producer Warren Spector, I also got to fly a couple of missions from *Wings of Glory*, Origin's "Blue-Maxian" saga of World War One aviation. I would not want to compare it against its obvious rival, Dynamix's classic *Red Baron*, without spending a lot more time with the program. Suffice it to say that *Wings of Glory* looks great, sports a delightfully boisterous storyline — complete with all the old-movie cliches you could ask for — and employs flight models of scrupulous accuracy (unless the player selects a less manly setting than "Realistic"...), down to the ominous creaking sounds made by wood-and-fabric wings that are about to break off. You can feel how the torque of a rotary engine keeps trying to pull your plane out of a straight line, and from the cockpit you can turn your head and see anything a real pilot could see.

All in all, *Wings of Glory* should be a lot of fun — assuming it flies as good as it looks.

continued from page 63...

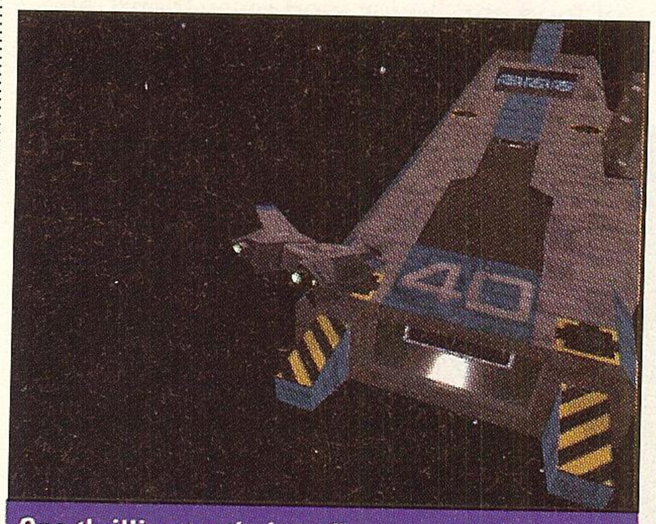


New types of ships, new explosions, new debris, stereo-pan sound effects — the dogfight scenes and a great 3D look make Wing III more exciting than ever!

ceptor. Indeed, the combat engine has been so refined and augmented that you can actually fly *into* a Kilrathi carrier and blast its guts from within. Ground attack missions are included, although not fully implemented in the version I saw; I can report that the tracer effects really sizzle, and the planetary contouring is very convincing. And it should be — it's modeled after NASA survey maps of Mars!

Sound effects are downright sexy (the stereo panning during a dogfight is a wonderful touch), and the music, composed and elaborately scored by George Oldziey, is appropriately grand and stirring.

Every project member I talked to during the course of my visit evidenced the same quiet confidence that *Wing Commander III* was going to cause an even greater sensation than the game that started it all. Sure, the hardware



One thrilling tactic is to fly your ship into enemy carriers, and blast them in the guts.

requirements are elitist, but with prices steadily dropping and with CD-ROM technology widely accepted even by PC owners who haven't yet taken the plunge, that whole concept of "state-of-the-art" hardware is becoming more and more the realizable dream of Everyman, not just the wealthier hackers.

This game is going to sell a *lot* of CD-ROM drives — and among the customers standing in line will be yours truly, GP Publications' resident *Wing Commander* fanatic. I've seen only a handful of programs that were, for their time and technology, as great as *Wing III*



A few years have passed since you saw a Dralthi, and the Kilrathi have spent that time making improvements to all their ships. The texture-mapped ships in *Wing Commander III* are completely convincing, and fly as good as they look.

looks to be; and none, not one, that surpasses it. It is a magnificent achievement in every respect.

Release date is Thanksgiving, and don't laugh — I think they're actually going to make it.

PCG

The Gospel According to Origin

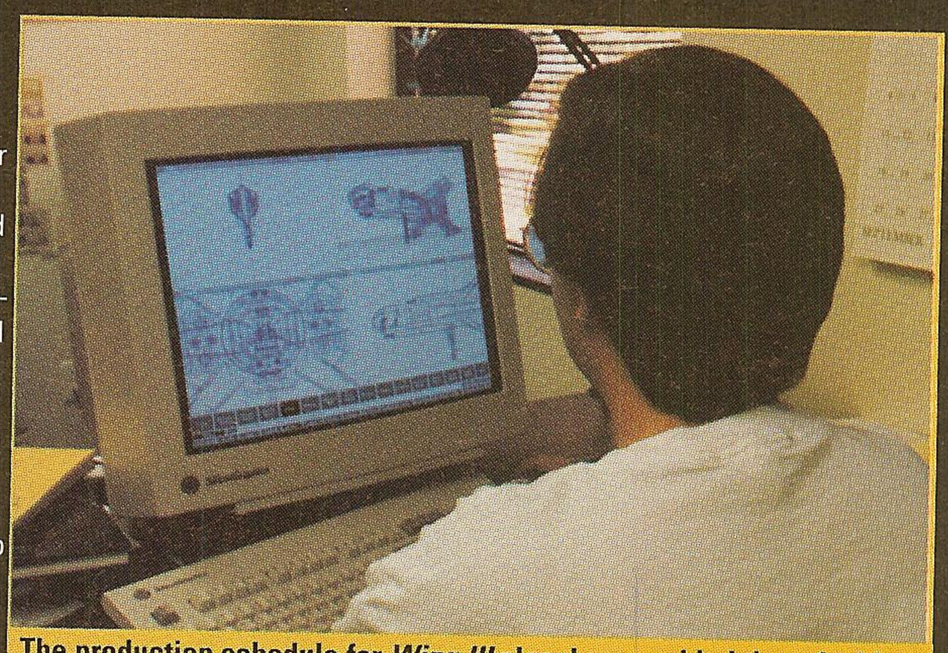
Before venturing to produce an "interactive movie," Origin's game designers took the trouble to formalize precisely what that term was going to mean as applied to Origin's products. Theirs is one of the most sensible definitions we've seen, so we reproduce here its four salient points:

An interactive movie employs the conventions of film to tell a story, including the use of synthetic or video-based actors, cinematic camera and editing techniques, dynamic, action-sensitive music scores, and digitized speech and sound effects.

In an Interactive Movie, the evolution of the story — including the tempo with which it unfolds — is directed by the game designer, sweeping the player along with it.

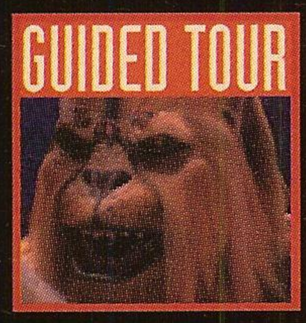
Interactive Movies strive to deliver a seamless integration of the passive and interactive portions of the game, and requires a high degree of player interaction to advance the story.

An Interactive Movie totally immerses the player in the story and provides an emotional context for the game play.



The production schedule for *Wing III* closely resembled that of a big-budget movie. And once you play the finished product, you can easily see where all of the money went.

GUIDED TOUR



Wing Commander III

The latest installment in the Wing Commander series adds live action to the popular space-battle game.

When it comes to fast-action space operas, the Wing Commander series from Origin Systems has always been a trendsetter. Hold on to your joystick, because Wing Commander III is about to redefine the genre once again.

You'll still find the impeccable cinematic detail, compelling plot lines, sophisticated characters, and high-powered space-battle simulation you've come to expect. But forget animation—the new version uses real video and a star-studded cast of live actors. (Of course, the space battle sequences at the core of the game have also been improved—see "Flying Time," on page 71.)

Mark Hamill, best known as Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars,* is the player's alter ego—veteran pilot Colonel Christopher Blair of the Terran Confederation. Malcolm McDowell, star of *A Clockwork Orange, Cat People,* and countless other films, plays Admiral Tolwyn. He's been dogging Blair since the bloody feud between mankind and the lionlike Kilrathi developed in the original Wing Commander back in 1990.

Jason Bernard, whom you'll recognize as the easily irritated boss on Fox TV's "Herman's Head," plays Captain Eisen, the seasoned commander of the space carrier *TCS Victory,* where our hero finds himself reassigned.

Wing Commander veterans will remember that the *Concordia,* Blair's previous ship, was destroyed by the Kilrathi at the end of Wing Commander II.

John Rhys-Davies, best known for his role as Sallah in the Indiana Jones trilogy, plays two roles in Wing III. As Thrakhath, the bloodthirsty Kilrathi prince, he attempts to wipe out the last remnants of the Terran battle fleet. As Paladin, Blair's best friend, he is head of covert operations for the Confederation—just the kinda guy Thrakhath would love to exterminate.

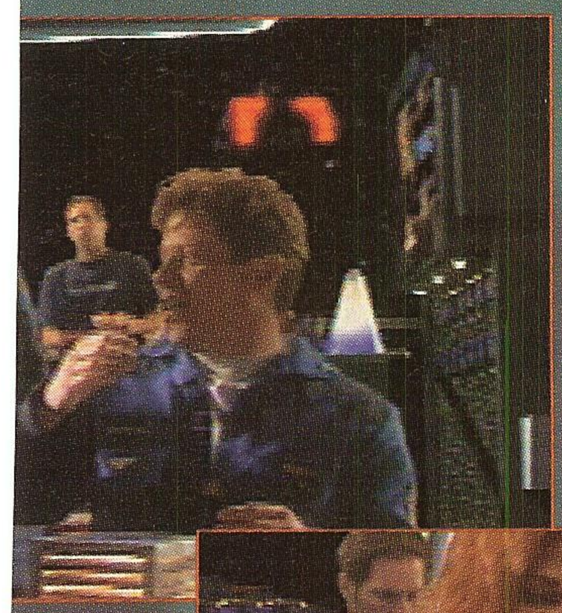
And, for the first time, Blair has not one, but a pair of love interests. Flint, played by accomplished stunt woman and TV film actress Jennifer MacDonald, is a hotshot pilot flying under Blair. She just happens to have a big crush on her boss. Former porn star Ginger Allen plays Rachel, the tomboyish technician on the *TCS Victory.* Rachel wouldn't mind getting to know Blair quite a bit better.

The cast supplies the acting. You, as the player, propel the action and interaction. When characters meet, you choose Blair's responses to their comments. Choose wisely, and you keep the *TCS Victory* in one piece. Make the wrong decisions, and your demoralized crew may just fall apart, leaving you to face the music in the Kilrathi disintegration chamber.

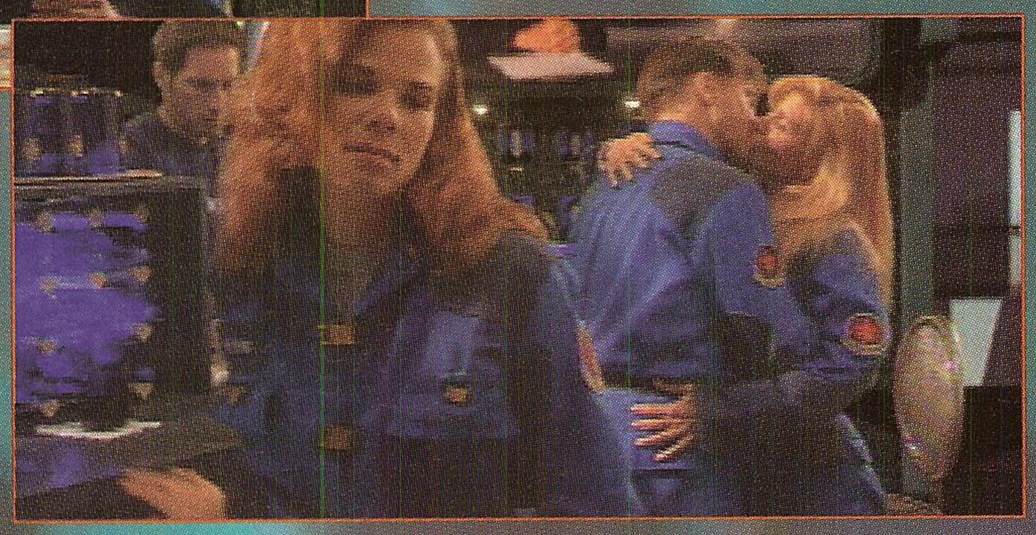
Wing Commander III is due out before the holidays. For a head start on getting to know the new characters and mastering the new challenges, join us for an exclusive guided tour.

By Bill Meyer

TOP PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL KUBEISY ©1994



7 Blair can put some love in his life by sending the right vibes to Rachel or to Flint. However, getting romantically involved with either of them could cause more trouble than he can handle, since both women control critical elements of the mission. Broken hearts have a way of coming back to haunt you.





6 The brutish and maniacal Prince Thrakhath argues with the more moderate Melek. Unfortunately, there is no hope that negotiation can settle the war—the only conclusion can be total victory for one side and total annihilation for the other.



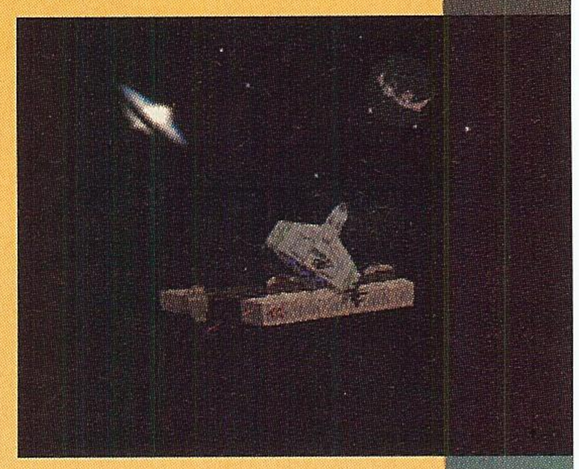
5 Paladin must balance his role as Blair's good friend with his job as head of covert operations. He must toe the Confederation party line while knowing full well that mankind may be losing the war.

Flying Time

If you liked how it felt to strap yourself into the previous Wing Commander incarnations, you'll love the feel surrounding yourself with Wing Commander III's luxurious interior.

Space jocks with enough hardware horsepower—a fast 486 or Pentium with a local-bus graphics card—can run Wing Commander III in optimal Super VGA mode. And as you can see from these screens, the results are amazing.

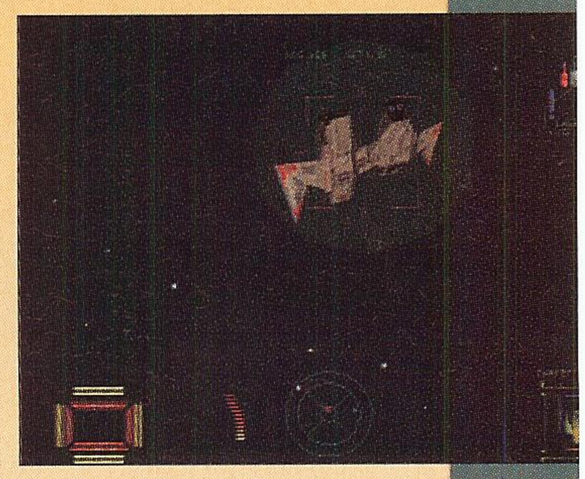
Polygon-based, texture-mapped ships have replaced the pixelated crafts of old. Capital ships look sharp even on close inspection. And instead of gauging your speed and direction by watching a few flakes of space dust go by, you navigate through entire clouds of flotsam and jetsam. The new graphics also make for smoother movement and a more realistic feel during combat—when that Kilrathi starts to break right, you see it happening and can react more effectively.



Wing Commander III's terrific graphics give the universe a whole new look.

Wing Commander III's artificial intelligence has also leapt light-years beyond previous versions, so you'd better stay on your toes. Your first opponents may make easy targets of themselves by repeating the same evasive maneuvers, but later aces rarely try the same thing twice. And don't expect enemy ships to simply turn around to gun you down as they did in previous games. These guys now attempt to lose you first.

The improvements go even further. With a keen eye and fast fingers, you can blow off the movable gun turrets mounted on Capital ships. An intelligent external camera view keeps track of two ships simultaneously—your wingman and the target, say—making it easier to monitor how well your side is doing on the 3-D battlefield.

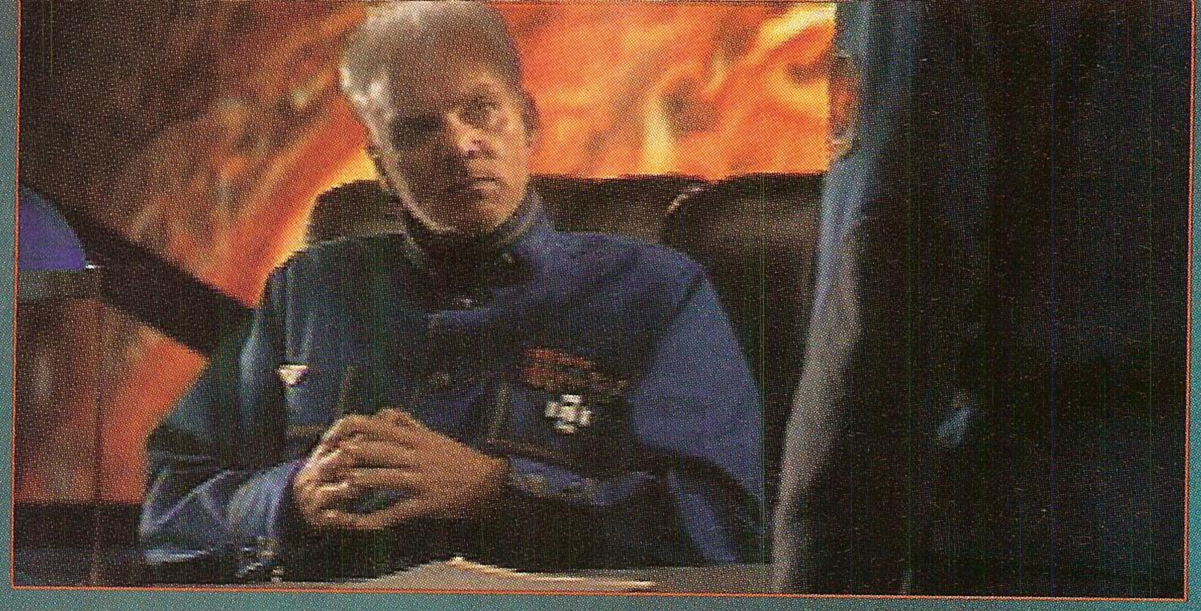


The enemy ships look great in Super VGA—especially when they're sitting in your sights.

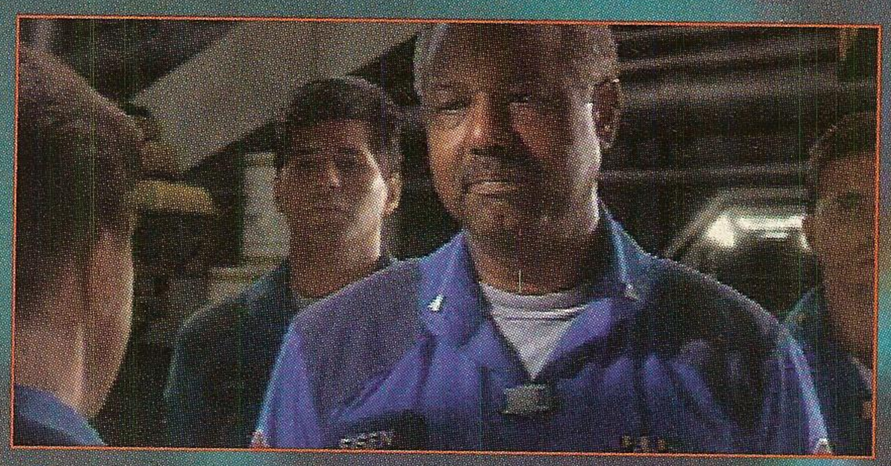
Wing Commander veterans will feel right at home with the controls, but they'll be thrilled to discover that everything else has changed for the better.

—Christopher Lindquist

Thanks to Frank Savage, project director at Origin, for his help with this story.



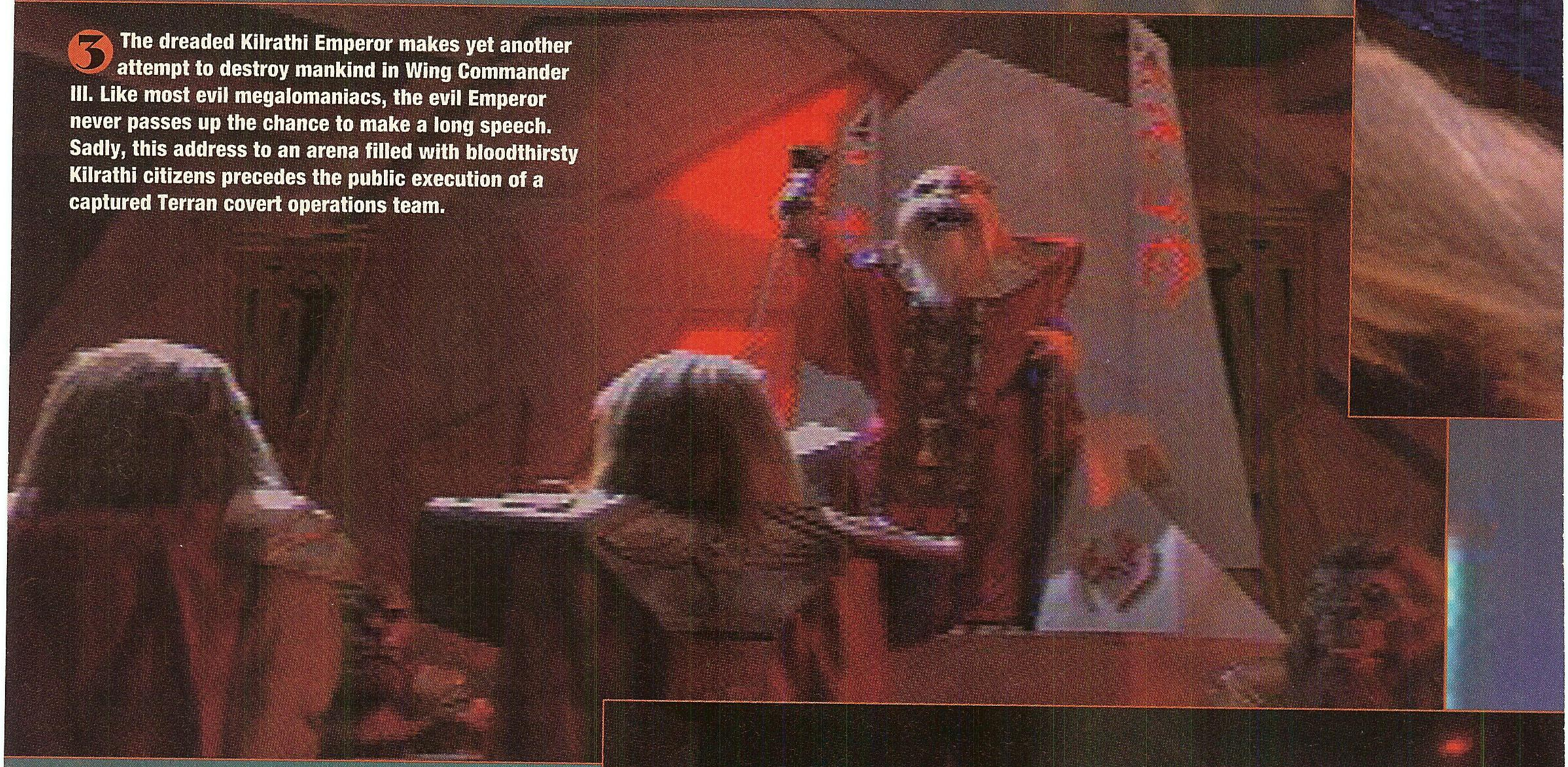
1 Blair is called into Admiral Tolwyn's office only to find that he has been transferred to one of the oldest space carriers in the Terran fleet, the *TCS Victory.* The new post is disappointing, considering that Blair had previously served on the *Tiger's Claw* and the *Concordia,* the Rolls-Royce of the Confederation. Of course, both those vessels were blown to bits by Kilrathi fire.



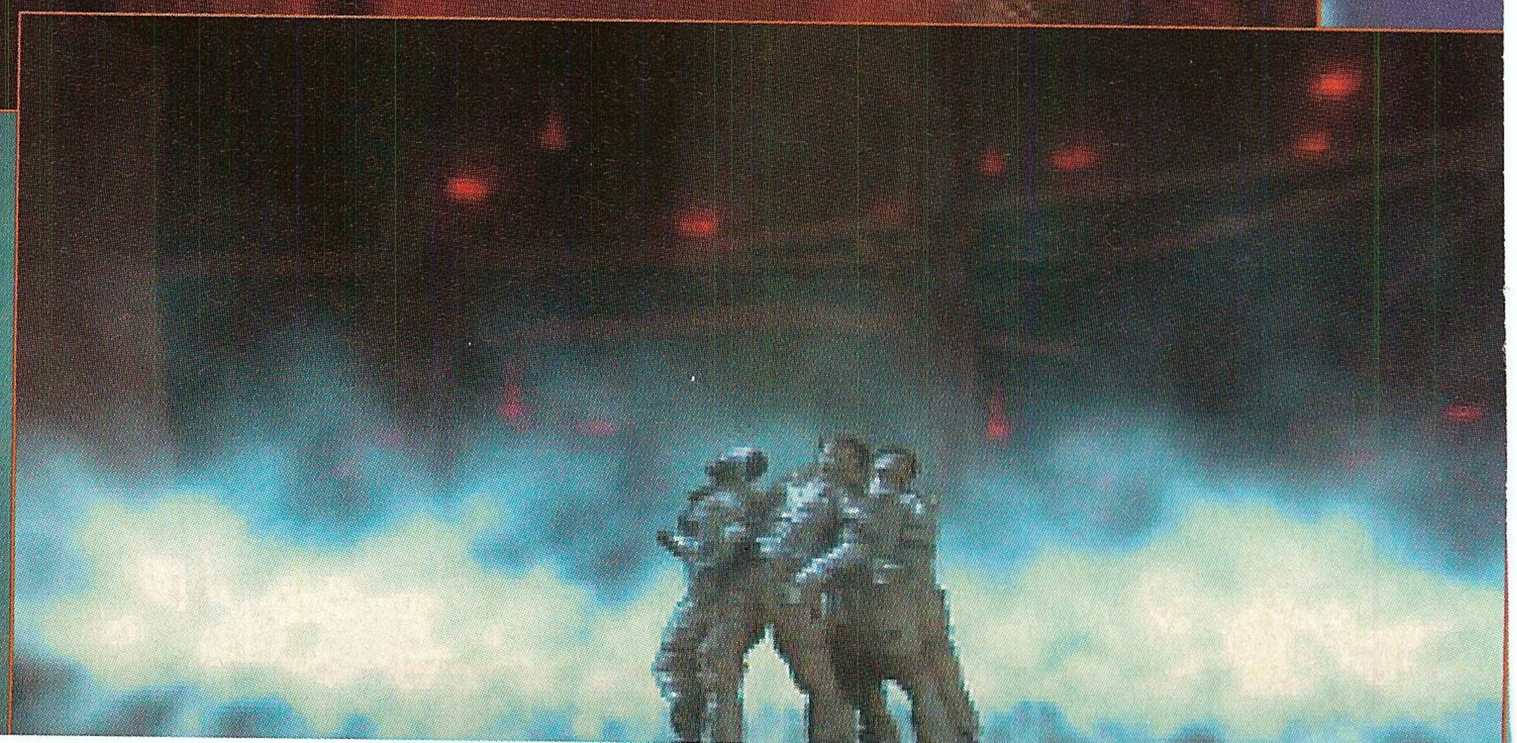
2 The seasoned Captain Eisen and his crew greet Blair aboard the *TCS Victory.* Eisen's been there since the ship's maiden voyage and tries to reassure Blair that the *Victory's* still got her stuff. But Eisen can tell that Blair is hardly convinced.



8 Maniac is a great pilot, but he loves to talk trash—even to his superiors. Blair might find it satisfying to put him in his place, but it could also cost the morale of one of the squad's best pilots. If Blair can't strike the right balance with those he meets—both subordinates and superiors—he'll end up in a Kilrathi disintegrator.



3 The dreaded Kilrathi Emperor makes yet another attempt to destroy mankind in Wing Commander III. Like most evil megalomaniacs, the evil Emperor never passes up the chance to make a long speech. Sadly, this address to an arena filled with bloodthirsty Kilrathi citizens precedes the public execution of a captured Terran covert operations team.



4 Things get pretty toasty when some captured Terran spies meet their maker in the Kilrathi disintegration chamber.

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Comments:

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On A Wing



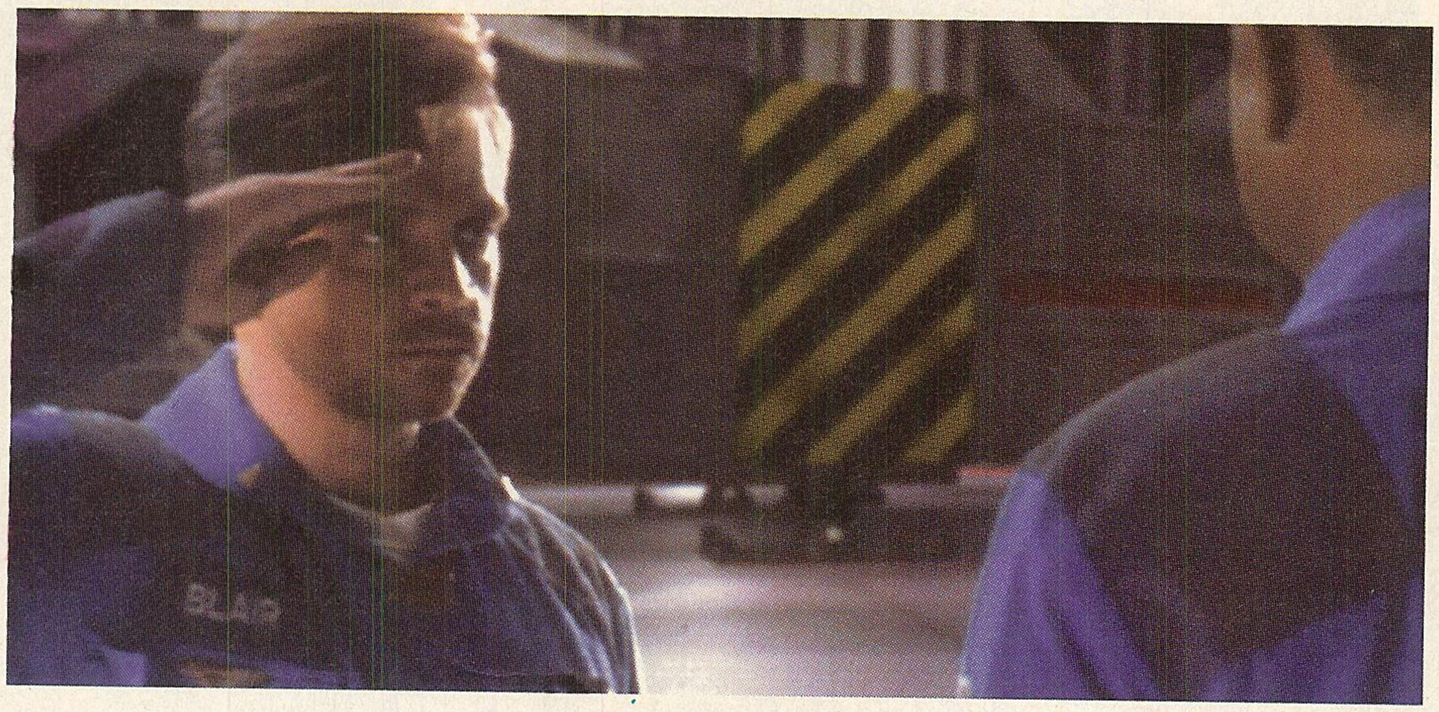
A PYRAMID OF TEA SANDWICHES—TURKEY, HAM, LETTUCE, ON WHITE OR WHEAT TOAST—SITS on one silver platter. On the other sits a well-combed Kilrathi head. In between sit Mark Hamill, known to the world as Luke Skywalker from the *Star Wars* movies, and Ginger Lynn Allen, star of such mainstream fare as *Young Guns II* and the upcoming HBO movie *Fever*, but better known for her memorable work in some of the best-selling adult films of the 80s.

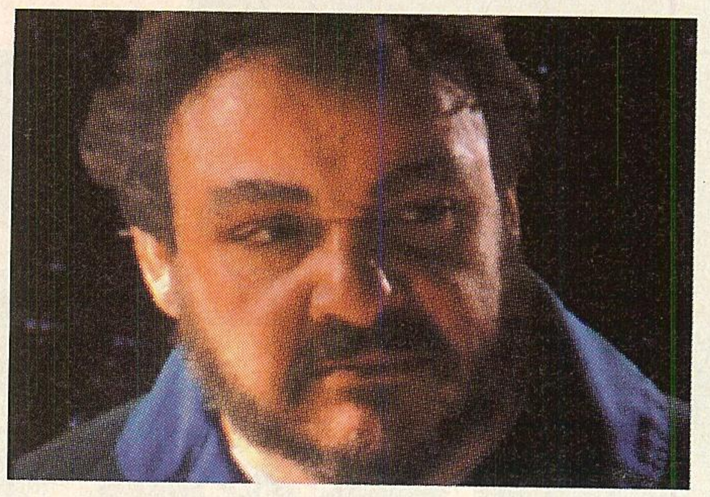
Under normal circumstances, the presence of any one of these elements—the stars, the severed head, the sandwiches—would command attention, even in a hotel room in Times Square in New York City. But these are not normal circumstances. From the next room come the sounds of WING COMMANDER III, and even co-star John Rhys-Davies (Sallah from the Indiana Jones movies) has been lured away.

I find Rhys-Davies sitting in a dim corner of the room, intense and wide-eyed in the glow of a 13-inch monitor, gripping his joystick tightly and cursing the Kilrathi bandits who keep eluding his fire. "I have been at it for eight hours," he admits during a lull in the action, in the famous baritone that won him two roles in the game. (He does double-duty as the veteran Confederation flyer known as Paladin and as the voice of the chief Kilrathi villain.) He points at Ginger Lynn, who has just appeared on the screen.

"It takes 30 missions before you even get to kiss her." He has the look of a man who is going for 50.

Meanwhile, at the next machine, WING COMMANDER creator Chris Roberts is explaining interactive movie-making to a reporter from *Forbes*. A reporter from *Time* looks on; *USA Today*'s representative takes notes. "The trick to telling a really good interactive story is that you want the player to experience everything you put in there...[but] the game shouldn't make decisions about what happens next. *You* should make the decisions." The reporters nod: they're eating it up. "Most of the interactive movies that have come out until now haven't been good,





His rebel days over, Mark Hamill learns some discipline as Col. Chris Blair (left). John Rhys-Davies looks like he misses Indy (below).

And A Player

Origin's WING COMMANDER III Heralds A New Era In Interactive Cinema

by Charles Ardai

and they haven't been very interactive. I needed to make a game in which I could be proud of every element."

Two feet away, the game's 11-minute introduction is playing. Even with the volume turned down, you can hear the soundtrack loud and clear, and it's a beaut: a symphonic overture full of dread and mystery that would do John Williams proud. Mammoth spaceships glide across the monitor; Mark Hamill's Colonel Chris Blair gets dressed down by Malcolm (*A Clockwork Orange*, *Star Trek: Generations*) McDowell's Admiral Tolwyn; the Kilrathi High Command slaughters a few human prisoners for the sheer sadistic pleasure of it; battles are fought, plans made, forces amassed; and even though it's all going on in a crowded room, on a small screen, in front of some pretty jaded industry observers, it feels like we're all 12 years old again, watching *Star Wars* and knowing, somehow, that the world of entertainment will never be the same. There's not a person in the room who can honestly say that the spectacle unfolding on the screens before us hasn't stirred the blood in his veins.

In the center of the hubbub, WCIII designer Chris Roberts basks. He has every right to feel proud. He has pulled off the impossible yet again: he's topped not only himself, but the entire industry of which he is a part.

WINGS OF GLORY

The Kilrathi-Human war is going badly—for the humans, that is. The hero of the saga's first two installments, Col. Blair, has been reassigned to a lumbering scow, the *TCS Victory*. His girlfriend, Angel, has been captured by the enemy. The Confederation has built a huge, planet-destroying ship called the Behemoth (sort of a defensive Death Star), but a traitor turns the plans over to the Kilrathi. Only a suicide mission into the heart of Kilrah can win the war for the humans now, and who do you suppose gets tagged for the assignment?

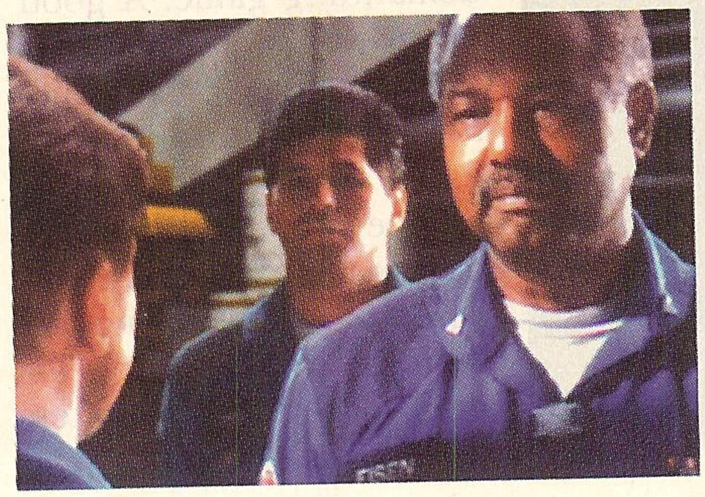
SNEAK PREVIEW
Game Still In
Development

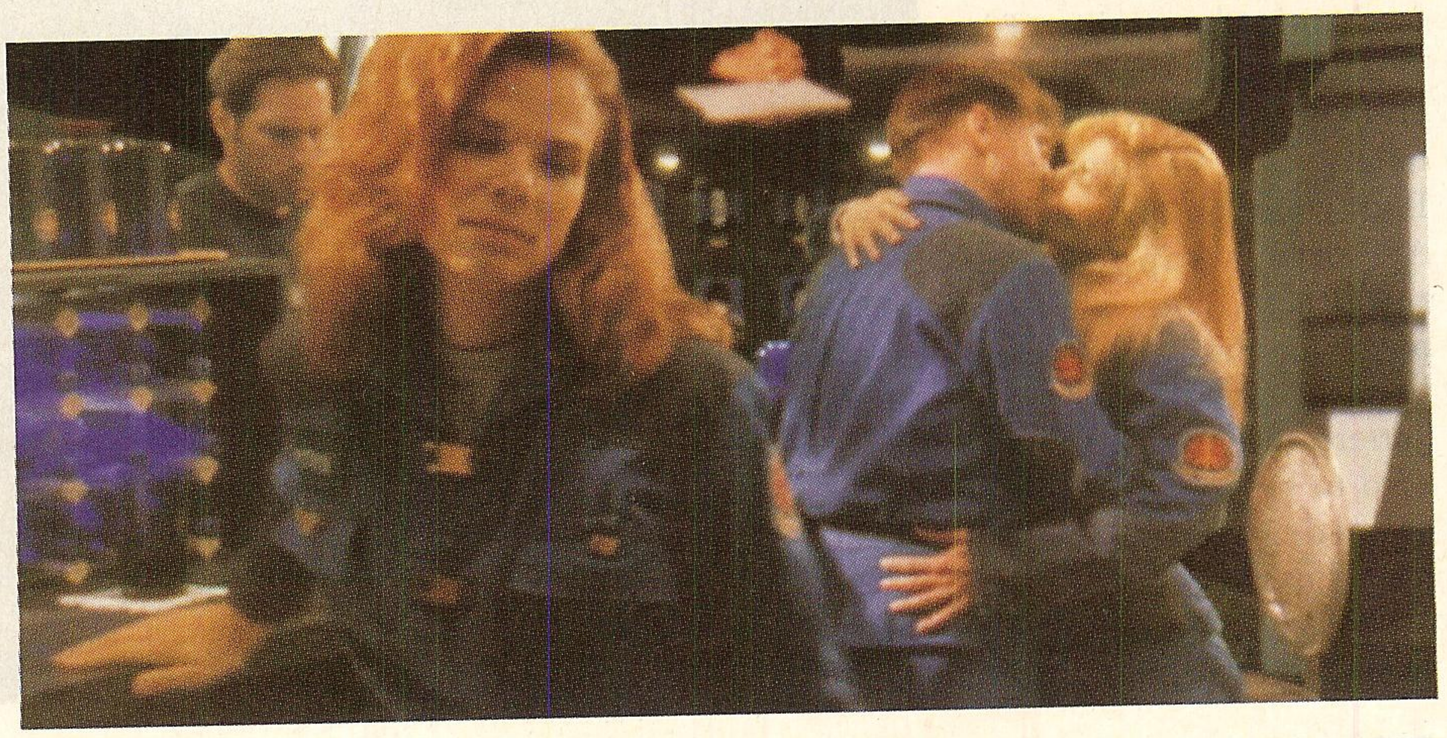
Yes, it's Col. Blair, performed on-screen by Hamill (in the best performance he's given in years), but controlled by none other than you. Blair has personal trials and dilemmas to face as well as the bigger problem of having to save the human race, and it's up to you to decide which set of problems to focus on. The decisions you make can mean the difference between life and death, both on a small and a grand scale.

Do you pursue a personal vendetta at the cost of winning the war? Or do you sacrifice your own needs for the greater good? It's your choice, and you make it not only by winning or losing a certain number of space battles (as was the case in the first two games), but by choosing how to behave both in battle and in the dramatic scenes that play out between battles.

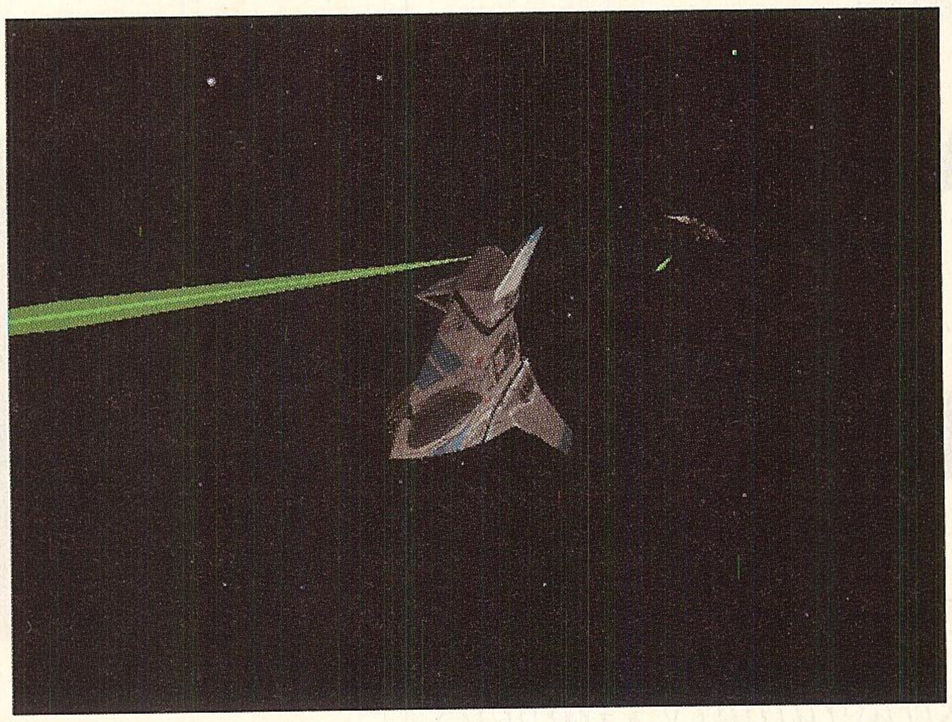
With Angel away, two of your female comrades start coming on to you. Which, if either, will win your favor? Your old nemesis, Maniac (played by *Back To the Future*'s Tom Wilson), is serving under you now, as is Hobbes (voiced by GABRIEL KNIGHT's Tim Curry), the turncoat Kilrathi from WING COMMANDER II. Can you trust them with your life? Then there's the matter of how you respond when tragedy strikes: do you keep a stiff upper lip or drown your sorrows in the ship's bar? If you choose the latter, watch out—

Jason Bernard of *"Herman's Head"* gets bossy with Blair, too. The Confederation ace initiates docking procedures with a space cadet (right).





The game's size is deliberate, of course. "A player pays around 90 dollars to buy it," says Roberts. "He'd be disappointed if he finished it in a night." This said, a built-in "cheat" feature will, if they can find it, give the battle-weary and the hopelessly inept the chance to get their money's worth out of the game. Roberts said that Origin will neither publish nor publicize the cheat, but that it will be there in the final release for easter egg hunters to scope out.



WISH I HADN'T KILLED HOBBES All new AI routines mean that Kilrathi pilots will prove a much more formidable challenge.

Make it all the way to the end and you've got a boffo climax in store—so big and so conclusive, in fact, that it is hard to imagine what might be left for WING COMMANDER IV. "Good question. I don't have that answer yet," says Roberts, who adds, "My next game is going to be in a different universe: fantasy, with lots of swordplay, that sort of thing."

In part because of the finality of the finale and in part because of production costs, which Roberts estimates at $4 million (the most ever spent on a computer game), WING COMMANDER III will stand alone—there will be no "add-on" special mission modules as there were for the first two games. Still, from what I've seen, I'd say that players are unlikely to feel unsated or inadequately impressed when the game is over.

GRABBING THE BRASS WING

"It's a bit like where TV was in 1946," says Rhys-Davies, a long time science fiction fan. "Soon you will be able to play a game like this and choose the actors for the different parts. You'll be able to say, 'I think I'd like to see my friend Karen Allen in one of the roles, and maybe Bogart for another.' That's the next step."

Perhaps so. But even if I had free choice, I doubt I could have picked a better cast for WING COMMANDER III than Origin has, or done better by them. The actors work well off of each other; the story works well off the action; the script's a real script; the music is real music; the game, as a game, is strong, and as a piece of cinema is—who would have predicted it?—even stronger.

It all makes quite an addictive package, not least of all to the actors who breathed life into it. At one point, I took advantage of another writer's pulling Rhys-Davies aside for an interview as an excuse to slide into his seat and take over his game.

"You're stealing my game!" he thundered.

"You're a gentleman to let me," I said.

"Don't think of it as my being a gentleman," he said. "Think of it as theft."

When I left, he was still playing.

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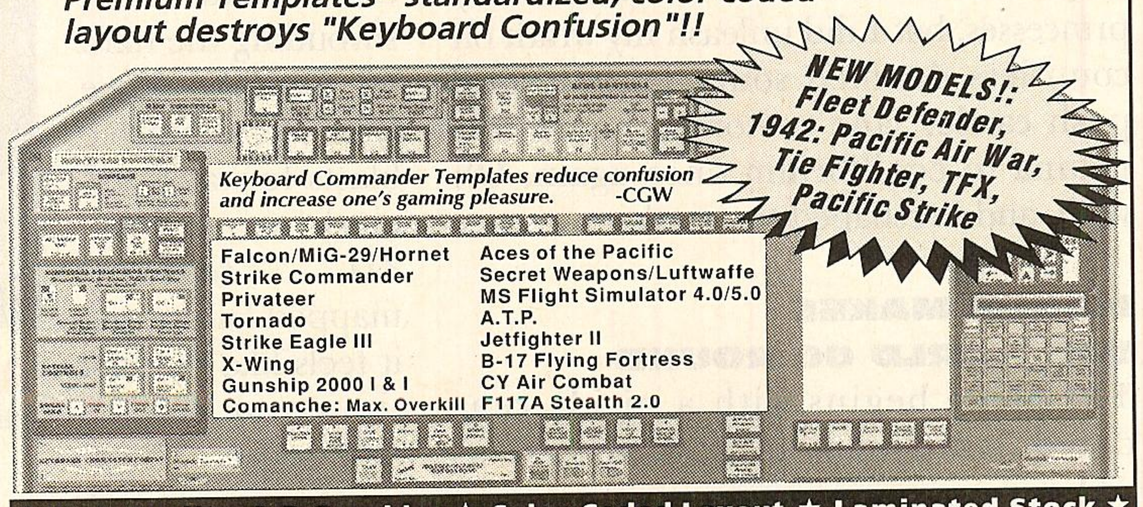
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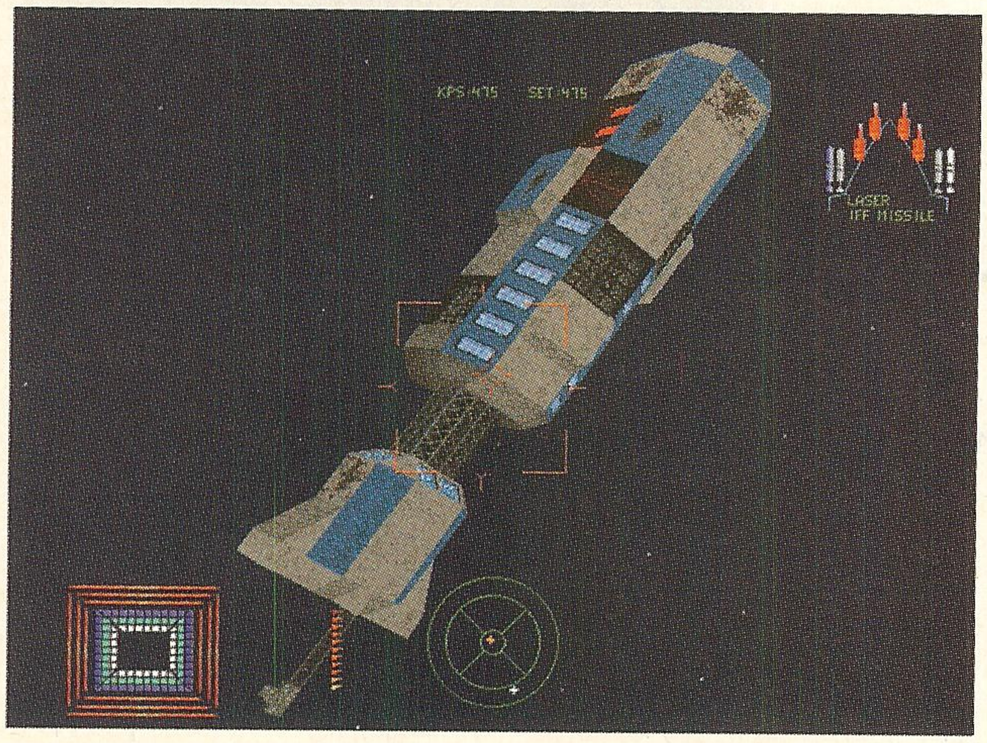
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SHIP SHAPE Origin's designers have used state-of-the-art 3D graphics techniques to create WING III's new space hulks.

you never know when the next alarm will sound, and if you've still got alcohol in your system at the time, well, it'll take a small miracle to keep you alive in battle. ("If you're drunk when you launch," Roberts says with obvious glee, "the joystick's rubbish.")

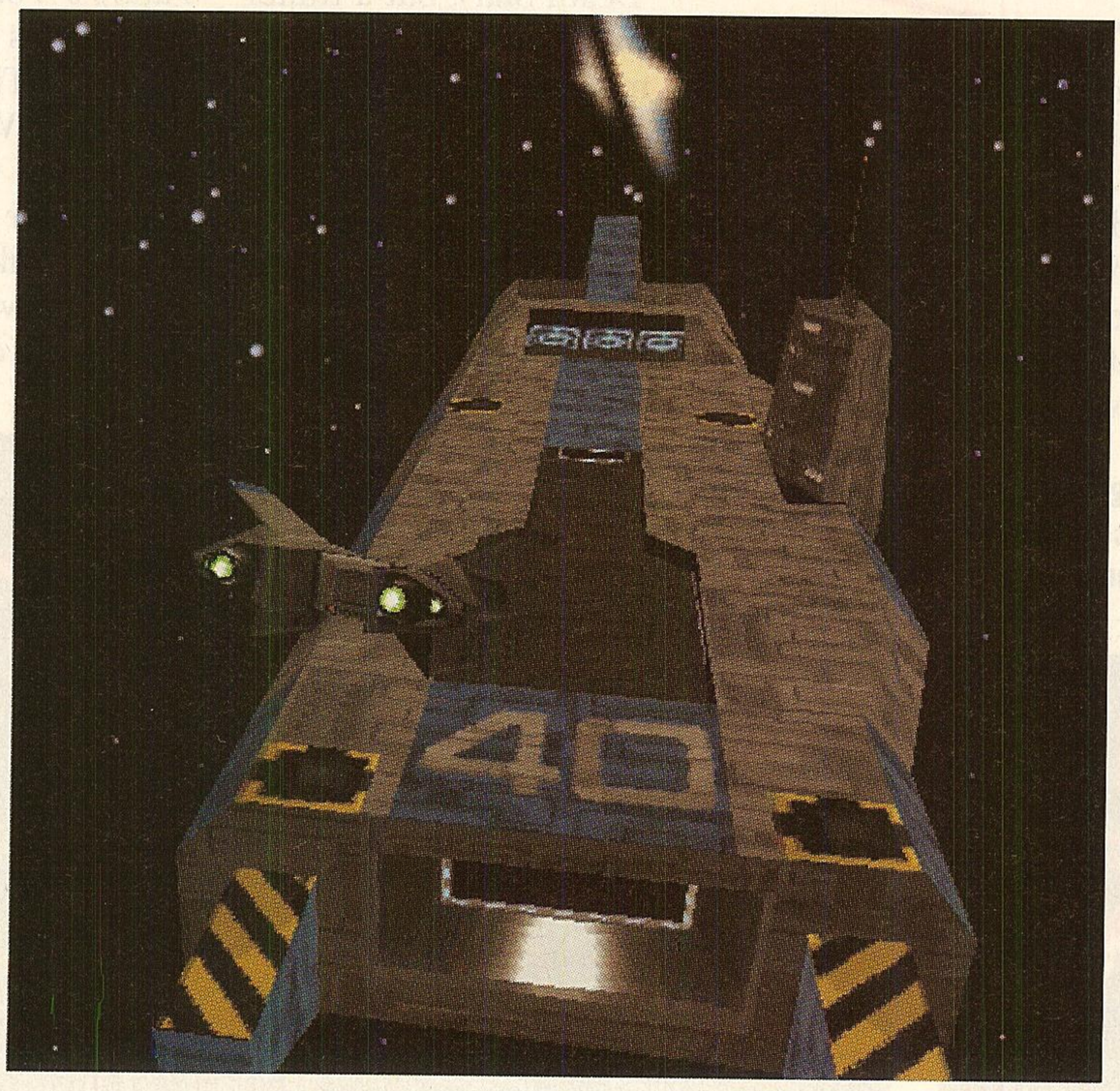
Gameplay within battle sequences has been kept consistent with the first two games, presumably so as to cause fans of the series a minimum of discomfort. You still view events primarily through the main viewscreen of your fighter, track enemies on a tiny radar screen, and communicate with friend and foe alike on a miniature video screen; pressing 'A' still turns on the autopilot and 'T' the targeting system, while 'G' still cycles through available guns and pressing both joystick or mouse buttons at once still launches a missile.

Where the game has changed substantially, other than in the quality of its visual presentation and the complexity of its storytelling, is in its combat AI. Both good guy and bad guy AI were scrapped and rewritten from scratch, meaning that the Kilrathi are less predictable and pattern-oriented than they used to be (though Roberts concedes that "a really good human player will always beat an AI") and that your loyal wingmen won't bite the galactic dust with the regularity and rapidity that used to be characteristic of them.

Hobbes still died within a minute of launch in my first attempt at playing the new game, but in all fairness this was my fault: I blew him up. Once I got used to the hardware Origin had brought to New York (including a couple of extremely sensitive joysticks, which added a lot to the gaming experience), I found myself blowing Kilrathi scum out of the sky just like in the old days.

LIGHTS, CAMERA... ACTION!

The game contains 50 missions, including four that take place not in space but over alien terrain, in the manner of STRIKE COMMANDER. In VGA mode, the battle action is extremely smooth and fast, though the graphics are a little crude. (That is, crude by this game's elevated standards—they're slightly better than the graphics in WCII.) In SVGA mode, the graphics are so good they'll make your eyes bug out, and the action doesn't slow down appreciably, even on a 486/33 machine, the slowest the game will support.



As usual for this series, the soundtrack is dynamically synchronized to the action, so it gets fast and furious when the action heats up, becomes portentous when disaster is about to strike, and calms down when the script calls for a quieter dramatic moment. The other portion of the soundtrack—the actors' voices—is equally well synchronized, both to the movements of the actors' lips and to the movements of the eight-foot-tall animatronic puppets used to bring the Kilrathi to life.

The sweeping theatrical gestures and hissing, *eeevilll* deliveries that most of the Kilrathi indulge in are a bit overdone, but this is, if anything, a directorial weakness, not a technological one. Aside from their hamminess, the Kilrathi look and sound entirely believable, which is something I had not been expecting. Similarly, the effects—ranging from outer-space pyrotechnics to the superimposition of the actors' performances on computer-generated virtual sets—are first-rate.

It would surprise me if, even with such stiff competition as **Access**' UNDER A KILLING MOON and **Sierra**'s KING'S QUEST VII, WING COMMANDER III weren't cited as the reason for many a hardware upgrade this holiday season. Even if you don't do anything to improve your machine's speed, memory, video card, or sound card, WC3 should be enough to finally get you to buy a CD-ROM drive if you've been putting it off (the game is only available on CD—in fact, it comes on *four* CDs, tying it with KILLING MOON for the title of "largest game ever produced"), or to upgrade to a double-, triple-, or even quad-speed CD-ROM drive if you currently only have a single-speed.

Apart from technical considerations, WING COMMANDER III is an uncommonly demanding game. A good player will have to hammer at it for 40 to 60 hours before reaching one of the game's two endings; a novice may find himself playing for 80 or even 100 hours, as well as seeing the game's "third ending"—Blair's death—more often than he would like.

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February 23, 1998

Teresa Potts, Assoc Publicist
ORIGIN SYSTEMS INC
5918 W Courtyard Dr
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Dear Ms Potts:

Two major daily newspapers have been added to our AM NEWSBREAK service:

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AM NEWSBREAK (the fast efficient, same day service) now provides clippings from 28 publications in the 15 top metropolitan areas. For many clients, AM NEWSBREAK now is an essential supplement to their basic clipping service. Please note that the reading specifications for AM NEWSBREAK are customized to your requirements, and can be different from the basic service.

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WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON POST