

**GENESIS...**

A brief history of X-COM

**GOD IN HEAVEN!**

We talk to X-COM's creator

**ANGELS 5-0!**

We fly with *X-COM: Interceptor*

**MICRO PROSE**

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JULY '98 EDITION OF PCZONE

# The Making of... **X-COM: Interceptor**

MicroProse combines space blasting and strategy in this latest X-COM classic

← **TURN OVER TO SEE THE MAKING OF... MECHCOMMANDER**



## The Making Of...

## X-COM: IN



Microsoft's fourth installment in the cult classic X-COM series combines intense strategic gameplay with one of the best 3D space combat sim engines ever seen. We reveal a long pedigree before taking *X-COM: Interceptor* out on its maiden voyage...

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## EYES NOT RED ENOUGH YET?

Close the mag and turn it over to reveal our second cover feature – MechCommander

It began five years ago with *UFO: Enemy Unknown*, then moved underwater with the release of *X-COM 2: Terror From the Deep* and last summer, erupted in a blaze of alien blood and gore with the release of *X-COM 3: Apocalypse*. Its cult-classic status now guaranteed, the fourth title in the X-COM saga is now very eagerly awaited.

So what exactly is X-COM? Put bluntly, it's mankind's last hope, a

planet-wide organisation tasked by the world's governments with keeping any and all alien scum off our luscious green planet. Despite a xenophobic bias against aliens, X-COM is, of course, an equal opportunity employer...

## GAME ON X-COM 1

The first game in the X-COM series, *UFO: Enemy Unknown*, was launched in 1994 and put you in the role of X-COM boss. Your first job was to set up bases

around the globe, equip them with the latest aircraft, strap on the sharpest and deadliest weapons your technology allowed and intercept any attempts by the aliens to put their slimy suckers on the surface of mother earth.

If the aliens shot down your interceptors, the next step was to send in squads of troops and armoured vehicles to hunt down the slimy scum. There was limited funding too, so in between alien-bashing sessions, you had to

allocate time and effort researching new weapons, constructing bigger and better craft and hiring the best recruits to fight your corner. You also got attached to your pilots too, especially the ones with big biceps and lots of skills. Or big busts and lots of skills – equal opportunities, remember? Look after them and they did the business for you until the day they wound up as brain chowder.

Meanwhile, any scraps of alien (dead or alive) or alien technology you found aided the cause. Putting your boffins to work could build a better picture of the aliens, their weakness and their overall plan. In the meantime, you could also use their captured high tech weapons against them.

Most of your game time was spent squinting at the Geoscape, a rotating globe that allowed you



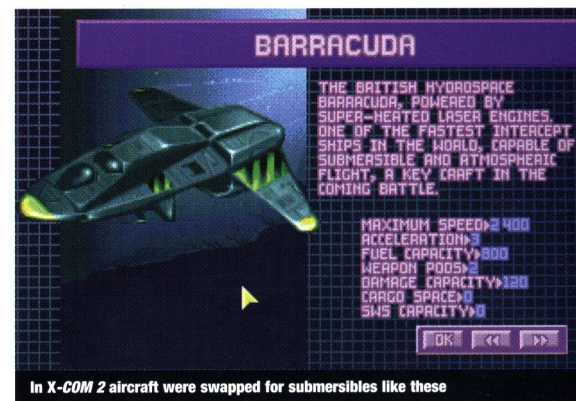
UFO: Enemy Unknown – DOS graphics but brilliant gameplay



Tracking down an alien underwater was much harder...



Remember these? The first X-COM interceptors...



In X-COM 2 aircraft were swapped for submersibles like these



# INTERCEPTOR

to pinpoint your bases, plot alien sightings and landings, and control the movement of fleets, waypoints and so on. You could also zoom in and out at any time and swap instantly from screen to screen to check on your funds, production schedules, weapon stocks and training. Nobody ever said that being the boss of X-COM was easy...

## WATER WORKS... X-COM 2

It didn't take long for MicroProse to realise they were on to a winner with *UFO*. In time-honoured gaming tradition, the company grabbed the basic code, revamped the graphics and churned out a second game, *Terror From The Deep*.

This time the aliens were at the bottom of the sea but otherwise the game was much the same – if a damned sight harder this time around, with the play balance leaning heavily towards the aliens.

Despite the different flavour, *X-COM 2* is virtually *X-COM 1* underwater, even down to the same Geoscape. You build your bases on the blue bits rather than the green bits but you'll find that almost every weapon and vehicle has a direct counterpart from the first game.

This kind of thing was fine for most of the X-COM buffs – they wanted more of the same – but it was never likely to open up the X-COM world to any new gamers. For that, a completely new approach was needed – and *X-COM 3: Apocalypse* was born.



The cityscape in *X-COM 3: Apocalypse* was a giant step forward

## APOCALYPSE WOW!

The thinking behind *Apocalypse* was simple – take the proven gameplay but utilise the rapid advances in PC hardware to create a better AI, better graphics and more depth. Set in the earth's only remaining city, Mega Primus, *Apocalypse* swapped the Geoscape for the living, breathing Cityscape, a highly detailed conglomeration of buildings with



The improved graphics in *X-COM 3* made it a huge hit



Agents needed lots of TLC in *X-COM 3* – and *X-COM 1* and *X-COM 2*.

corporations and organisations such as the police and the Mafia all doing their own thing. Investigating Mega Primus became a 'real' experience – you could send your agents into buildings to look around, 'steal' guns or drugs or just flatten the place. Provided that you could handle any of the

resulting unpopularity...

Your only interaction with the world in the first two games was the funding levels which fluctuated according to your success at protecting a particular country from the aliens. Winning at *Apocalypse* means sticking to the original X-COM gameplan – recruit agents, research weapons and technology, recover aliens and artifacts and finally rearrange the alien base into its constituent parts – but you've got to do it by keeping the people and all of the powerful corporations on your side. A superb game, it sold twice as many copies as *Terror From The Deep*...

## X-COM TIMELINE

A brief history of X-COM



**1998** – The first aliens start to appear on earth



**1999** – The alien base on Mars is wiped out in *X-COM: Enemy Unknown*



**2039** – Alien activity increases under the oceans



**2041** – X-COM battles the aliens' underwater city in *X-COM 2: Terror From The Deep*



**2062** – *X-COM 5* will be set around this time. Rumoured to be a first person shoot 'em up, MicroProse is saying nothing...



**2067** – *X-COM 3: Interceptor* sees X-COM try to protect earth's mining colonies from the aliens



**2084** – Dimension gates start appearing in Mega Primus, the setting for the latest battle, *X-COM 3: Apocalypse*

Ugly mothers these aliens – an anthropod from *Apocalypse*



# GOLD IN HEAVEN

Whenever the name of *X-COM 4: Interceptor* comes up, so does the name of its designer. *PC Zone* gets an audience with the creator...

**X**COM 4: *Interceptor*'s designer is David Ellis and at the grand old age of 33, it's his first game as lead designer. Previous credits include *Civilisation 2*, *CivNet*, *Fleet Defender Gold* and the story and scripts for the forthcoming, *Klingon Honour Guard*. He's also written the official strategy guides for all three current *X-COM* titles.

So what inspired the radical departure from the more traditional *X-COM* mould?

"I used to love playing the old MicroProse favourite *Gunship*," he recalls, "so when *X-Wing* came out, I thought that it would be cool to put *X-Wing* and *X-COM* together. We tossed the idea around for a while and then about 18 months ago, we finally got the go ahead."



Scratch one alien Wraith fighter...

David's idea was to keep the strategic portion of the game the same, a bit less complex than *Apocalypse*, but to make the combat side a real-time space combat sim like *Wing*

*Commander* or *X-Wing*.

"It's our own 3D engine created from scratch and we reckon it's the best so far with much more depth and some stupendous explosions." David is

especially fond of the graphics. "The *X-COM* and alien bases and the mining platforms are beautifully modelled and the asteroid belts have to be seen to be believed. And if you want a truly weird experience, you could try combat near the edge of a black hole – it sucks in missiles and damaged ships just as you'd expect it to!"

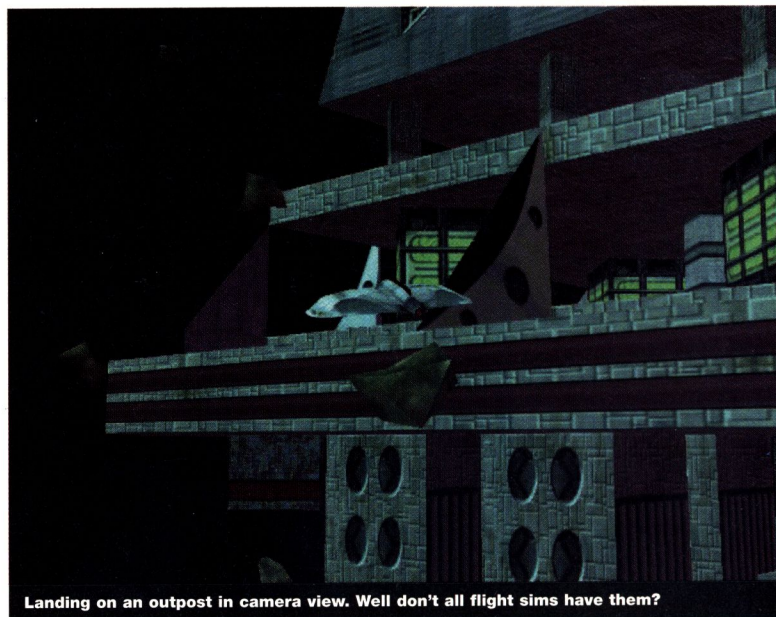
## TRUE SIM OR NOT TRUE SIM?

So how did they come up with the space combat simulation?

"It's not a true sim," explained David. "A real space combat engine would take hours to master – *Interceptor* has much more of an aircraft feel with a bit of inertia here and there to make it more space-like. There are some neat features though – a

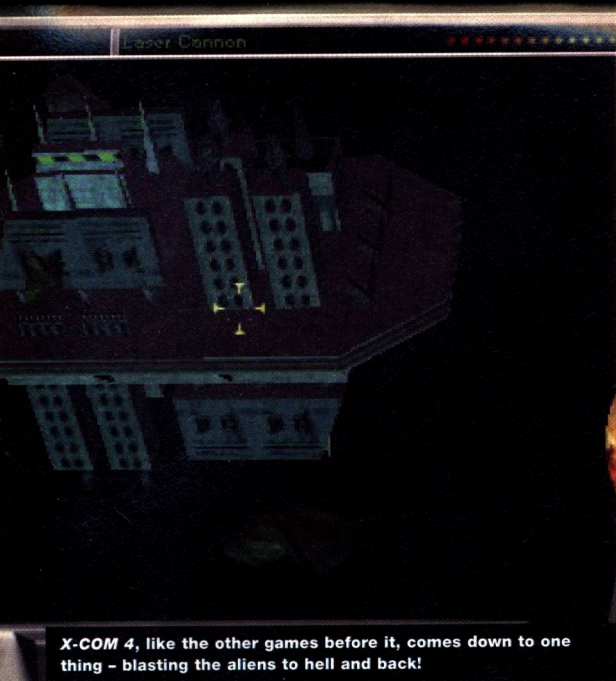


The 3D graphics are out of this world – and well into the next.



Landing on an outpost in camera view. Well don't all flight sims have them?





X-COM 4, like the other games before it, comes down to one thing – blasting the aliens to hell and back!



Knocking out alien bases is what it's all about.

special device that lets you slide left or right, for example and there's even a reverse gear that's great for turning the tables on aliens that are right up your ass."

David is enthusiastic about the game's Artificial Intelligence too. "Wingman AI is excellent – the more experienced pilots are quite capable of carrying out the missions with or without you, so they're good to have around. If you lose a wingman, you'll see a two million dollar craft and a well-trained buddy go up in smoke. That pilot will take ages to replace too. Unfortunately for you, the alien AI is equally good regarding it's pilots, so you can't afford to mess up too much.

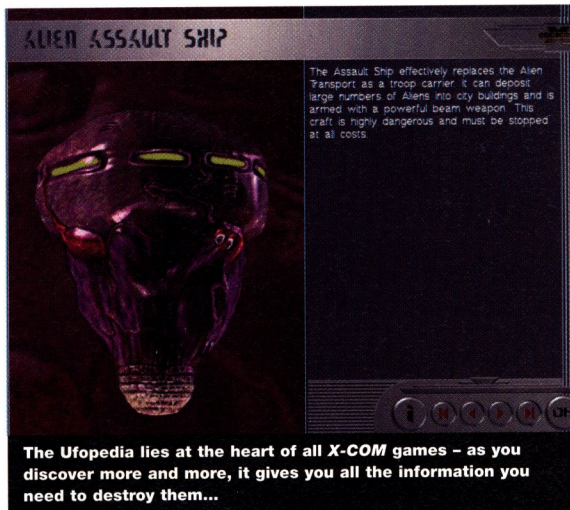
"Your wingmen will improve with experience and they'll always look after you. They don't

shoot through you to get to their targets either, unlike some games I could mention!"

The game's producer is Mike Denman. He assures X-COM fans that the most important quality of the X-COM series is a combination of strategy and resource management – and action.

"In the first three games the action element was tactical combat but in *Interceptor* it's 3D space combat. In future games it'll be something else entirely, though at some point I expect that we'll return to tactical combat."

"The game was designed from scratch by a team that are all X-COM fans. We wanted to take it in a completely different direction but with all the in-depth gameplay X-COM fans love and respect and we have delivered."



The Ufopedia lies at the heart of all X-COM games – as you discover more and more, it gives you all the information you need to destroy them...

## WHAT'S NEW?

X-COM 1 and 2 are basically the same game and although DOS-based, with graphics to match, they're still well worth playing. Both games have three species of alien in common, the Sectoids, Mutons and Ethereals. They don't reappear in *Apocalypse* but look out for them in *Interceptor* behind the controls of the alien spacecraft...



*Interceptor* designer David Ellis points out that the only common thread between the games is the X-COM universe itself. You never see the same weapons and although the ships have similar names, you've got to remember that the three games cover a time span of 90 years.

*Apocalypse* managed the clever manoeuvre of adding very little to the overall gameplay while managing to look absolutely spankingly gorgeous about it – although it did offer the option of real-time combat as opposed to the turn-based mode of the first two games.

There's a lot more depth to the game and more weapons and techniques on offer but underneath it's the same strategy that will win. Critics have called the plots linear but that's missing the point. All X-COM games – including *Interceptor* – are based on the four Rs... You need to recruit soldiers, research new technologies, recover aliens and artifacts – oh, and rub the bastards out before you can make any progress. Yes, it's linear – in that sense that the end result is always the complete destruction of the enemy base or 'queen' but there are lots of different ways of getting there...



Searching a building for aliens in X-COM 3.

## WILL YOU, WON'T YOU?

Try these questions out for size. If you answer yes to 4, 5 or 6 of them, you might be pleasantly surprised by X-COM 4: *Interceptor*. Answer yes to 7 or more questions, and you should get ready to go out and buy it...

- 1 Do you like *X-Wing*, *Wing Commander* or *Privateer* 2?
- 2 Do you fancy yourself as a hotshot pilot?
- 3 Do you long for a say in which missions to launch?
- 4 What did you like about any other X-COM games you've played: *Strong strategy element?* *Research and production management?* *The rich storyline and detailed universe?*
- 5 Do you enjoy moderately-complicated flight simulators?
- 6 Do you prefer *Aliens* to *Buck Rogers in the Twenty Fifth Century*?
- 7 Can you remember a dozen different key presses in the heat of action?
- 8 Do you have a 3Dfx card?

## THE ANDERSON TAPES



PC Zone's deputy editor Chris Anderson, one of the X-COM genre's greatest fans despite years of therapy, remembers an otherwise innocuous day back in 1994 that changed his gaming life for ever.

"After that first unremarkable little package from MicroProse, *UFO: Enemy Unknown*, landed on my desk, my hours of sleep could be counted on one hand," he recalls.

"Its arrival was a bolt from the blue – no fanfare of trumpets and no hordes of PR people buying me drinks – and my expectations had been pretty low, but that night I just couldn't leave it alone. By the early hours of the morning, I'd decided it was the best strategy game ever. Full stop. Yes and that did include Sid Meier's *Civilisation*..."





It might be the fourth in a long line of alien-bashing combat games but *X-COM 4: Interceptor* is like no other game you've ever seen. Imagine, if you can, a cracking visual extravaganza like *Wing Commander* crossed with a down-to-earth productivity and resource management-based game like *Stars!* or even *Civilisation*. Yeah? Well, you're probably not even close.

It's the way the two separate elements of flight combat and strategic planning are combined that really gives *X-COM 4* its huge appeal. Every decision you make in terms of what research to carry out, what you produce and where you position your various craft will reflect on what happens in combat. You can afford to make one or two mistakes but that's about all.

But let's start at the beginning. As *X-COM* commander, you're provided with a single star base in an area known as the Frontier, right on the edge of the known galaxy. Your goals are to explore space, protect the dozens of existing earth outposts owned by

**Have MicroProse managed to create a convincing fusion of graphics, gameplay and loin-girding resource management? *PC Zone* straps on its wings and takes *X-COM 4* for a test flight...**

mining companies, keep the aliens at bay by fighting back wherever possible and to boost your knowledge through research and technical development and discover just what it is that the aliens are up to.

All these goals are well and truly linked and that's always been what makes an *X-COM* game an *X-COM* game. The mining outposts are your main source of income and they'll pay you according to how well you've defended them. Defend them well and the corporations will set up more outposts, making you even more money to invest in weapons and space craft. It is also worth remembering that your pilots are also recruited from the outposts, so the more the merrier.

You can set up extra bases to

provide better cover for clusters of outposts or to push forward the Frontier – deeper into alien-held or unknown territory. Bases can also be upgraded with better and better detectors and their own missile and beam weapon defences.

### DEEP SPACE THREE

From a combat view, you start with just three space craft – the small, fast and highly manoeuvrable Lightning II interceptors but with very basic weapons

and defences. That's not a lot to go around, so you can bunch them together as a fire brigade type force or parcel them out on patrol to defend other outposts and bases.

Once the money starts rolling in and research has started to kick in, the Lightnings can begin to add some punchier weapons. In the meantime you can purchase a few more and look towards saving up for a Firestar or even an Avenger or two when you're ready to take the battle to the bad guys. The X-winder missiles you start out with will undoubtedly kill aliens – if you're good – but you'll find that newer models like the permeator, doppelganger and fusion 'base buster' missiles and elerium torpedoes will all give you measurably better attack capabilities all round. Your standard laser beam weapon is particularly poor when up against the alien ships so rapid laser research is a must. With heavy and Gatling lasers, tracer, phase and plasma pulse cannons, ➔



An X-COM base.





## AVENGER

The Avenger is X-COM's best spacecraft – you just can't get enough of them...

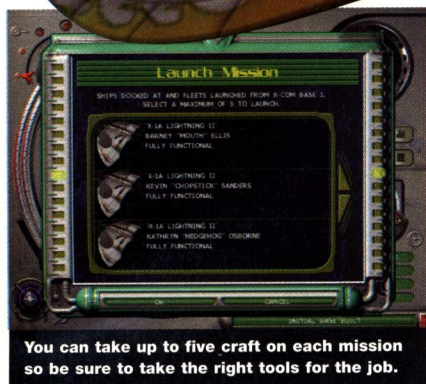
## FIRESTAR

The X-COM equivalent of a fighter-bomber, it can carry out almost any mission.

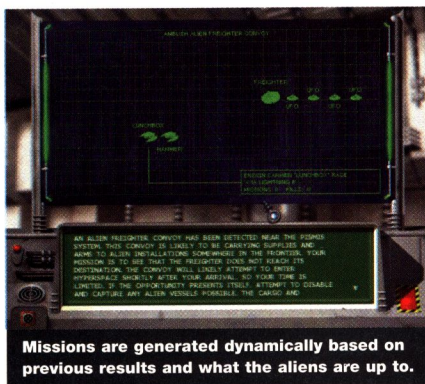


## LIGHTNING

It might look the business but its basic weapons need upgrading fast!



You can take up to five craft on each mission so be sure to take the right tools for the job.



Missions are generated dynamically based on previous results and what the aliens are up to.

## SHIPS AHOY!

Three ships are available to X-COM but each needs to be upgraded as the game goes on. Every ship has different handling characteristics and remember that there's a marked difference in performance when you've got a full weapon load.

### LIGHTNING

Built by the Transtellar Corporation, the X-1A Lightning II was designed specifically for patrol duty on the frontier. Although somewhat vulnerable, it has two beam weapon and two missile weapon hardpoints and is the fastest ship available to X-COM. Armaments and other devices such as cloaking systems can be added when research allows.

This one is designer David Ellis' favourite: "It's great in dogfights. With advanced armour and shields it can stand its ground against even the heaviest alien ships."

### FIRESTAR

The S2 Firestar Interceptor was developed for flexibility. It is fast and manoeuvrable enough to go up against alien saucers but carries enough armament to attack bases and ore processing facilities. It's tri-titanium plated hull gives it better defence and it carries three missile hardpoints and four beam weapons.

### AVENGER

With five missile hardpoints, the Marsec M-3 Stellar Avenger is a tough, powerful bomber that can take on anything the aliens can put in its way. It also boasts a special munitions rack for oversized payloads and can even out-fight smaller ships when upgraded with a graviton pulse drive engine.



A few more 'potent' weapons are all this Firestar needs.

BEAM WEAPON HARDPOINT

BEAM WEAPON LOADOUT

LASER CANNON

MODIFY THE SHIP'S WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT. EXIT THE SCREEN WHEN DONE.



# Baldur's Gate

CHARLIE BROOKER used to think the letters 'RPG' stood for 'Rape and Pillage Game', and avoided the entire genre in disgust. In fact, he used to picket the local Games Workshop, angrily setting fire to copies of *The Hobbit* and the beards of passing customers in protest. Now, several years later, he at last knows the truth – just in time for the great Role-Playing Game revival of 1998.

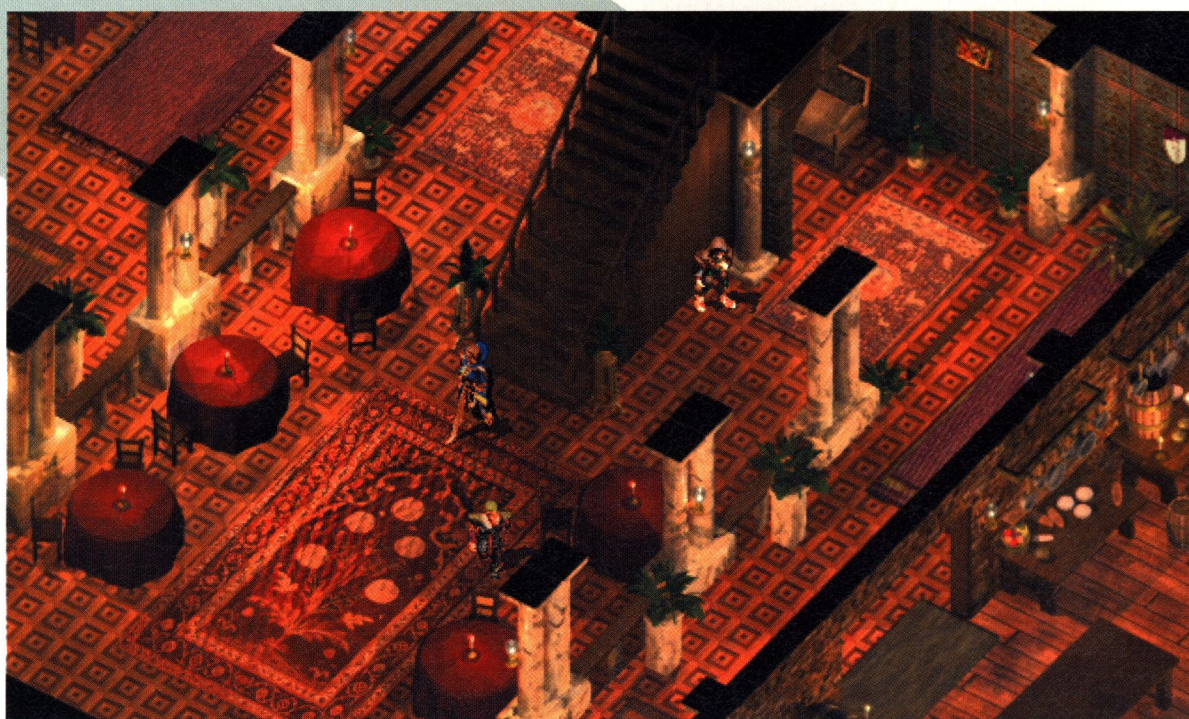
**R**OLE-PLAYING GAMES, IT SEEMS, ARE STAGING A spectacular comeback. Having been roundly ignored by both gamers and publishers in the

clamour for *Quake* clones and *Command & Conquer* wannabes, the humble RPG now looks all set to be the Next Big Thing. In recent months we've seen telling signs which seem to indicate that character stats, experience points, and ludicrously extensive inventories are very much 'in'.

Of course, despite assurances to the contrary, 'cool' in the world of computer games rarely translates into 'cool' in the real world, and it's doubtful whether your more image-conscious friends will ever truly appreciate a lengthy discussion about the pros and cons of including a third-level mage in your party, when they could be discussing something important, like who Goldie's currently shagging, or which magazine cover Denise Van Outen's spreading her legs across this month – then again, in these post-*Final Fantasy VII* days, anything's possible. And here's another reason for dedicated RPG fans to start mewling like excited kittens: *Baldur's Gate* – an unutterably immense serving of red-hot questing and hardcore sword-on-sword action.

## IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE?

From the outset, let there be no confusion on one particular issue: *Baldur's Gate* is a very large game indeed. If it was a hotel, it'd be the MGM Grand. If it was a lump of stone, it'd be the Rock of Gibraltar. If it was an unpopular, loudmouthed blonde, it'd be Vanessa Feltz. It's huge. It spans five CDs. Five CDs! When you've finished playing you can string them together and make a big necklace. It's

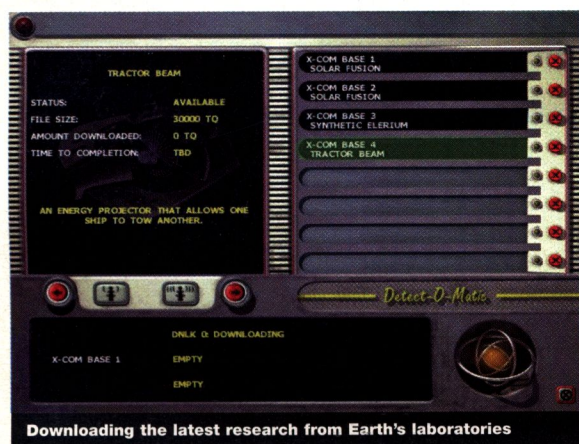


◦ "My goodness," Gregory exclaimed, "this has to be the most opulent branch of Starburger in the land."

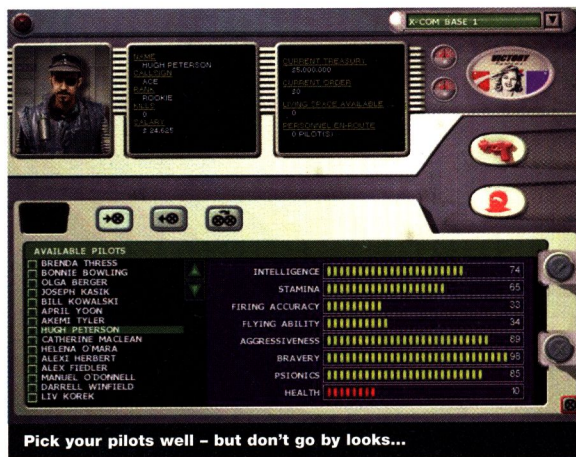




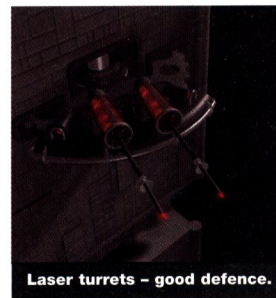
Add modules to bases – missile and beam turrets are a good idea.



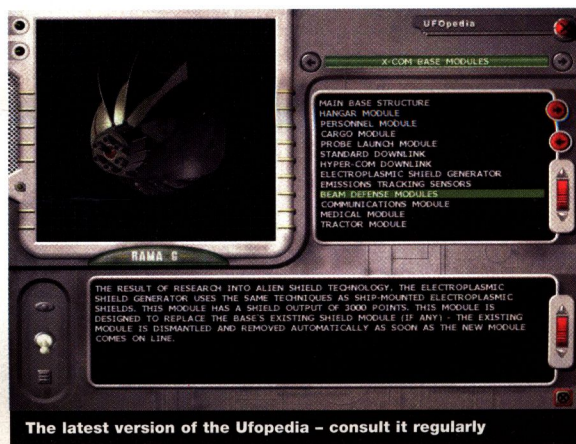
Downloading the latest research from Earth's laboratories



Pick your pilots well – but don't go by looks...



Laser turrets – good defence.



The latest version of the UFOpedia – consult it regularly

destruction. Don't waste a minute – switch to the production and base upgrade screens and get right back to work. They won't leave you alone for too long.

You're limited to taking a maximum of five ships on each mission so you can't rely on swamping the aliens with firepower to win your battles. This can be awkward on attack missions as you've only room for one or two heavy bombers and an escort flight of three but presumably more ships would slow the game down too much.

There is no scripted mission structure to speak of

as you decide whether each engagement will take place or not. That said, you start on the defensive and then as research gets going, and the firepower and knowledge increases, you can start to hit back where it hurts. When and how is up to you but once you discover fragments of alien transmissions alerting you to the aliens' hidden agenda, the missions you fly will begin to have real purpose.

### AI ON THE BALL

The artificial intelligence is already looking good and the aliens won't certainly try to out-maneuvre you when it comes to overall strategy as well as dogfights. They're certainly good at hanging on your tail and staying there...

When and where they strike next is always a surprise. You can send out unmanned probes though to help you keep an eye out, or even launch reconnaissance flights just for the hell of it, provided you watch your fuel. It also helps here if you've got several bases up and running – but remember to make sure that they're all protected, and not just with fighters but with defensive systems, missiles and laser turrets.

The interface isn't the easiest to get to grips with but the look

and feel is great. You won't get anywhere on your first few games, thanks to a lack of funds and a sense of bewilderment at all the tasks you've got to keep an eye on. An option to automate one or two things would be useful but X-COM fans demand total control – you can control just about everything – from manufacturing priorities of each individual item to the numbers of missiles you store on board a base.

There's a strong element of the 50s sci-fi look mixed in with some cleverly designed dials and buttons but MicroProse has probably gone over the top with confirmation dialogues. There are too many and they can get tedious. Music and sound effects are A1 with appropriate beeps and squawks backed up by some atmospheric but non-intrusive use of digitised speech – pilot messages, computer alerts and so on.

The fact that MicroProse has moved X-COM on from isometric tactical battles to a full-blooded space combat sim shows its level commitment to the game and its universe. With the fifth and sixth games already on the drawing board, X-COM 4: Interceptor looks set to pull in not just the hardcore X-COM followers but gamers with more interest in space combat and flight simulators.

Perhaps most surprisingly, especially in view of its massive strategic element, X-COM 4: Interceptor is probably the best-looking and most satisfying space combat sim I've seen so far and it

makes you wonder why the developers of games like X-Wing didn't ditch some of their sexy FMV sections for some decent behind-the-scenes strategy.

Existing X-COM fanatics will tell within minutes that this is first and foremost an X-COM game – it's just that the real-time action, first tasted in Apocalypse, adds a whole new dimension in terms of gameplay. In Interceptor, hand-eye co-ordination is just as important as a good strategic brain. All the resources and production in the world won't help if you can't fly a Straighter straight or hit an alien Wraith interceptor at a couple of thousand yards with a laser – and that is the reason that X-COM Interceptor is currently in a league of its own...

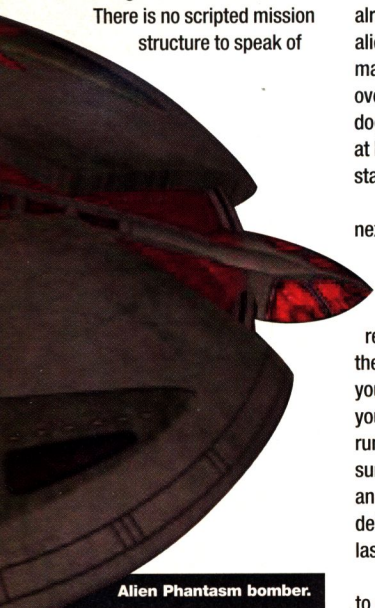
## MULTIPLAYER

How to learn to stop worrying and love the X-COM bomb!

The sophisticated nature of the XCOM Interceptor experience dictates that full-blown network play is unfortunately not feasible. However, XCOM fans with a penchant for multi-player frag-fests will be appeased with the inclusion of a two player head-to-head option which gives you the opportunity to blow each other to bits using any of the ships available in the full game. In this sense it's not entirely dissimilar to the multiplayer options found in games like X-Wing and Wing Commander. The ships can be customised in the same way as in the full game, bringing a tactical element to multi-player shoot-outs.



Plug in for a bit of head to head action using X-COM's finest.



Alien Phantasm bomber.



The MicroProse logo, featuring the word "MICRO" in red and "PROSE" in white, both in a bold, sans-serif font, enclosed within a red rectangular border.

**MICRO PROSE**





**ANY OLD IRON?**

The BattleTech universe unveiled

**THE MAN IN THE IRON MECH**

We talk to BattleTech's creator

**LOOSEN YOUR NUTS...**

...as we get inside MechCommander

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The Making of...

# MechCommander

Real time strategy set in the BattleTech world of Mechs, metal and mayhem

TURN OVER TO SEE THE MAKING OF... **X-COM: INTERCEPTOR**



# MechCommander

# FORGED



BattleMechs at war. 31st Century combat in all its metallic fury.



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**EYES NOT RED ENOUGH YET?**  
*Close the mag and turn it over to reveal our second cover feature – X-COM: Interceptor*

Editor: Philip Fisch  
Designer: Duncan Hemphill  
Writers: Paul Presley, Andrew Wright  
Sales/Promotions Manager: Mike Shepherd  
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**B**ut who gives a toss about BattleTech? If you ask the average man in the street what he knows about BattleTech you'll either get a blank look of incomprehension or, "Summit to do wiv big robots, innit?" Apparently, the BattleTech games never really attained the kind of mass-market popularity of, say, Star Wars or Byker Grove. Or did they?

BattleTech exploded into life in 1984 as a fairly complex tabletop wargame, made from a few cardboard cut-outs atop a crudely drawn paper battlefield. Several

**When a game concept is built around a whole universe and populated by warring high-tech metal assault vehicles, you know your world will move. PC Zone charts the rise of the robots...**

years, a dozen or so expansion packs and a million dice rolls later, it had become a fully-fledged role-playing system.

The background story is one of futuristic warfare, man's colonisation of space and large robots blowing each other up. The year, roughly, is 3050 (although FASA, the game's creators, have an incredibly detailed timeline for events from 2005 onwards – see for yourself at [www.fasa.com](http://www.fasa.com)). Mankind has been split into dozens of separate factions, all intent

on proving that, "My BattleMech is better than your BattleMech". To make things worse, the known universe has just been invaded by a group of 'Clans', all with superior hardware and technology and intent on being just as much of a pain to the humans as the humans are to each other.

## MECHS

The big thing about BattleTech is, of course, the Mechs – thirty-foot war robots piloted by the most elite human warriors. There are over thirty different kinds of BattleMech in the whole universe, all with different attributes and abilities. Imagine a tank on legs, armed with multiple weapon

## BATTLETECH TIMELINE

*A brief history of the big robot phenomenon*

**1984** – *Battledroids* first released (the name is later changed to BattleTech after George Lucas complains).

**1985** – *BattleTech 2nd Edition* released. The rules are refined and enhanced and the overall package is given a glossy overhaul. Anoraks around the world are thrown into the air with joy.

**1986** – *MechWarrior* released, turning the BattleTech wargame system into a fully-fledged role-playing game. The first BattleTech novel – *Decision At Thunder Rift* – is also published.

**1988** – Infocom release *The Crescent Hawk's Inception* – the first BattleTech computer



Don't mention his hump – he's very sensitive and is easily annoyed.



# IN STEEL

types, able to withstand huge amounts of damage, able to do even more damage – in fact, not much like a tank at all. Try imagining Transformers on steroids. That's more like it.

## BIG IS BEST

We have been reliably informed that there are 'millions of BattleTech enthusiasts world-wide' playing in 'a rich and detailed game universe spanning dozens of computer games and over thirty novels.'

Can this be true? Well, yes it is. BattleTech has been going strong for over fifteen years now and it exists in more forms than a piece of Disney merchandising. Boardgames, role-playing games, novels, animated cartoon shows, plastic figures, lead figurines, comic books, card games, biscuit games and finally of course, computer games.

BattleTech proved so popular with gamers that the company Virtual Worlds Entertainment was set up to provide, on a global basis, full-scale VR centres enabling you to experience the

thrill of commanding a thirty-foot walking arsenal of painful death for yourselves.

It all indicates that BattleTech has built up a base of fans who have stuck with it through the

years and slavered after each new incarnation – be it tabletop game, novel or computer simulation – with the excitement of a starved pit-bull in a school playground during National Dress Your Child Up As A Pork Chop Week.

## RESISTANCE IS FUTILE

So, to end on one of those 'full circle' doobies, we ask again – who gives a toss about BattleTech? The answer is an awful lot of Americans. And as with McDonald's, Jerry Springer and basketball, it's never long before popular American culture becomes popular British culture. BattleTech is growing in this country and with games like *MechCommander* to help it along, it looks like being a steady growth. So why not give it a try? There's a wealth of material, all within the world of BattleTech®.

## WHERE NEXT?

*So you want to know more about BattleTech? You even want to try playing it yourself? Where do you go from here? A few links and resources to help you on your way (although these are really just the tip of the mechberg)...*

**Websites:** [www.fasa.com](http://www.fasa.com),  
[www.mechcommander.com](http://www.mechcommander.com),  
[www.virtualworld.com](http://www.virtualworld.com).

**Boardgames/RPGs** (available from most good specialist gaming stores): *BattleTech 4th Edition*, *MechWarrior 2nd Edition*, *CityTech 2nd Edition* (urban warfare rules), *BattleTech: Mercenaries* (a trading card game from *Wizards Of The Coast* – the Magic people).



**Novels:** *Decision At Thunder Rift*, *Mercenary's Star*, *The Warrior En Garde* trilogy, *Lethal Heritage*, *Grave Covenant*.



Above you can see a typical virtual worlds centre, whilst above it is the view that you get from inside one of the pods.

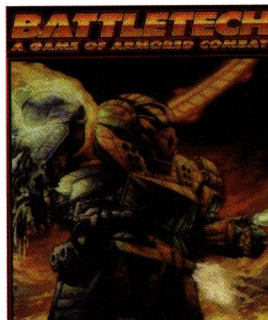


game. Infocom purists wonder what all those moving pictures on the screen are.

**1991** – *MechWarrior® 2nd Edition* is released. The Berol Pencils production line goes into overdrive.

**1994** – *BattleTech 3rd Edition* is released, bringing the game into the nineties.

**1995** – Sierra release *Metaltech: Earthsiege*, a rival large robot computer game series. In response Activision release *MechWarrior 2* – the largest, most expensive and most hyped BattleTech computer game ever. Sierra blub.



**1996** – *BattleTech 4th Edition*. The currently available version, compatible with all the source and rule books released so far.

**1997** – Activision sign up the Heavy Gear license (another rival Mech series) and release a game of the same name. FASA understandably move to

another publisher – MicroProse. Michael Stackpole's novel, *Grave Covenant* (providing the setting for *MechCommander*), is published.

**1998** – MicroProse finally release *MechCommander™*, heralded as the first 'true' RTS BattleTech game. The BattleTech world rejoices.

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# THE MAN IN THE IRON MECH

Fourteen years ago today, Jordan Weisman taught the band to play. Play BattleTech® that is. We talk to the man who started the whole thing off.



In 1984, a young and highly enthusiastic games-player had an idea for a game of his own. Fourteen years later and the BattleTech universe is being enjoyed by millions of fans world-wide. Since MechCommander™, the most ambitious BattleTech computer game to date, is about to be released we thought it would be a good idea to track him down and ask him a few questions concerning real life, the BattleTech universe and everything.

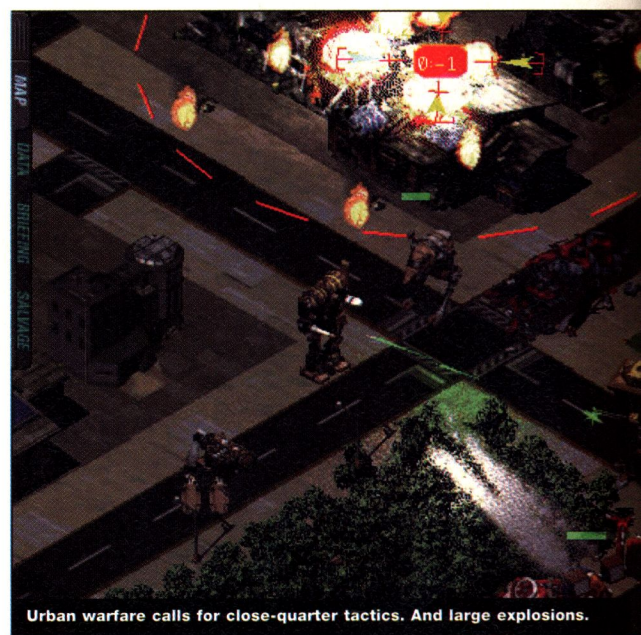
**PC Zone:** So tell us Jordan, just how does someone build their own universe? Just how did it all begin?

**Jordan Weisman:** BattleTech first came visually, as most things I design do. I was at a hobby-show where a number of imported things were being brought in from Japan. There were these model kits from a Japanese giant robot series which I thought had incredibly dynamic and strong visuals. I contacted the people who owned the licenses and said,

"Look, the story isn't something I think is going to be well received here," – it had a very Asian feel in the way it was established and set up. But I thought a very different story could be written around these strong, dynamic visuals of giant, walking tanks.

**PCZ:** Why did the 'Mech theme appeal to you though?

**JW:** I believe, by virtue of their vaguely human shape, they became a kind of natural extension of your power. They



Urban warfare calls for close-quarter tactics. And large explosions.

become a personification of what you want your actions to be. As you climb into this thing, strap yourself in and put on a helmet, it becomes your body. You feel its power, making you want to go and step on your high school, whip out your PPC, or fire across town at the bank that refused your house loan.

**PCZ:** You, uh, seem to have a few unresolved issues there. Would BattleTech be your way of hitting back at the world?

**JW:** Well it's that central theme of arrogant power that makes the 'Mechs so appealing. In essence a BattleMech is a really silly vehicle in many ways. In a real battlefield your whole goal is to get low to the ground. You don't want to represent a high profile because that would equal death. But that's part of their power. It's part of their arrogance. Standing up, beckoning to all challengers that it can take it and dish it out.

**PCZ:** How has the game, the universe even, evolved

throughout the years?

**JW:** BattleTech, from the very beginning, was a dynamic universe in which the story continues to unfold. Each product adds to that story, whether it's a novel or game.

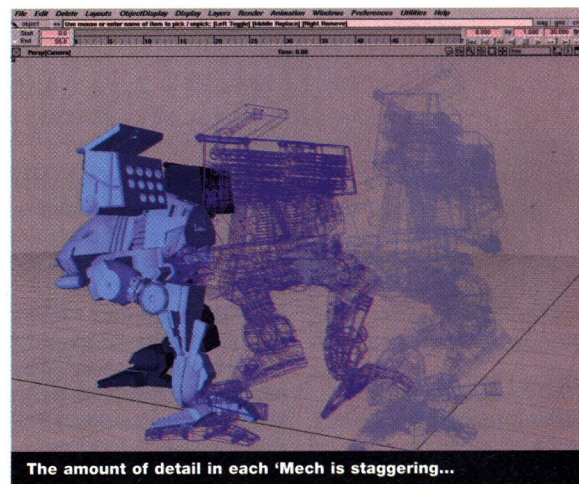
One of the things that is important when creating a universe is that it's constantly turning. A cold war makes a very bad gaming environment, so you need to make sure that there is a rationale for why conflict continues. The story needs to evolve and change. That is one of the things BattleTech does very well. It has enough players with enough diversity of motivation to constantly keep this week's war new and different.

**PCZ:** Are you surprised that it's lasted so long?

**JW:** Always. When you create something, you dream, "Oh man, this will be great. People will love it. It'll last forever." But you never expect that to happen. It's constantly surprising and very rewarding to see that people

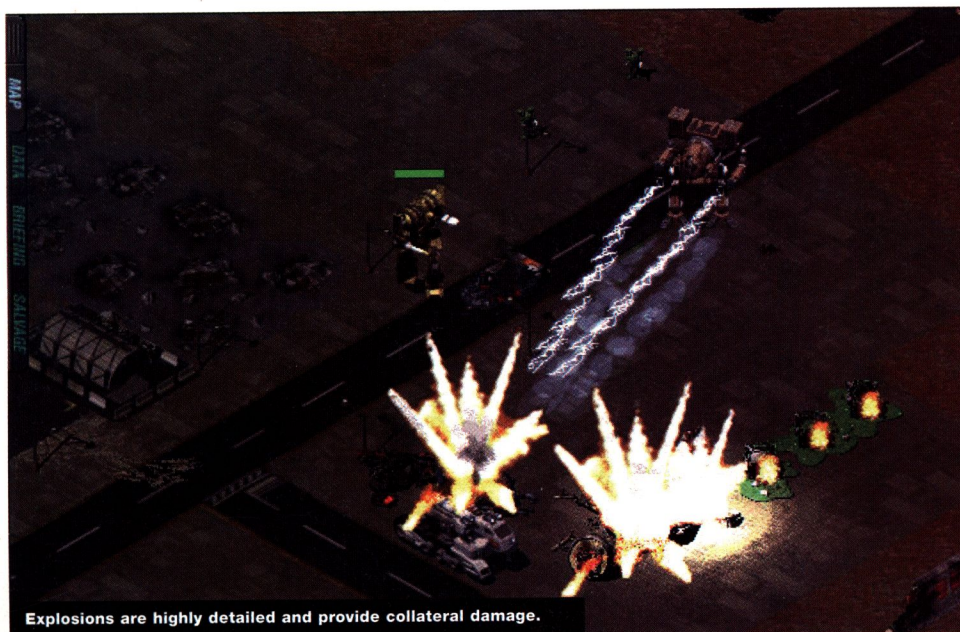


A city at war. Air strikes can be a handy tool.



The amount of detail in each 'Mech is staggering...





Explosions are highly detailed and provide collateral damage.

continue to care about it.

**PCZ:** It hasn't really achieved a widespread, mass-market, 'Star Trek' kind of appeal though has it?

**JW:** I'm a different type of storyteller. I tell stories that people interact with. A movie-maker tells stories that you witness, but don't interact with. You don't become the hero or heroine. That interactive nature to my storytelling has historically meant the venues we worked in are always, for lack of a better word, called games.

To get to the vast market in the form of a movie or television presentation, you basically have to move from the smaller audience of gamers to a larger, less interactive audience. I want to talk to people whose minds are actually engaged in what they do, rather than passively observing. I love movies, but to me it's more engaging when you actually get to be involved. So, it's been an uphill battle in that respect.

**PCZ:** What do you feel needs to be done to change that audience perception?

**JW:** What we won't do is dumb the BattleTech universe down. That doesn't serve our fans or us. If it happens, it will happen for the right reasons. More than ever before, there are people who work in film or TV who realise that there is an audience for intelligent shows, like Babylon 5 or The X-Files for instance.

**PCZ:** So where do you see BattleTech in five years time?

**JW:** Fictionally it's going to be really different. For the last five years the story arc has been very concerned with the invasion of the Clans, and the Inner Sphere's response to that invasion. *MechCommander* is the beginning of the end of the chapter where the Inner Sphere starts retaking its territory from the Clans. Over time, the Clans become the lesser element in the story over all. This is where the story's going, but tune in next week to find out more.

**PCZ:** What about the 'product'?

**JW:** I think if we all manage to do our jobs right, then there will eventually be more people as more people become involved in interactive entertainment. More people who will be attracted to the interactivity that BattleTech can offer.

I'd also like the challenge presented by trying to adapt BattleTech to a linear format for television or film. My foremost goal remains on the interactive side. The big battleground for me now is a large persistent-universe Internet game. It may take a couple of years to get there, but that's where my aspirations lead for BattleTech.

**PCZ:** Just how much control do you still have over the different elements of the BattleTech world?

**JW:** Well we get together annually to plot out the next several years of unfolding fictional events, the events that drive the universe forward. I'm still very much involved with that whole process.

I'm involved with the fictional aspects all the way across, whether it's in novel, board game or computer game form. Trying to keep the BattleTech universe compelling is one of my main responsibilities.

**PCZ:** And how much involvement did you have with *MechCommander*?

**JW:** My involvement with *MechCommander* was contributing to the design of certain elements, producing the opening cinema, which I helped write, as well as the overall story with Tom Dowd.

**PCZ:** Finally, are there ever times when you regret starting the whole BattleTech thing off in the first place?

**JW:** Denny [Thorley - FASA Interactive CEO] often jokes I should've started religions instead of designing games, because of the loyal followings that they inspire. I guess I could have gone the L. Ron Hubbard route, but there you go.

## DID YOU KNOW?

*Little rivets of 'Mech info.*

Each 'Mech has over 100,000 frames of animation.

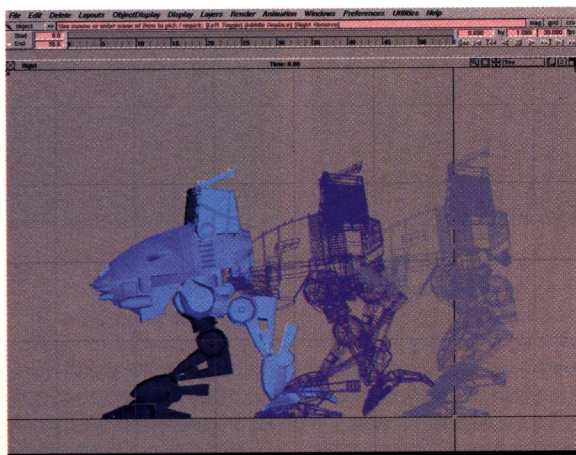
Virtual World gaming centres operate in over ten sites in the US, as well as Japan, Canada and Australia. There was one in England (in London's swinging Trocadero centre) but it closed down half a year ago when SEGA bought the place.

The first BattleTech computer game - *The Crescent Hawk's Inception* was coded by a little-known team called Westwood studios. And, surprise surprise, it was a top down strategy game. Sort of.

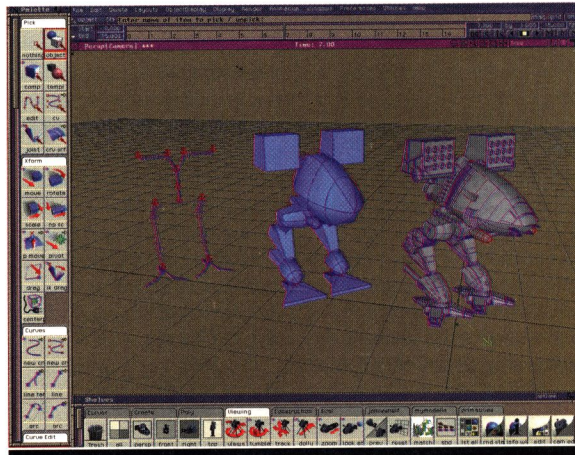
The rules for the BattleTech game have more volumes than the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.



There are, in fact, two BattleTech-inspired films - RobotJox and Crash & Burn. Unfortunately, both are worse than sitting through a Police Academy marathon (despite the former being directed by Stuart "Re-Animator" Gordon).



...with over 100,000 frames of animation in each.



For realistic movement, each 'Mech has a skeletal structure.



# LOOSEN YO

...And climb inside. So that's the background, what about the game?

**B**y now the words BattleTech® and MechWarrior® should hold no fear for you (unless you skipped straight to this page from the cover in which case you're probably confused, upset and more than a little scared already. That'll teach you). *MechCommander* plunges you, metallic foot joints first, into the heady world of top-down, real-time strategy, putting you in command of an entire platoon of mechanical killing machines from the 31st century.

The storyline is taken from the Michael Stackpole BattleTech novel, *Grave Covenant*. Basically, a force of warlike Clans are starting to invade the known galaxy and as Commander of the elite Zulu Company of the First Davion Guards (one of mankind's most skilled fighting forces), you are tasked with heading off one such clan, The Smoke Jaguar Clan no less (yes, I knew you'd be impressed), before their main invasion fleet arrives.

## IT'S A DRAG, MAN

One of *MechCommander*'s key features is the ability to totally customise your forces before each battle starts. The 'Mechs have been designed along



Line of sight is all important in warfare, so use cover wisely.

'modular' lines, meaning you can equip whatever combinations of weapons, armour and field equipment you see fit. The only thing to worry about is the weight of your final 'Mech. Each mission starts with your troops being released from a dropship. However, each dropship can only carry a certain weight so you have to take this into account before you start. It's a balancing act combined with a juggling routine mixed with a piece of experimental street theatre. Er, except for the last bit.

The mission briefings take place at your headquarters from where you have full access to the

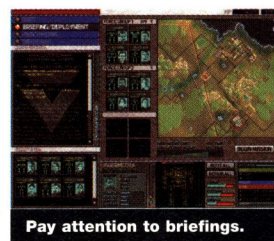
latest military intelligence, equipment and repair bays and purchasing options (including weapons, new 'Mechs and mercenary warriors if your pilots are getting sparse). This might all sound pretty complex but it's presented in a straight-forward 'drag and drop' manner. Want to add a weapon? Just drag it to the 'Mech of your choice. Want to change pilots between that Centurion and the Cougar? Drag 'em over.

## THEY'VE GOT THE SMARTS

Start a mission and the first thing that will probably go through your



Multiple teams enable you to vary your strategies.



Pay attention to briefings.



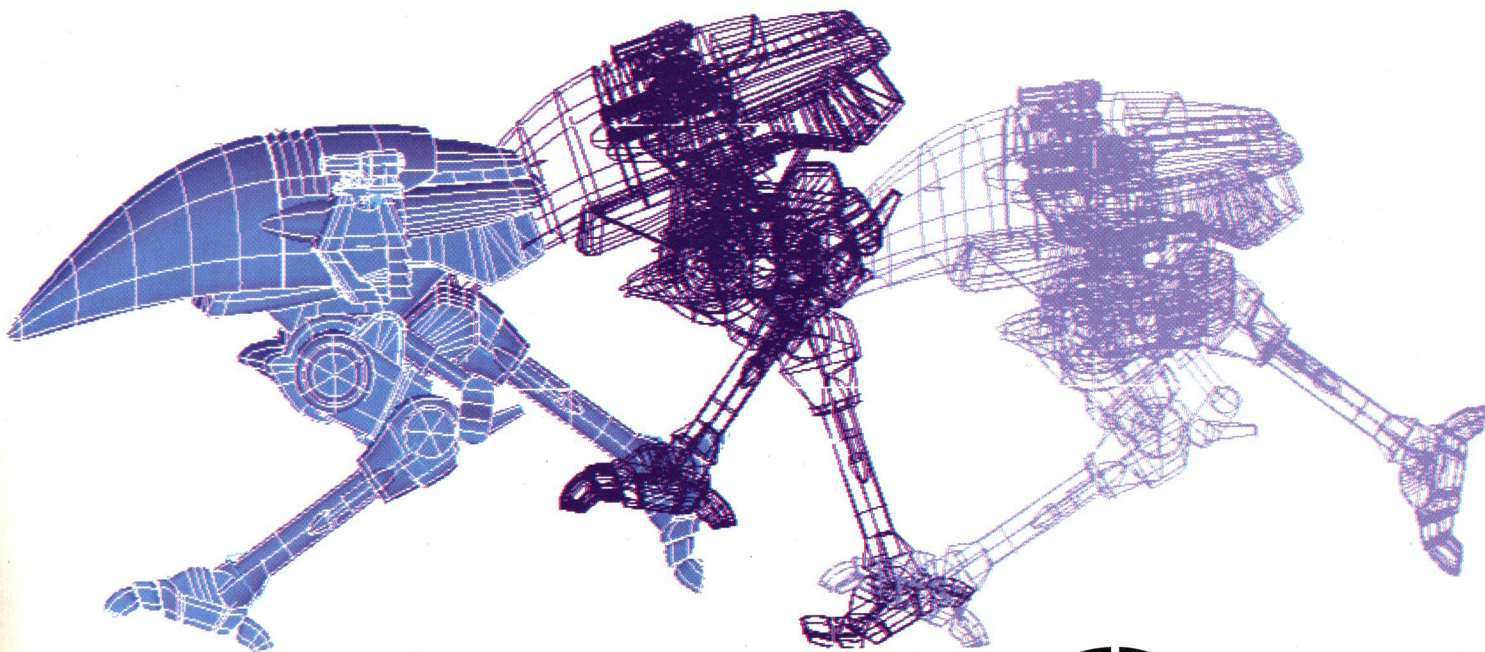
A pitched battle, yesterday.

mind is, "Oh for the love of Peter Andre, not another *Command & Conquer* clone. Is there no originality left in this god-forsaken games industry? Pass me a poker, I want to gouge my eyes out in disgust." But while real-time strategy games may all be dancing to similar graphical

tunes, it's what goes on behind the scenes that counts.

*MechCommander* sports something called the Advanced Brain Language. What is it? How does it work? We asked technical lead programmer Frank Savage to explain. "It is an interpreted language, like Java, which can be





# OUR NUTS...

PC Zone takes the lid off **MechCommander™**.

## 'MECHS ON PARADE

Let's take a closer look at the stars of the show – the 'Mechs. MechCommander features more than you see here, but we wouldn't want to give everything away, would we?

**FIRESTARTER** – Built for urban combat, the Firestarter's *raison d'être* is to fight at short range in confined spaces. Its weapon of choice – surprise, surprise – is a flame thrower.

**RAVEN** – Laden with the latest in sensor equipment, the Raven is ideal for nipping ahead of your main force and scouting for trouble. It won't last long in a fight though. Wuss.

**HOLLANDER** – The Hollander is one of the few 'Mechs to be able to carry a Gauss cannon – a weapon of such awesome

destructive power that the government have actually banned us from telling you about it in case you decide to build one.

**CATAPULT** – Because of a large rack of long-range missiles on its shoulders, the Catapult is used as a fire-support 'Mech,

raining death from above while its comrades wade in and do all the real work.

**HUNCHBACK** – The Hunchback is a low-down dirty brawler. Despite carrying a modicum of distance weapons, it's really best suited for short-range fighting. Get it in close then watch them all fall down.

**JAGERMECH** – There's nothing the JagerMech pilot likes more than standing a long way from its target and letting rip with a host of long-range lasers, cannons and

missiles. If anything does manage to get in close though, they'll find it has a heavy armour structure as well.

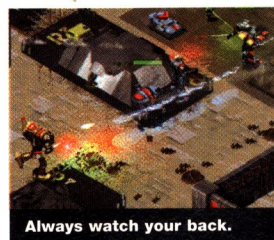
**AWESOME** – Big. With a capital huge. The Awesome lives up to its name by having masses of armour on

top of a high-powered weapons array. It's job is to lead large battles from the front so if you do see one, it won't be for long.

**ATLAS** – The only thing bigger than an Awesome is an Atlas. It carries more weapons than Arnie and boasts more armour than actually exists today. The game's manual sums it all up – fear it!



Two levels of zoom lets you get right into the thick of the action.

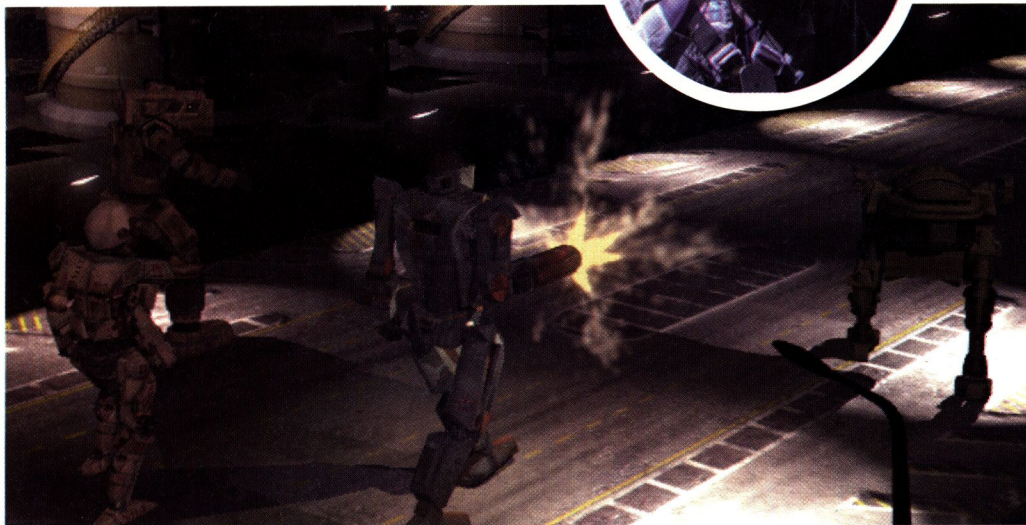


changed without recompiling the entire game," Savage explains. "The end result is that the AI for the game can be put through many iterations without a large amount of programmer involvement. This means that much of the mission design and enemy AI aspects of the game

can improve quickly and, as such, are made to look far more intelligent than the average game in the genre."

The upshot is a game with an enemy that behaves more like a human player than we've ever seen before. At least that's the theory. "Players are going to have to work really hard in order to outsmart the enemy 'Mechs," boasts Savage. "For example, for the first time facing counts. Enemy 'Mechs will try their damndest to prevent the player from getting behind them, where their armour is weakest. Our goal was to ensure players forgot they were playing against a





☞ machine and feel instead like they were playing against an enemy commander."

## IN THE GAME

The drag-and-drop theme carries over into the main game, with control of your 'Mechs travelling along the familiar and well-trod RTS route. There are plenty of subtle differences that developers

FASA are hoping will really make *MechCommander* stand out from the crowd. For one thing your 'Mechs can target individual sections of their opponents. Remove an enemy's legs, for instance, and he'll be forced to sit there, stranded while you dance around him, toying with his very life as a cat toys with a mouse. 'Mechs also have three ranges

of firepower. Long, medium and short range attacks all provide different strategic options, especially as some 'Mechs have better weapons in different positions. The Hunchback, for instance, has superb, heavy armour and can therefore afford to get in really close to opponents, with devastating effect. Luckily some 'Mechs can be equipped

with jumpjets (albeit at the expense of weapons and armour) to help them to cover large distances in a single bound. What FASA are really counting on though is the characterisations of the MechWarriors themselves. Each pilot has a different personality and their combat ratings will grow as the missions progress. Since you only start

with a handful of pilots and have limited opportunities to replace them should they become char-grilled MechBurgers, you're expected to form an attachment to these brave souls and weep tears of bitterness should you lose one. Combining the right warrior and the right 'Mech in the right situation is also paramount to a successful mission.

## A SAMPLE MISSION

Allow us to demonstrate more clearly the way *MechCommander* works as Obergruppenführer Presley leads his troops into battle. Into the valley of death and all that...



**1** The mission briefing. Three objectives: destroy a gas pumping station, capture a supply base, then run like girly 'Mechs to the extraction point. It's vital we choose the right 'Mechs and the right crew for this one.



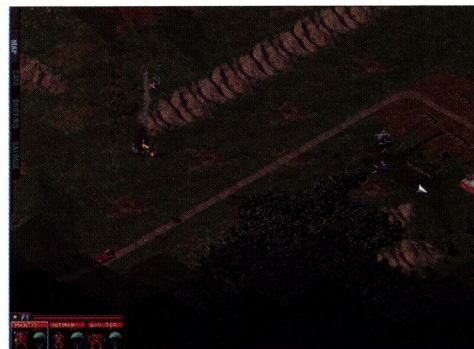
**2** A quick stop in the 'Mech bay to ensure that all the right weapons are fitted to the 'Mechs. I'm not too sure about the Firestarter. It appears to have some battle damage and bent armour. It's a twisted Firestarter, in fact (*Terrible. Keep it up - Ed.*).



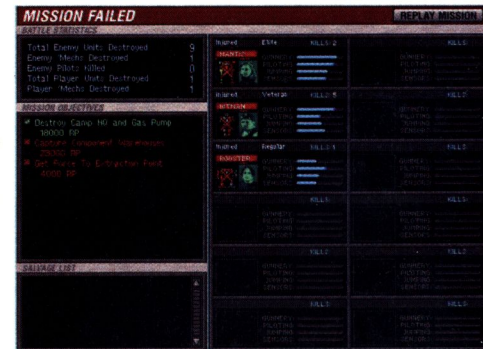
**3** Typical. The mission has only just started and we find ourselves under attack. Luckily it was only a young child armed with a stick, but you can never be too careful. A short-range missile volley please troops. Spare the rod, and all that.



**4** Okay, we've made it to the first objective, the pumping station. Trouble is the enemy have very unfairly left it guarded. A squadron of tanks is soon taken care of but Rooster has taken some damage and has started crying.



**5** Unfortunately the next target is being guarded by a couple of enemy 'Mechs. Uh oh. We destroyed one of them, but at both Rooster and Hitman's expense. Without the backup, Mantis was no match for the remaining 'Mech. Ejecting!!!



**6** So, three 'Mechs lost, three warriors injured, three 'Congratulations On Vanquishing Your Enemy' victory cakes sent back to the MechBakery. Better try again, this time with a different set of pilots and different 'Mechs.





## GROW WITH IT

Fortunately the missions have a sensible learning curve to them, so casualties are more down to your own negligence than unfair game balance. The story is set at the start of the Smoke Jaguar Clan's invasion, at a time when they're still setting up their advanced outposts and scouting the land ahead. Consequently at the start of *MechCommander* you have fairly simple tasks such as cutting off communication routes or supply trains. With successful missions come rewards in the form of Resource Points. RPs can be spent on everything from repairs and replacement equipment to brand new 'Mechs and the recruiting of mercenary MechWarriors.

As the game progresses and the missions get harder, you'll find yourself facing bigger and better enemy divisions until,

ultimately, you take to the field of battle controlling three divisions of 'Mechs in a decisive battle that will shape the history of mankind for ever more. No pressure.



## THE REAL FIGHT

*MechCommander* is obviously going to go head first into a packed world of C&C-style strategy games. In its favour are the globally-popular BattleTech connections, the ambitious ABL system, the concept of actually

caring about whether your troops live or die and the sheer thrill of watching thirty-foot tanks smacking the hell out of each other with gay abandon. FASA are confident enough that RTS and BattleTech fans alike will not be disappointed. "More than 60 real-time strategy games will release in 1998. As a result, the need for break-through innovation is greater than ever," explains FASA Interactive CEO Denny Thorley. He believes the game has innovation in abundance. "No other game features *MechCommander's* unique logistical planning, true resource persistence and challenging tactical gameplay. Judging from the feedback we have received from real-time strategy players, we are offering a new experience. Also, I believe no game has been able to capture the inherent drama of the BattleTech universe as well as this."

## FULL METAL VIDEO

*One of the most impressive aspects about MechCommander's production is the amount of time being spent on the visual style. Todd Labonte, FASA's lead animator gave us his thoughts.*



**PC Zone:** What influenced the style of the 'Mechs?  
**Todd Labonte:** Well, the basic design is generally pretty well laid out by the various Technical Readouts from the paper game. However, transferring them to the "real world" of 3D

graphics presents its own challenges. We try to stay true to the spirit of the design, while making concessions for little details (increased degrees of freedom for the legs, for example). As for detailing, we try to give a battered, 'used' look to the 'Mechs. We reference vehicles from WWII, like tanks that were banged up and personalised by their crews.

**PCZ:** How do you stop it looking like every other real-time strategy game out there?

**TL:** I think we will be set apart by the realism of our graphics. By that I mean our terrain and building art is quite naturalistic and identifiable. It's not a fantasy sci-fi world. There are huge lasers and radar arrays, but there are also factories and dirty warehouses and a nice sense of gritty reality. That's *BattleTech*.

**PCZ:** Was it hard to fit such large 'Mechs into this type of limited-space gaming environment?

**TL:** The 'Mechs are rendered and detailed as believably as possible and the sheer fidelity of the animations are a clear standout. Each 'Mech is animated with individual attention to its personality and combat role. When you see a Masakari for the first time, you don't have to look in the manual to know that it's gonna kick your ass. The walk cycle itself says that!

**PCZ:** Why did you go with live-action FMV over pre-rendered animation for the opening cinema?

**TL:** We decided to use real live humans to nail home the point that these are real people in the 'Mechs you are commanding, and that you, the MechCommander, are a real person as well, not a guiding spirit or other omniscient force.

**PCZ:** Also, why haven't you called it simply an intro sequence like everyone else? Is there a design philosophy at work here?

**TL:** Our philosophy is to give *MechCommander* a sense of drama. This is true for the all the animation in the game as well as the opening cinema. Before we animated a single scene or cast the actors, we spent time planning and mocking up the opening cinema to ensure that it played as an effective story. Pacing, music, dialogue, camera placement were tried and retried until it all fit. We storyboarded and created digital animatics complete with stand-in 'Mechs and people sliding around in a very simple form so that we could all get a sense of the big picture.

## MUSIC MAESTRO PLEASE

Music may be able to soothe the savage beast, but FASA are hoping that their impressively dramatic score will also be able to urge it on in a fight. We spoke to Duane Decker, Sound Designer...

**PC Zone:** How important are the music and sound effects to the game?

**Duane Decker:** I can't imagine a world without music and sound. Everything around us treats our ears to a cacophony of sound. Although sound is more subliminal than sight, it has been proven to have more of an impact on us emotionally. The goal, right from the start, was to make the player believe they were in the BattleTech universe. Music and sound are just two elements in the bigger picture. A great game must also integrate story line, game play, user interface and graphics in order to totally immerse the player. Lose any of these elements and you will come up short of a great experience.

**PCZ:** What influences were there on the game's music?

**DD:** I had the opportunity to develop a style and instrument set specifically for this project. In order to stir up feelings of

this civilisation, a combination of traditional, world and synthetic instruments were used. The instrumentation has a pronounced impact on how the themes are developed and orchestrated. I also listened to a lot of movie soundtracks. A wide variety from Terminator to Blade Runner to Star Wars. The most influential was probably Conan the Barbarian though, for its minor modes and beautiful instrumentation.

**PCZ:** How blurred is the line between composing for films and composing for games?

**DD:** I believe that games like *MechCommander* are really interactive movies. They provide entertainment and allow the player to escape to a different time and place. It follows that the score has certain qualities of film scores. Like a good film score, it should be almost transparent to the player. It is there to provide emotional cues. Shouldn't you feel a bit nervous when commanding your 'Mechs to follow a road without knowing what lies ahead? Does your adrenaline start to pump in the heat of battle? If I've done my job correctly, these emotions will be much stronger and envelop you in that distant universe.







**MICRO PROSE**

# MECHCOMMANDER