



<b>UPSIDE</b>	<b>DOWNSIDE</b>
Great visuals, dynamic gameplay elements, some great mission design.	Downside Also some not-so-great mission design, intermittent crash bug.
<b>COYOTE</b>	
FIRE ROCKETS WHEN USED IN	

"My god! That thing's operational!"  
 This is where you pick your ship and configure your loadout... the Coyote is a safe pick throughout much of the game.

# Starlancer

*Space has its ups and downs*

**D**igital Anvil's first game is a bit like a swimming pool full of little kids. It's bright and flashy and fun, it will amuse you and infuriate you in turns, and it will go from warm to cold to warm so often while you are in it that your head may spin. It's tough to sum the experience up succinctly, except to say that it's probably worthwhile—more so if you are the tolerant type.

It's the developer's first game since the founders—industry veterans Erin and Chris Roberts—left the fold at Origin to start their own development house. The brothers are widely known for Origin's *Wing Commander* games, and while *Starlancer* may not be an official sequel to any of those games, it is obviously a close cousin. The story and characters are different, but the atmosphere and gameplay are strikingly similar to that of the venerable series—

particularly the early titles. That is not to say that *Starlancer* is a *Wing Commander* clone—it parts ways with the traditional formula in a few areas, with varying degrees of success—but it shares a number of its forebear's conventions (and flaws) as well. If you played and enjoyed the *Wing Commander* games, chances are strong that you will enjoy *Starlancer* as well, despite a number of flaws and quirks that can make the game infuriating at times.

## Cold War, Part II

The stage is set a mere century or so in the future. Humankind has expanded into space, but not yet to the stars. Much of the solar system has been colonized with the help of a jump drive technology that allows for quick travel over long (but not interstellar) distances.

This is not a wimpy "peace and love" version of our future. Peace and technology rarely go hand in hand, and the ability to travel to new worlds has not granted our future generations some elusive wisdom that thousands of years of terrestrial progress has failed to unlock. "Squabbling factions" is still the dominant theme in international relations, and the lines are still drawn in roughly the same places that they were during the cold war. The Alliance represents

democracy and the Forces of Good (i.e. the western nations of Earth), while the Coalition is a dark boogeyman composed of eastern nations such as Russia and China that represents Fascism, Socialism, Communism, and all the other "isms" that good freedom-loving Americans recognize as the apotheosis of evil.

Sound hokey? It is, a little bit. It is also effective, though, especially considering how difficult it can be to get players to empathize with unfamiliar settings and characters. Years of watching James Bond films have conditioned us to recognize that the guy with the thick Russian accent is unquestioningly mean and nasty—a mad dog that can neither be reasoned with nor swayed from his campaign of terror. The only real option is to put him down—a handy contrivance in a game about space combat.

In the game's opening cinematic, the Coalition offers the Alliance an olive branch. They are to meet in Earth orbit to discuss terms of peace and an end to their ongoing conflict. We know better, of course—the peace gesture is a diversion, and the real intent of the gathering is the destruction of the Alliance fleet at the hands of

the wicked Admiral Kulov (who just happened to bring along a massive squadron of cloaked fighter craft... go figure). From there the story chronicles the ragged retreat of the Alliance forces to Neptune, the slow regrouping of the remnants of the fleet, and the ultimate confrontation with Kulov.

The story tends to be a bit predictable, and it recycles just about every space sim plot device ever devised. The Coalition has cloaking device technology at the start of the game, but of course the good guys don't get it until much later. One of the opening videos, in which a Coalition ship de-cloaks directly behind and unsuspecting Alliance fighter and blows him to smithereens, is very nearly a direct rip from *Wing Commander IV*. The requisite "rescue the prisoner," mission makes an appearance, along other longtime favorites such as "destroy the super carrier before it's operational," "sneak into the midst of the enemy fleet with our newly-discovered stealth technology," and the classic "destroy the uber-weapon before it's operational... oops! It already is!"

Not all the missions are that derivative, of course, but odds are

<b>THE GOODS</b>	
<b>GENRE</b>	Space Sim
<b>PUBLISHER</b>	Microsoft
<b>REQUIREMENTS</b>	Pentium 200, 32 MB RAM
<b>MULTIPLAYER</b>	2-8 players; Internet, modem
<b>RATING</b>	

★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

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that you will like the story for reasons other than its originality. It flows well, the acting is decent, and if the events feel familiar they also feel comfortable, kind of like an old pair of shoes.

### Gameplay 1, personality 0

The real problem, if there is one, is that many of the characters closest to you are lacking in presence and personality. The game places a strong emphasis on in-mission gameplay—a welcome change from the some of the later *Wing Commander* games, in which gameplay became almost secondary to the lengthy interactive video clips that pushed the story along between missions.

*Starlancer* goes very nearly too far in the other direction. When you are not in the cockpit you can watch or read news clips, look at the kill board, and attend the briefing for your next mission... but there is no interaction at all with any of your fellow wingmen. They chat about mission objectives while you are flying, but as characters they remain fairly disposable throughout the game.

It's a tough trade-off. The advantages of putting combat in the spotlight are unquestionable, and the game excels in that respect. On the other hand, you may find yourself missing the virtual camaraderie of your fellow pilots. In *Wing Commander* you got to know the pilots that were flying with you. You knew their personalities, you knew a bit of their histories, and as a result you knew how they were going to behave under the gun. In *Starlancer* you will be lucky to remember your fellow pilots' call signs.

Moose is the exception to that rule—he introduces himself at the beginning of the game, and while you never find out much about what makes him tick, you will probably come to despise him. Ostensibly he is your copilot; "annoying passenger" is a more apt description. What purpose he serves is never really made clear—he whines ceaselessly about dropping countermeasures whenever a bogie locks you up with a missile, but apparently some horrible training accident left him without the use of his hands, as he seems incapable of dropping said countermeasures (or doing anything else useful, for that matter) himself. It is a pity that none of the Alliance fighters come equipped with a separate ejection button for the rear seat—perhaps future

advances in technology will make this possible.

### It's all about the action

Story quibbles aside, a lot of *Starlancer*'s missions are quite fun, and several of them are absolutely stunning. They get a lot of help from the game's engine, which hands out spectacular backdrops and flashy effects in turn. Recent space sims have turned to colorful nebula effects to "dress up" the drab emptiness of space.

*Starlancer* goes a little bit lighter on the nebulae and instead relies on planetary vistas—recognizable ones at that—to inspire your awe. Imagine duking it out on the dark side of Saturn—you are close enough to the planet that it eclipses your view, the rings shining brightly in the distant glow of the sun. Can pretty visuals actually make a game more fun to play? Yeah, apparently they can.

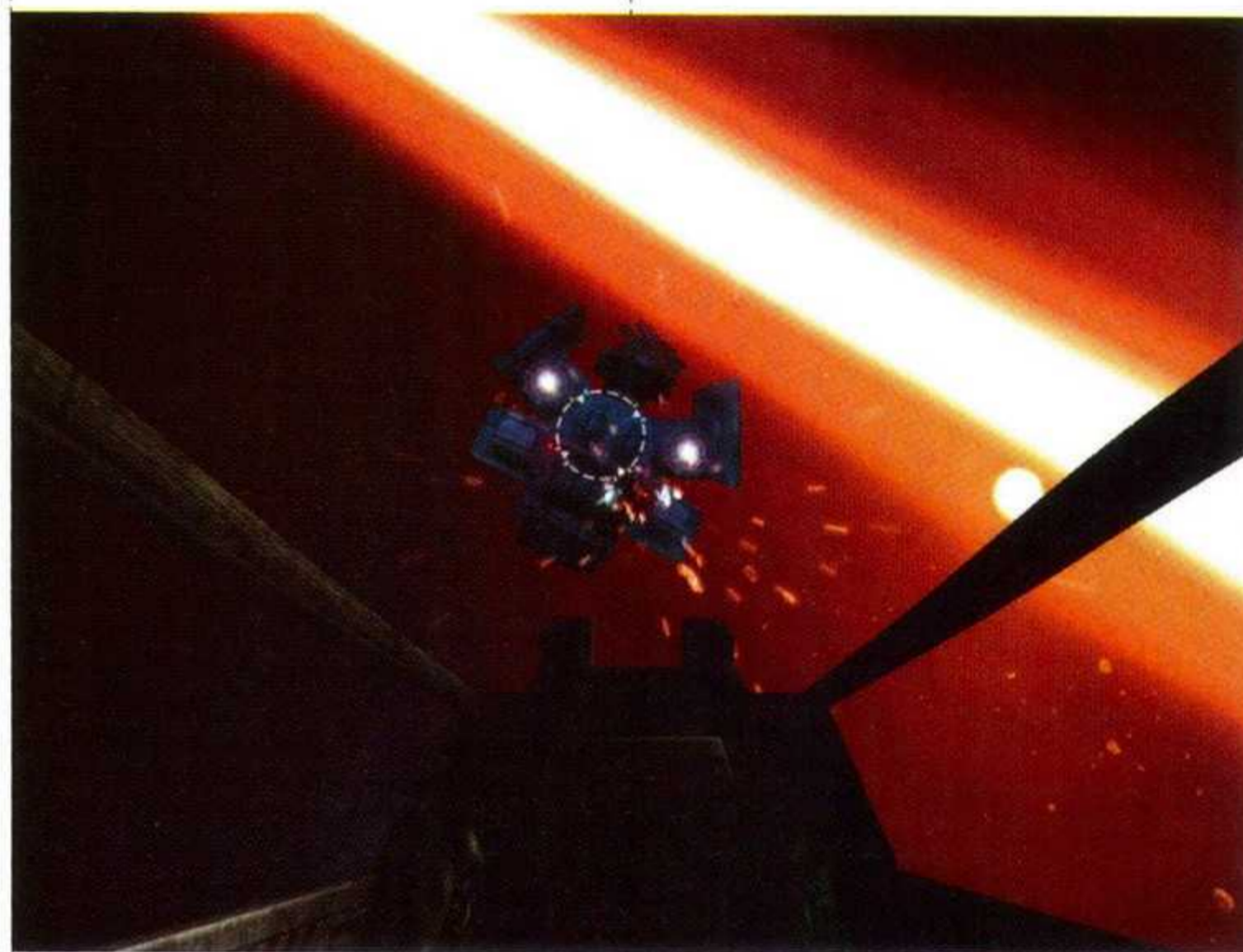
Good mission design can help too, and the game delivers it... most of the time. When all the pieces come together just right you will feel as though you have been dropped in the middle of a good sci-fi action movie. The missions throw unexpected events at you as a matter of course, and you will have to do a lot of thinking on your feet (or in the cockpit, as the case may be).

While most of any given mission is scripted, there are enough dynamic elements along the way

to keep them from *feeling* scripted. What you do—and what you fail to do—can have consequences later in the mission, and sometimes in other missions down the road. Did you fail to take out that Coalition ace? He might just show up later. Ditto for that carrier that you let slip away. In one mission you are tasked with destroying an asteroid-bound communication facility that the enemy is using to coordinate research on warp technology. You fly cover for Gamma Wing (torpedo bombers), protecting them en route to the target and then clearing the target area of any hostile forces.

Along the way you will be ambushed by several groups of fighters, and you will need to make sure that at least one Gamma Wing bomber survives to hit your primary objective. Once you arrive at the communication tower you have 60 seconds to take down the facility's communication tower before they radio for reinforcements. Failure does not end the mission—it just makes it a bit trickier (enemy reinforcements jump in and you must once again rally to Gamma Wing's defense).

Little things like that provide feedback on the fly about how well (or poorly) you are doing. Better



"Whoa. That was a little too close."

"I don't think we're in Kansas any more, Toto..."



still, each mission has multiple levels of success or failure, and some missions allow you to continue on to the next mission even if you fail to achieve some (or all) of the mission objectives. Post-mission cinematics give you further feedback on well you did, and a detailed debriefing gives you the specifics.

The game could do a better job of letting you know how well things are going during a mission, however—the Mission Objectives display only lists the current

objective, and it gives no indication of mission status. Wingmen chatter generally lets you know how you are doing in a vague sense, but a list of all objectives would be more helpful (perhaps color-coded to indicate whether or not the objective has been met), and it would be nice if you could get the Mission Objectives display to stay locked on your HUD.

**Load, play, and repeat**

Regrettably, the game often falls

back on a common contrivance of the genre—the long, incredibly difficult multi-part mission that you have to beat to continue. It's not an easy problem to solve—there is no question that long missions can be fun, but playing long missions over and over again certainly isn't. Short of adding save points within the missions or making the missions shorter, it is mostly a matter of balance and design.

In one mission that takes place relatively late in the game, the

Alliance has stolen several Coalition torpedo bombers and the security codes needed to fly them into Coalition space. The plan is to fly the bombers into the middle of the Alliance Second Fleet and nuke the flagship—a massive vessel called the Varyag. The first part of the mission involves flying into position and waiting for the order to fire on the Varyag. It's a gripping sequence that borrows heavily (once again) from the scene in *Return of the Jedi* in which Han Solo flies the stolen shuttle past the Imperial Fleet to the surface of Endor. You have to fly in slowly and in formation to avoid arousing suspicion—not particularly difficult, but quite nerve-wracking (which is, of course, the whole point). Once in position you sit still for a minute or so before you get the order to fire, then it's "torpedoes away" and time to make a run back to your carrier (which jumps in after the Varyag buys the farm). There are a few in-engine cut scenes along the way, and the whole operation takes about seven or eight minutes.

The mission does not end when you rendezvous with your carrier, however—instead you merely swap out your torpedo bomber for a fighter and immediately launch again in order to protect your carrier from an incoming volley of torpedoes. Shooting down torpedoes is a schtick that plays a major role in five of the game's 24 missions, and in retrospect that is probably four times too many. It can be difficult enough to intercept even a single volley, and when they are coming from two or three directions (as they often do), success is mostly a matter of blind luck.

This particular volley is one of the most difficult in the game, and if you fail (and most likely you will, many times) your carrier gets destroyed and you get booted out of the military. End result: you have to replay the mission. Every time you replay the mission, however, you also have to replay the easy-but-lengthy "destroy the Varyag" sequence. Destroying the Varyag loses its charm pretty rapidly after the fifth or sixth time you have done it, and since you can't skip any of the in-engine cut scenes, you will have to watch those all over again as well.

**Mission impossible**

The game is peppered with "choke-points" such as the Varyag mission, and even on the easiest difficulty setting they can be

	PILOTS	SHIP	TOTAL KILLS
15	Ned Dundee (51st Volunteers - WL)	Patriot	44
16	Robert Foe (Black Aces - WL)	Crusader	42
17	Angelo Fuser (Hornets - WL)	Mirage	41
18	FELDERIN (45th Volunteers)		38
19	Joe Dabo (Buccaneers - WL)	Tempest	37

You may start out near the bottom of the ladder, but your kills will number in the hundreds by the end of the game.

[below] "I'll see you on the dark side of... well, Saturn, actually."



insanely difficult to beat. It might not be so bad if the missions were not so long—replaying a difficult sequence over and over can be annoying, but replaying the several sequences that come *before* the difficult sequence over and over again can make you want to shelve the game.

It's not that the game shouldn't have long missions, and it's not that the game shouldn't have missions that you have to succeed at in order to continue. It's not even that the game shouldn't have difficult challenges. The problem comes into play when you mix all three together—any of the game's insanely difficult mission sequences probably would have been more palatable if they were separated out into their own shorter missions, and they would have been more palatable still if you were allowed to chalk them up as a loss and continue on if they proved too challenging. "Repeat it until you beat it" gameplay unerringly draws a lot of criticism from space sim fans, and it is unfortunate that *Starlancer* carries that sort of baggage in spite of features such as varying degrees of success.

It doesn't help that the game seems to have a bug that locks up your system at random intervals, forcing a hard reset. It doesn't happen often, and it's tough to reproduce the specific circumstances of the bug, but it has occurred—multiple times—on five different system configurations. Heaven forbid if the game should lock up just after you have *finally* shot down all the torpedoes in the Varyag mission... well, we won't go into that.

**Help! I need somebody...**

There is one possible approach to beating the game's more frustrating missions—have a friend help you out. Taking out torpedoes that are streaming in from more than one direction is an entirely different ballgame when you have more than one human player in the game. *Starlancer* has two multiplayer modes; the first is a standard deathmatch set on six different maps, each with its own unique objectives. The maps are slick and the objectives are entertaining, but the bottom line is that space sim deathmatching gets old fairly quickly.

The second multiplayer mode is the real winner—you can join up with other players to tackle mis-

sions in the single-player campaign. Having a human wingman can make all the difference in the world in some of the game's more difficult missions. The AI wingmen are competent enough in combat, but they have an irksome tendency to ignore mission-critical situations (incoming torpedoes, for instance) in favor of jumping into the nearest furball. Human wingmen are more reliable... well they usually are. It depends on the human in question, obviously.

**It was the best of games, it was the worst of games**

If you are still undecided about whether or not you want to play *Starlancer*, then you are probably on the right track. In fact you may still feel that way, even after you finish the game. It's not a bad game, or even a mediocre one. There are plenty of missions in the game that will make you sit back and think "damn! That was cool." There are also missions that will make you groan out loud. If you

are a space sim newbie, or if "load and repeat" style gameplay makes you cringe, you would do well to steer clear.

If you are a longtime fan of the genre, however—perhaps you still have the original *Wing Commander* box on your shelf—the game is worth checking out. The good parts are worth the price of admission, and if you have played a lot of space sims in the past then you are probably used to the not-so-good parts already. —Benjamin E. Sones



There are a few nebulae here and there, but the effect is pretty muted, and the planets are the main visual draw.

[below] Flying a stolen torpedo bomber into the middle of the enemy fleet... don't worry—you will get to do it more than once.

