

Review - Star Crusader (DOS, 1994)

The outer space shoot-em-up has got to be one of the most popular genres in all of computer gaming. Just look around the software store; you can't help but find more of them than you'll ever need. Stockboys are practically tripping over them. When a genre gets this crowded with new titles, companies have to start looking for ways to make their products stand out from the competition. Obviously, Origin and LucasArts flight games have a built-in image factor, but smaller companies don't have this automatic marketing advantage. Take 2 is still small enough that their games don't automatically sell due to the company's name recognition, so with their game Star Crusader they were faced with the challenge of giving their title a strong pre-purchase identity. The design crew knew that, and so did the marketing team, but I think these two offices miscommunicated somewhere down the line. Or maybe they forgot to communicate at all.

For the most part, Star Crusader is a basic game of first-person space combat. It is divided into missions, and between missions you get to see a segment of the story that sets the stage for your battles. Veterans of the Wing Commander series will immediately find themselves in familiar territory.

You portray Roman Alexandria (Gee, what are they trying to say here?), a hotshot pilot of the Gorene Empire. The Gorenese are the largest and most powerful civilization in the universe, and are also the most technologically advanced. The Gorenese are expansionists, constantly seeking out alien races to spread their culture and knowledge to; they are the self-proclaimed educators of the universe. Far from completely benign, the Gorenese also have a nasty habit of forcibly subjugating the occasional race that decides they'd rather develop on their own. Jean-Luc Picard probably wouldn't get along with them too well, but Kirk would fit in just fine.

As the game starts, the Gorene Empire has recently discovered five alien races inhabiting a previously unexplored area of space called the Ascalon Rift. Attempts to expand into the Rift were politely shunned by its inhabitants. Now the Gorenese have decided to take the Rift by force, and the aliens have temporarily settled their differences and formed an alliance to push the invaders out of their homeland. Your job is to help the Gorene Empire conquer the Ascalon Rift as peaceably as possible. Since peace would make for a pretty damn boring action game, you can count on this goal being only partially successful.

Pre-release press and hype has focused mainly on Star Crusader's awesome graphics as a means of hammering the game into potential buyers' skulls. The graphics in the animated intro and cut scenes are indeed striking, better than most games of this type offer. If the graphic quality had been constant throughout the game Star Crusader would have lived up to its press, but such is not the case. The in-flight graphics simply can't match those of the non-interactive portions of the

game. They aren't bad by any means, but they certainly don't stand apart from other space combat games. Enemy ships are fairly well detailed up close, but from a distance they're nothing to shout about. The cockpit graphics and displays are also fairly drab, at least in comparison to the competition.

Star Crusader does have some features that are deserving of a good deal of praise, which makes me wonder why Take 2's marketing strategy centered around the half-empty promise of graphical superiority. Most space combat games have decent plots, but Star Crusader's is not only decent, but quite original and thoroughly engaging. In most of these games, the plot is totally secondary, with the game's missions being the main attraction. Star Crusader's plot outshines the game itself, coercing players to keep flying just to see its resolution. The game's characters – who you get to know primarily through discussions in the briefing room – are fairly well-rounded and actually have personality; you care what happens to them. As you play the game, it becomes increasingly clear that your empire's intentions are far from peaceful, which leads you to a choice: should you continue to fight for an empire that no longer reflects your views, or should you defect and help the alien alliance drive the Gorenes out of the Ascalon Rift?

Another noteworthy feature is Star Crusader's strategy element. As the squadron's wingleader, you will have the opportunity to assign the pilots of your choice to your mission, making your decision based on their abilities and personalities; you also get to choose which types of ships they'll be flying. You also have the option of sending additional pilots out on secondary missions while you fly the primary strikes. By making wise choices regarding who to send where in what, you can allow your side of the conflict to liberate enemy sectors and capture alien ships for later use. Features like this are Star Crusader's strengths, and I wish its marketing strategy had focused more on them than on the graphics.

Star Crusader is a good solid space combat game with a few welcome new twists. The actual combat portion of the game is decent but unremarkable, but the extremely strong plot and strategic elements make it a game worthy of attention. If you've enjoyed the Wing Commander series in the past, Star Crusader should be a familiar, comfortable, and fun game you should have no trouble identifying with.

Demo

Revision #2

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