

Review - U.S. Navy Fighters (DOS, 1994)

Unfortunately, very few ever get the privilege of serving their nation as naval aviators, but Electronic Arts has done a slam-bang job of providing you a way of experiencing the visceral thrills of being a carrier pilot, in the form of US Navy Fighters (USNF). USNF is an extremely ambitious product. If you have the hardware to support its more innovative elements, this game will really blow you away. Here's a professional's checklist on the design:

Flight Model

This is a very subjective area, and as a real naval aviator I have yet to find a really good flight model in any computer simulation. However, I think the folks at EA have struck an admirable balance between realism and playability. The flight model doesn't get in the way of a player being able to accomplish the mission, but it gives the player a taste of some of the unique difficulties associated with flying "off the boat." I particularly enjoyed rolling into the groove and calling the ball. My first landing resulted in the Landing Signal Officer grading me with a fair pass. Not the kind of landing grade that will earn you top landing honors at the end of the cruise, but, hey, we survived.

Combat Realism

This is what a combat flight simulation is all about and Electronic Arts has hit the bullseye dead center with USNF. I've flown the canned training missions and I'm impressed. My next door neighbor, who did ten years in the Air Force as a Weapons System Operator (WSO) in F-4's, watched me do a night mission over downtown Kiev, where I had to take out a hardened bunker, and he was mightily impressed by the game's realism. All the elements of modern naval aerial combat are here . . . the carrier, the MIG's, the SAM's, ZSU's, you name it. You won't lack for challenge with this game.

Play Modes

There are several modes of play in USNF. You can play the canned training missions, you can design your own single missions, or play a campaign as your favorite alter-ego. The campaign mode also includes some interesting multimedia elements where actors play out the campaign in progress. Unfortunately, the characters tend to "ham it up" a bit much for my taste and the uniforms are not quite right, but it does add an interesting element to the game.

Exterior View/Scanning

Finally someone has implemented a way to keep your head on a swivel that actually feels natural. By pressing up, down, left and right on the coolie hat on your stick, your visual lookout will scroll smoothly in a completely natural visual scanning motion. There is no sense of disorientation, such as that experienced in Falcon 3.0's padlock mode. This one is the real deal and I like it . . . a lot!

Soundtrack

Phenomenal soundtrack with excellent digital effects. If you have a 16 bit card, especially if you have a wave table add-on, you won't be disappointed. The digitized voice assistance is really a major innovation in the design, and should be paid careful attention to during missions.

Hardware

To really run this game right you need a Pentium 90, with 8 MB of RAM and a fast video system . . . nothing less will really take advantage of all the game's elements and do it justice. While the game will run on 386's and low-end 486's with 4 MB of RAM, in 300x200 mode with details turned off (and digital sounds for the 386), I do not recommend it. Even on a 486-66 with 4 MB RAM you will lose the texture mapping of the Eisenhower, the coastlines and cities and it will still run slow. A 486-66 with 8 MB of RAM and a fast video system can run in 640x480, and is the real starting point for this game. The game is about high powered machines, and it requires no less of the player's equipment.

Compatibility Concerns

USNF runs in protected mode via the PharLap DOS extender, and may not be compatible with every type of BIOS ROM shadowing, though you can adjust your CMOS settings to handle most situations. Also, if you have a 4 MB machine you can't run USNF from a compressed drive if you're running both DOS 6.2 or higher and DoubleSpace. If that's your situation you'll have to create a hard disk partition for USNF.

Hook down, gear down, call the ball . . .

For anyone who ever dreamed of being a naval aviator and taking it downtown to the bad guys . . . this one is for you! Even with the heavy hardware requirements, and some niggling complaints about the game . . . I really like this one. This one rates an O.K. three wire . . . a perfect trap.

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