

Mindless Mayhem

Return to the simpler time of the Cold War with Microsoft's **STARLANCER**

FACT FILE

■ PUBLISHER Microsoft ■ DEVELOPER Digital Anvil ■ GENRE Action ■ PLAYERS 1-8 ■ ESRB RATING Everyone ■ PRICE \$34.99

GAME GLANCE

- 1 Solar system
- 2 Warring alliances
- 12+ Ships to fly
- 20+ Weapons
- 100 Screams of frustration

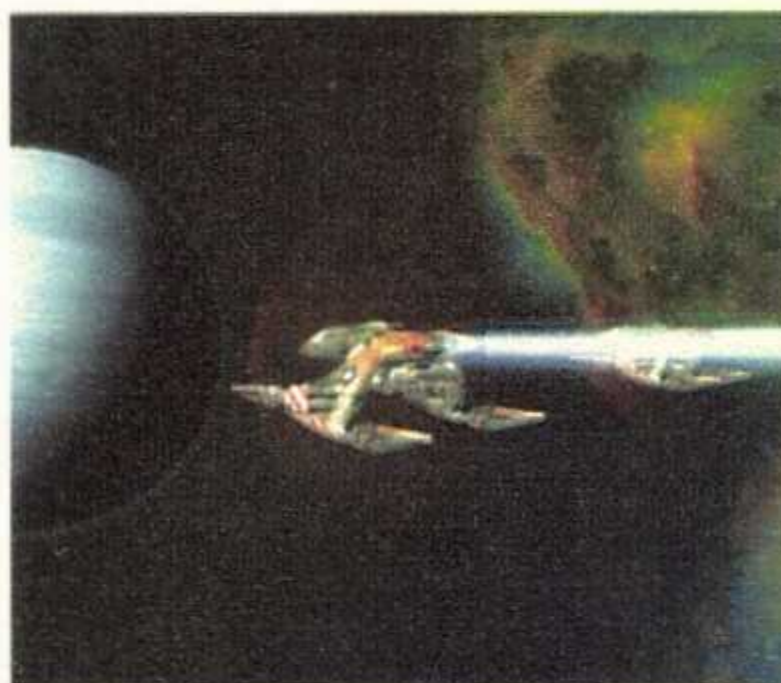
New world, new enemy, new ships, new weapons – same game. From the creators of the famed *Wing Commander* series comes *Starlancer*, a space-based flight sim filled with fast-paced action, beautiful graphics, and, alas, a linear and predictable story.

By Di Luo

The good folks down at Digital Anvil must subscribe to the theory that those who forget the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it. *Starlancer* takes you back to the Cold War via the future, when the Russians, Chinese, and Arabs have formed the evil Eastern Coalition to fight the Alliance of the Americans and their partners for domination of the solar system.

History Revisited

That future (i.e., the year 2160), begins as a time full of optimism and prosperity. Mankind has colonized the entire solar system, and the Alliance and Coalition are on the brink of ending their arms competition and dismantling their weaponry. On the eve of a treaty signing, however, the dastardly villains of the Coalition launch a surprise attack on the unsuspecting and idealistic Alliance, destroying much of their fleet and killing millions. (Anyone



DÉJÀ VU Like the *Wing Commander* games, *Starlancer* features cut-scenes.



'80S REVISITED Anyone up for a quick game of *Asteroids*? Anybody? Anybody?

want to bet that the game designers at Digital Anvil are *Battlestar Galactica* fans?)

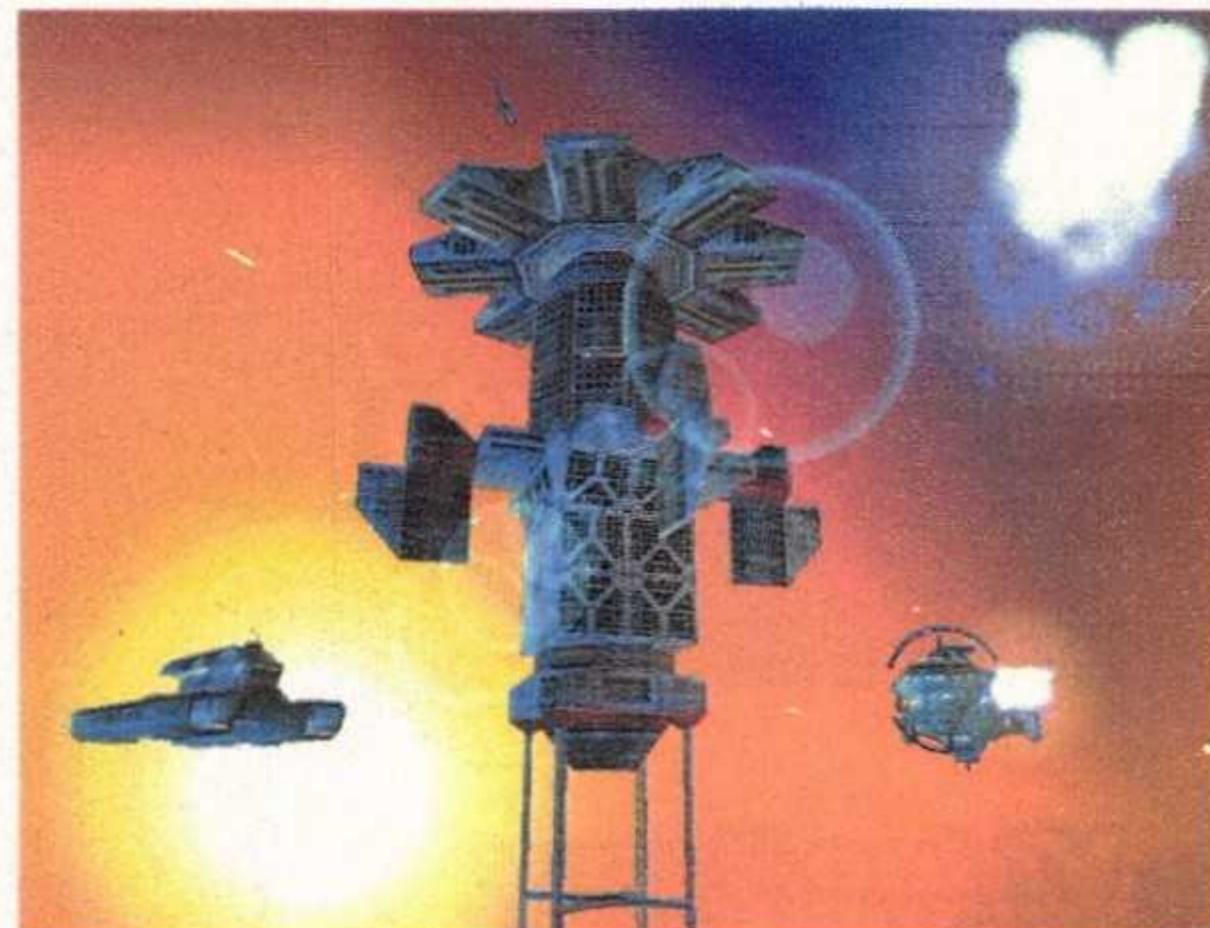
You are an American member of the ragtag 45th Volunteer Squadron, formed from a group of amateur pilots with no previous military experience. After an initial surprise attack by the Coalition, you are thrown into the desperate struggle of defending the last bastion of hope for capitalists everywhere. The regulars of the fleet, of course, treat your volunteers with little respect, but due to your heroism and fighting abilities, you are soon recognized

as one of the elite Alliance outfits. (No offense, but hasn't this formula been used in every other flight and space-combat game since the dawn of space-combat time?)

With heavy use of carrier-based fighters and intense dogfights, *Starlancer* has been billed as a futuristic World War II flight sim. Strangely, though, you're fighting alongside the Germans and Japanese, who this time around are trying to prevent civilian massacres rather than cause them.

In the game, the Japanese and Germans even retain some of their insignias of old: The Germans still

Starlancer will draw you in with its spectacular graphics and fast gameplay.



BIG BOYZ Capital ships and starbases in *Starlancer* play a large role, duking it out in many of the missions.



INSIDE AN ASTEROID There is a wide variety of mission objectives on tap, including this interstellar robbery of an enemy asteroid base.

use the Iron Cross, and the Alliance has the Japanese imperial battle flag (which was abandoned by the Japanese after their defeat in WWII). Eventually, your squadron even gets renamed the Tigers, after the volunteer Flying Tigers of WWII that fought against the Japanese in China and Burma.

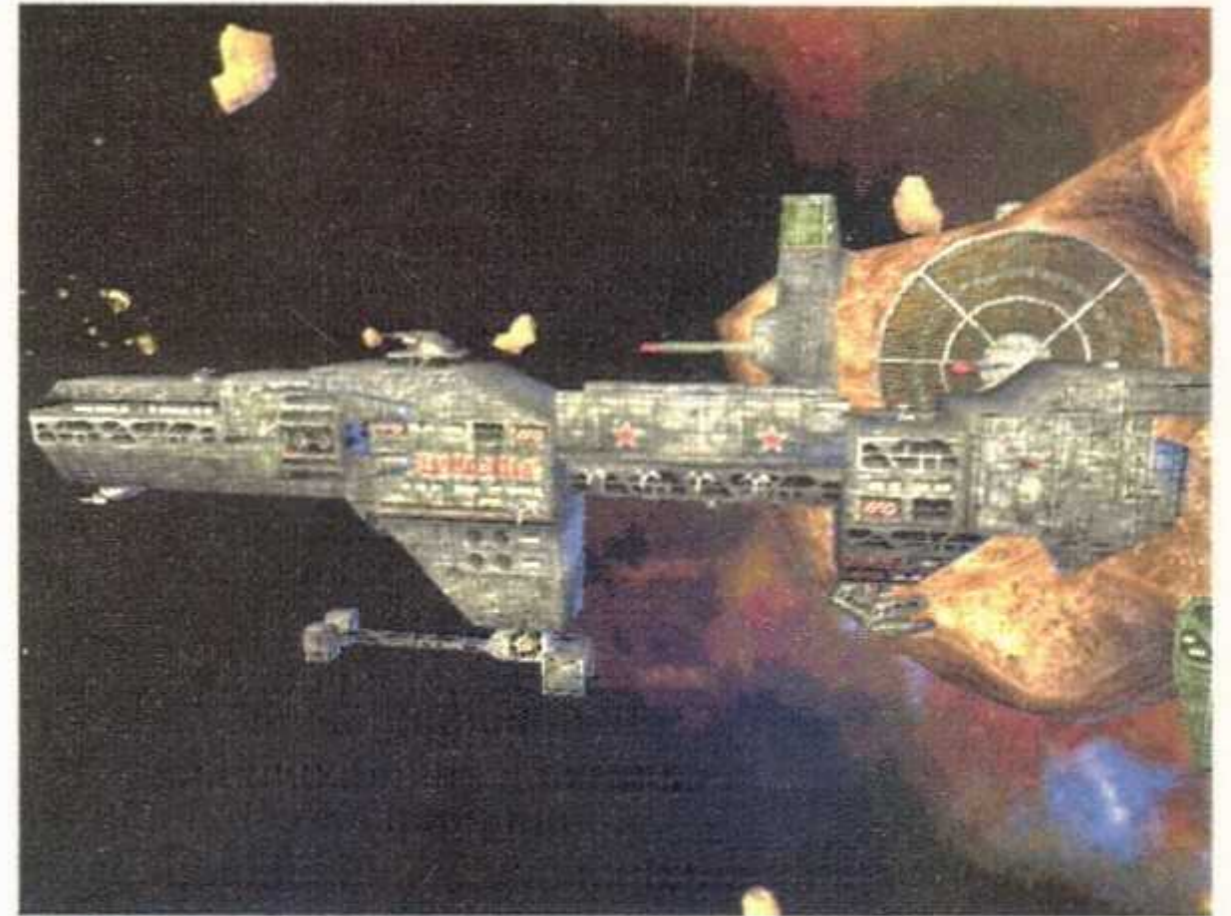
Despite a soap opera-like story with the usual betrayals, noble sacrifices, and more melodrama than 20 Mexican telenovelas, *Starlancer* will inexorably draw you in with its spectacular graphics and fast gameplay.

Every model, from gigantic capital ships to asteroids, is incredibly detailed and great-looking. The battles are epic in proportion, providing a more realistic feel of fighting in a large

war filled with fleets of ships and multiple squadrons. It's different than the *Wing Commander* games, Digital Anvil's legacy, in which you feel like you're alone against the entire universe.

Death and Destruction

The combat interface is flawless and smooth, and a vast array of ships and weapons are offered. *Starlancer* also has an almost endless horde of enemies to kill. There is a wide range of mission goals, ranging from seek and destroy to infiltrating an enemy base on an asteroid. However, the essential nature of these missions remains similar throughout, and mirrors the *Wing Commander* games: You go from one waypoint to the next, destroying your enemies

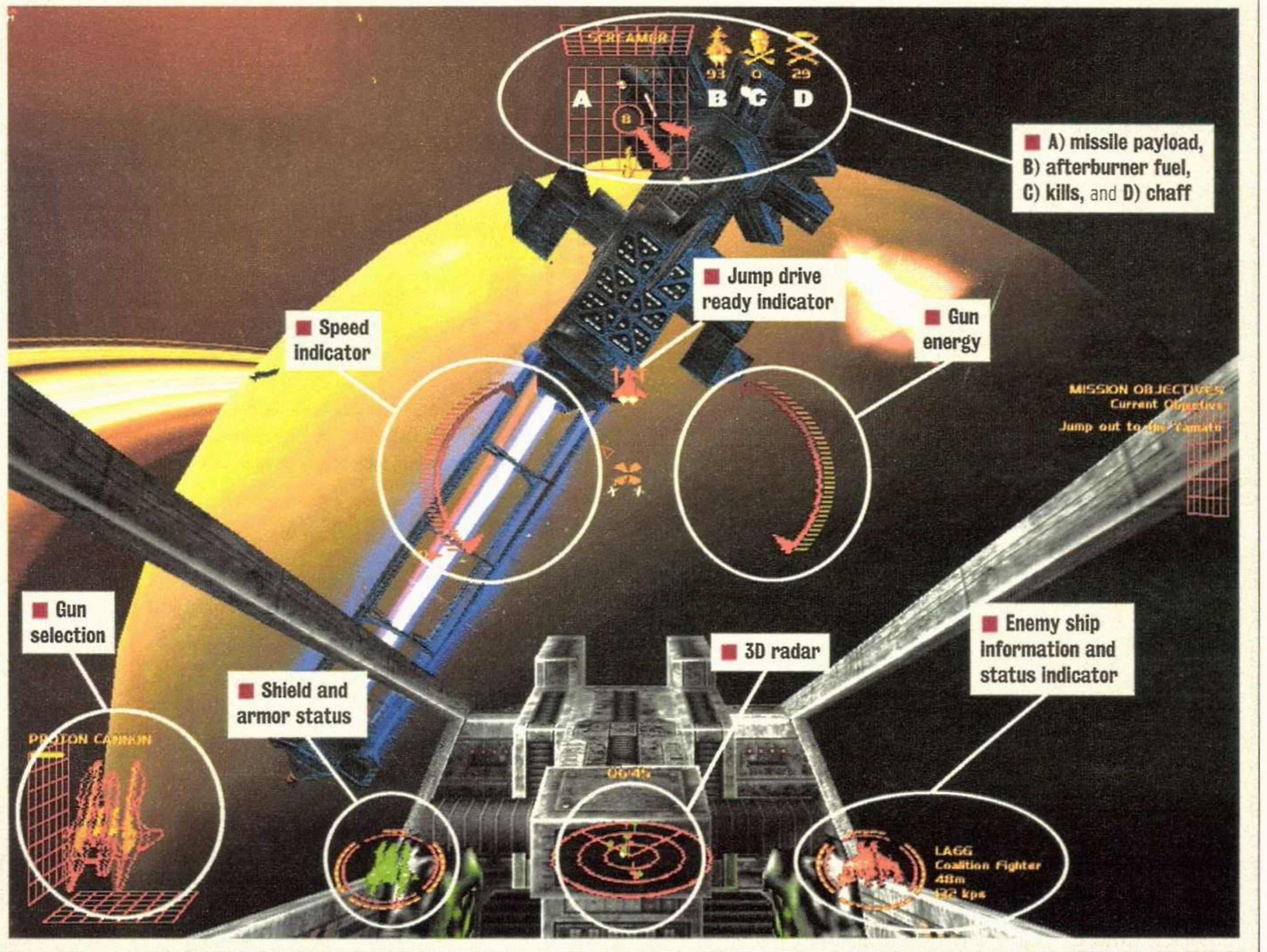


HOT WAR The commies are back and meaner than ever, with horrible voices that would drive any capitalist insane.

while protecting your friends. It's repetitive but usually enjoyable. Simplicity does have its charms.

■ A CLOSER LOOK

I'VE GOT YOUR COCKPIT RIGHT HERE



Test Center

Starlancer

UP AND RUNNING

INSTALLATION

- + Easy to install
- + No install glitches encountered
- Large amount of HD space required

ACCESSIBILITY

- + Interface is easy to use
- + Good training missions
- Occasional crashes are frustrating

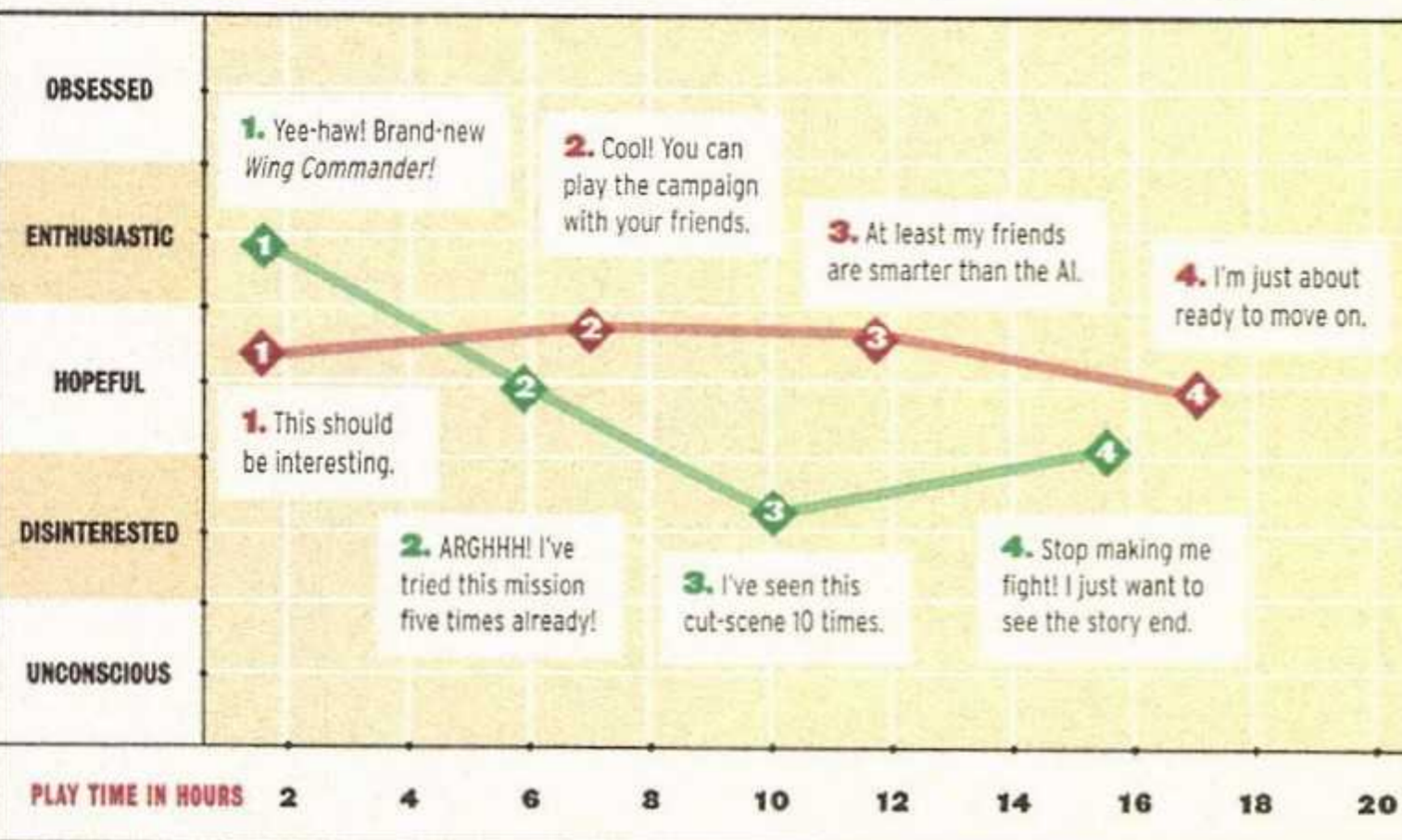
GRAPHICS PERFORMANCE CHART

PROCESSOR ▶		Pentium 166		Pentium II 233		Pentium II 350		Pentium II 450		AMD Athlon 700	
SYSTEM RAM ▶		32		64		32		64		128	
Voodoo2 Diamond Monster 3D II	640 x 480	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	800 x 600	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	1024 x 768	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Voodoo3 3dfx Voodoo3 3000	640 x 480	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	800 x 600	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	1024 x 768	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Rage 128 Rage Fury	640 x 480	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	800 x 600	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	1024 x 768	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Matrox G400 Millennium G400	640 x 480	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	800 x 600	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	1024 x 768	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
TNT 2 Diamond Viper V770 Ultra	640 x 480	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	800 x 600	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	1024 x 768	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
GeForce 256 Guillemot 3d Prophet	640 x 480	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	800 x 600	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	1024 x 768	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Savage 2000 Diamond Viper II	640 x 480	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	800 x 600	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	1024 x 768	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Software	640 x 480	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	800 x 600	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	1024 x 768	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■

WHAT IT MEANS ■ - Forget it! ■ - Runs poorly ■ - Acceptable ■ - Runs with ease

THE INTEREST CHART

Starlancer's **single-player** gameplay is exciting, though repetitive, and the fun wears off pretty quickly. The **multiplayer** mode offers a good selection of play types, though nothing great.



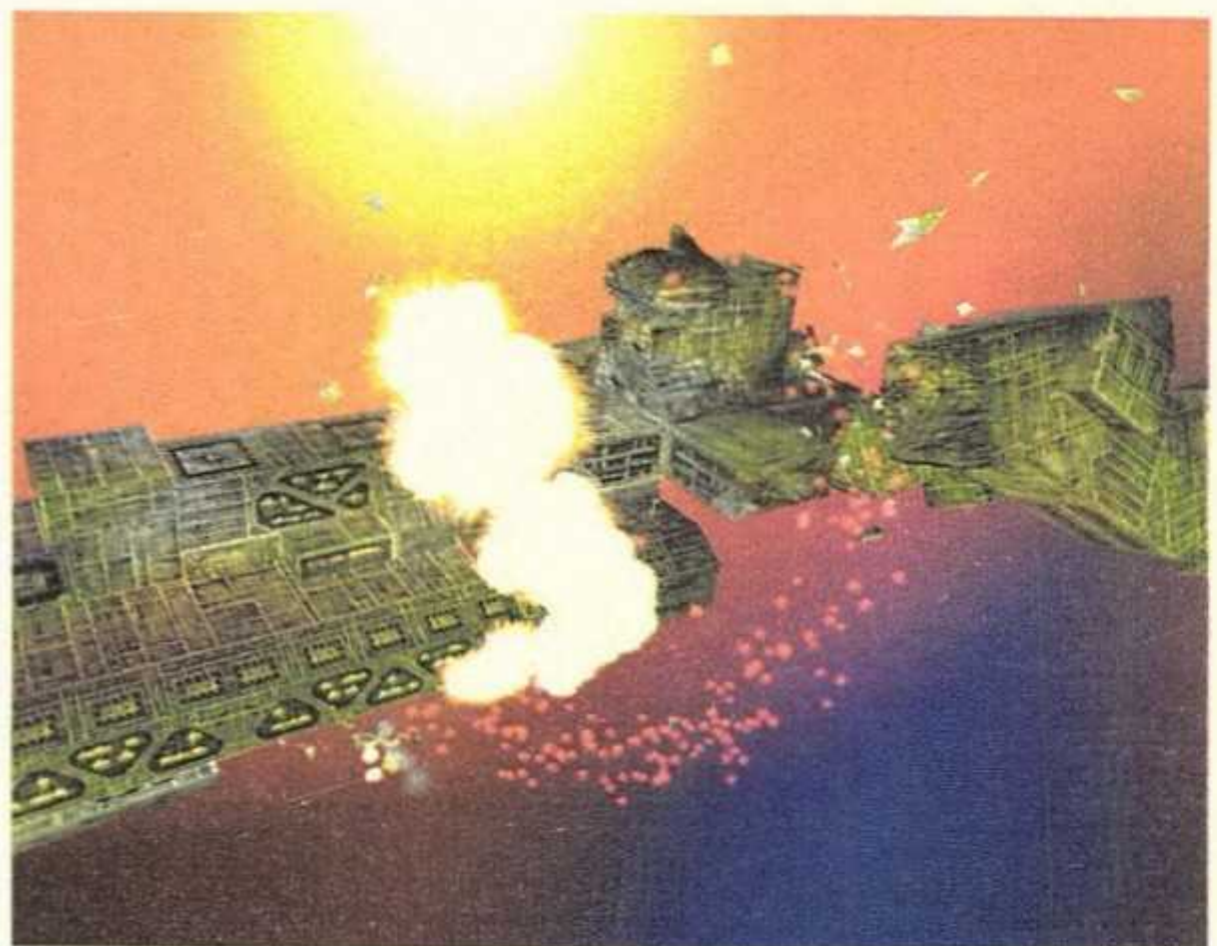
You're fighting alongside the Germans and Japanese, who are trying to prevent civilian massacres.

Unfortunately, the mindless fun offered by the combat is marred by the voice acting – especially with the stereotypical accents – which is repetitive at best and often extremely grating at worst. Hearing the same taunt from the enemy for the millionth time or the endless stream of encouragement from your wingmen quickly becomes tiresome. It tempted me to turn the volume off entirely. I would have, too, if not for the occasional useful mission information provided through chatter from your wingmen. Some way to shut up the useless speech – or at least subtitles – would have been greatly appreciated here.

Technical flaws also sap away the enjoyment of the game. As missions become longer and more repetitive, crashes seem to occur more often on certain video cards, especially GeForce cards. Though this might not affect you, the unlucky gamers with the wrong



REALISM BE DAMNED Even if explosions can't really happen in space, they still look pretty good in *Starlancer*.



BYE-BYE BIRDIE The bigger they are, the harder they fall. This capital ship eats it, thanks to my good shooting.

configuration could soon be tearing out their hair in a fit of rage. Nothing is as frustrating as finishing a mission after the fourth try and having it crash during the closing cinematic!

These crashes are not helped by the idiotic computer-controlled pilots that pass for your allies and enemies. Most of your wingmen have a hard time shooting down stationary targets, and not only will you take a lion's share of the kills, but you'll have to scramble around saving their asses in many missions. But don't worry, you won't have much trouble shooting down the brain-dead enemy pilots.

The pilots' ineptitude, especially in escort missions, combined with the occasional system crash can keep you stuck on a difficult mission for hours and hours. And, because most missions include scripted cinematic sequences that you can't bypass, you may be forced to sit through them every time you replay a



SITTING DUCKS? FISH IN A BARREL! Any way you put it, these stupid AI pilots are a breeze to kill.

Starlancer is by no means a perfect game, but it is a shipload of fun.

mission. Can you say, "Hell on Earth"? Of course you can.

Multiplayer Madness

The game's focus is on the 24-mission-long, single-player campaign. However, *Starlancer* has a good selection of multiplayer options as well. Other than the usual deathmatch, there are tag games and a Nuclear Strike mode, in which you try to be the first to collect the necessary keys to nuke everyone else. The most original of the multiplayer games, however, is a cooperative game that allows up to four players to play through all the campaign missions together.

Even with all the game's flaws, the simplicity of making beautiful ships go ka-boom and the lure of seeing what the next cut-scene has in store will probably have you coming back again and again. *Starlancer* is by no means a perfect game, but it is a shipload of fun nevertheless. Ⓜ



GOLDEN RING Come on... come on... I've almost got my lock on this enemy. When I finally get it, he'll be as good as dead.

WE KICKED BUTT THEN; WE'LL DO IT AGAIN
SCREW HISTORY

THE REAL
FLYING TIGERS
VS
45TH VOLUNTEER SQUADRON
TIGERS

The real **Flying Tigers vs. the 45th Volunteers** — who has more bite?



FLYING TIGERS



45TH VOLUNTEERS

CRAFT

Curtiss P-40E with a 1150hp Allison V-1710 engine, six .50-cal. machine guns

Spacecraft with multiple laser, tachyon, and plasma cannons

OPERATION AREA

Backwaters of China, with few supplies and poor conditions — as tough as it got

Neptune and Saturn, flying from state-of-the-art interstellar carriers

ENEMY

Fought against the Japanese invaders in China, scoring more than 200 kills with very few losses

Fighting alongside the Japanese against the Russians and Chinese. One pilot can score more than 200 kills

PERKS

Cool jacket, great stories to use to impress chicks, and a movie about them that wasn't directed by Chris Roberts

The ability to shoot down hundreds of brainless Coalition scum. Chris Roberts sticking with what he does best

Tech Specs

PROCESSOR & MEMORY

- **MINIMUM SPEC** 200MHz & 32MB
- **PREFERRED SPEC** 300MHz PII & 64MB
- **MINIMUM INSTALL** 300MB HD SPACE

GRAPHICS SUPPORT

- **Software Rendering** ✓
- **Direct3D** ✓
- **3dfx** ✗
- **OpenGL** ✗

AUDIO SUPPORT

- **EAX (SBLive!)** ✓
- **A3D** ✗

MULTIPLAYER OPTIONS

- **MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT**
Maximum number of players: PC 1, LAN 8, Internet 8
- **CD FOR EACH PLAYER?** Yes
- **MIN. INTERNET CONNECTION** 28.8kps

The Verdict

HOW THEY COMPARE

- **Tachyon: The Fringe**
Extremely open-ended gameplay and a story filled with plot twists.
- **Independence War**
The flight model involves realistic physics and is enjoyable.
- **Descent: Freespace 2**
Fairly intelligent wingmen, and the first game to do capital ships really well.
- **Starlancer**
Fun, fast, simple. It's good but very standard fare.
- **Wing Commander III**
The best of the WC series, this one finally got space combat right.

GRAPHICS

■ The best graphics in a space sim to date! Huge asteroids and capital ships are offered.



SOUND

■ The sounds of battle are well done, but the repetitive voice chatter can easily get on your nerves.



MULTIPLAYER

■ The ability to play through the single-player game with your friends is great fun.



Starlancer

PROS: Fast action; great graphics; a simple premise that requires little thought; good training missions.

CONS: Cliché story; bad voice acting; various crashes; occasionally repetitive missions are frustrating.

OVERALL

Despite some glitches, an overall solid release from the company formed by the creators of *Wing Commander*.

3
OUT OF 5

