



**THE DETAILS**

**DEVELOPER** Digital Anvil  
**PUBLISHER** Microsoft  
**WEBSITE** www.microsoft.com/games/freelancer  
**OUT** November 2002

**WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?**

- The spiritual successor to *Privateer*, from the creator of *Wing Commander*
- Should appeal to *Elite* fans, while remaining accessible to newcomers
- Rich and interactive story, a huge universe to explore as well as dynamic characters
- Full multiplayer universe



Light years ahead...

**FREELANCER**

**CV**

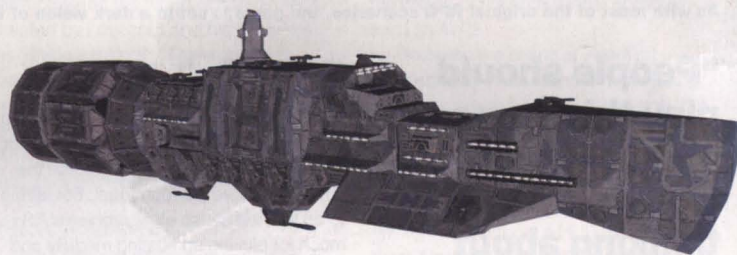


**DIGITAL ANVIL**

Founded by Chris Roberts (and chums) after his days at Origin, Texas-based Digital Anvil are now wholly owned by Microsoft Games Studio and have only ever released one game. So what happened to the other three?

- 1996** Chris Roberts leaves Origin for Digital Anvil, followed soon after by brother Erin, and *Crusader: No Remorse* producer Tony Zurovec.
- 1997** *Starlancer*, *Conquest*, *Loose Cannon* and *Freelancer* are all in production.
- 1999** *Freelancer* is shown to a select few at E3 and wins awards for the best game of the show. *Wing Commander - The Movie* however fails to win any Oscars.
- 2000** *Starlancer*, the prequel to *Freelancer* is released. It's a fine game but nobody buys it. Digital Anvil is bought by Microsoft and Chris Roberts moves on. *Conquest* and *Loose Cannon* are dropped by Microsoft and rumours persist that *Freelancer* could also be canned.
- 2001** Erin Roberts reveals his next project as *Brute Force* for the Xbox. Two old DA games, *Frontier Wars* and *Loose Cannon*, are picked up by Ubi Soft. *Conquest* turns out to be pretty good.
- 2002** Ubi Soft is still working on *Loose Cannon*, but it's *Freelancer* from Microsoft that everyone is looking forward to.

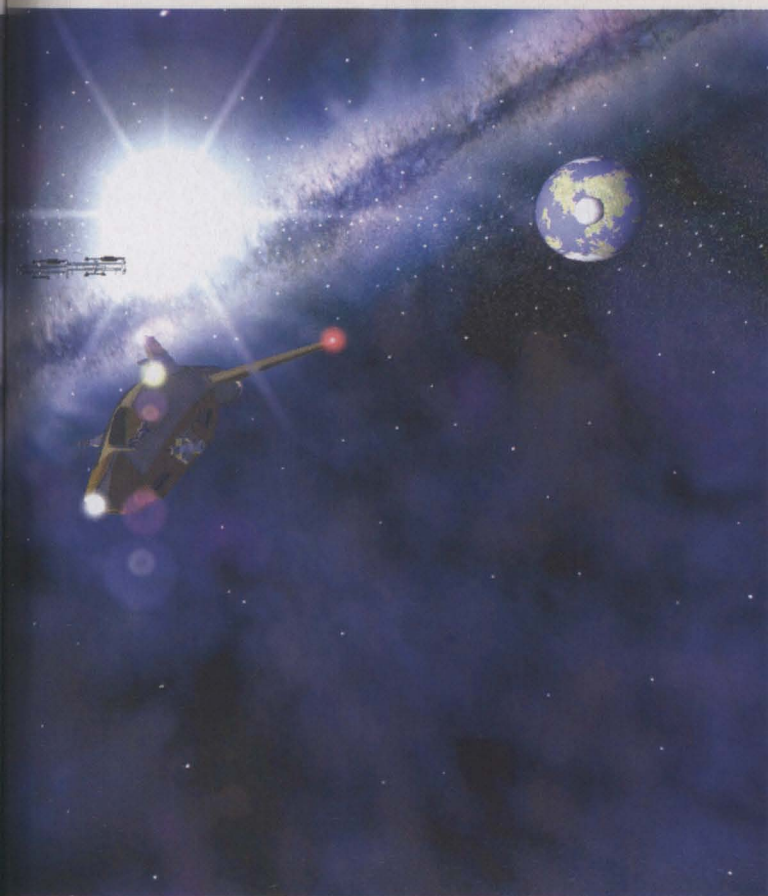
It's been five years in the making, it's the biggest space sim since the original *Elite* and *Richie Shoemaker* thinks it could be alright



**WE'RE NOT** in the business of guaranteeing scores, hence the loss of a cover exclusive every now and then. However, there are a few games that you come across, an elite few, where after just a few minutes play you know you are playing a future classic. *Freelancer* is one of them.

First unveiled in May 1999, *Freelancer* was the brainchild of Chris Roberts, creator of all things *Wing Commander*. It was for me the best game on show at that year's E3, the best game I'd seen since *Half-Life* and, more importantly, destined to become the best space sim since the original *Elite*. Watching him play through some very early missions, I was absolutely slack-jawed at what I saw, and thrilled by the plans Roberts had for his all-new

assault on the space-trading genre. I asked him at the end of the demonstration when would the game be out? "At the end of 2001," he said. "At the earliest." Since then, of course, Chris Roberts' role on *Freelancer* has diminished somewhat. December 2000 saw Digital Anvil, the studio he founded to create the game, fall into the hands of Microsoft, and Roberts' role since has been only an advisory one. To its credit however, Microsoft has stuck by the game, slowly and surely filling in the gaps and despite initial fears to the contrary, has pretty much stuck to the original blueprint, thanks, among many others, to the presence of *Freelancer's* original lead designer and now Roberts' successor as producer, Phil Wattenbarger. Perversely,



**Freelancer's graphical beauty is turning everyone's head.**

we can take some solace in the fact that *Freelancer* will only be a year late. Eighteen months ago it looked like the game might never see the light of day.

#### POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE OF SPACE

Apart from the upheaval of Microsoft's Borg-like assimilation of the team, there are many reasons for *Freelancer's* delay; reasons now evident having played the game for a short time and spoken at length to *Freelancer's* program manager Alan Hartman.

The first thing that hits you is how incredibly diverse it is graphically. No more do we have to endure in our space games a black backdrop, pocked with white pixels and the occasional purple swirl. In *Freelancer*, space is as beautiful as you imagine it to be. Moreover, rather than travel through an endless tunnel of stars towards a distant nebula (knowing full well

you'll never make it), here you can cruise from one end of the universe to the other, passing through dust clouds and nomadic asteroid fields that to those who might stick to the regular trade routes appear as distant landmarks. Each system of stars – their planets, moons and man-made stations are all linked by jumpgates – but rather than have each system as a self-contained 'level', the entire game universe is mapped as one. Hidden in deepest space, perhaps, will be secret bases and ships – the stuff of online legends – much like *Elite's* mythical Generation Ships that may or may not have ever existed. Some people love that kind of thing.

#### HOUSE PARTY

But exploration isn't what *Freelancer* is about, not initially anyway. Sequel to the enjoyable if somewhat formulaic *Starlancer* (reviewed issue 91), the game picks up from its predecessor with the

## "The main aim is to become the ultimate bad-ass freelancer"

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PROGRAM MANAGER

Alliance now divided between four main houses, each based loosely on old Earth civilisations: the morally upstanding Kusari (Japan), the technically advanced Rheinland (Germany), the capitalist House Liberty (USA) and industrial beer-swilling House of Bretonia (Blighty). Starting off in Liberty space with a basic Ford Fiesta of a spaceship and a small stack of credits, where you go from there is – in the true *Elite* tradition – up to you, but the main aim is, in Hartman's words: "To become the ultimate bad-ass freelancer."

#### EVERYONE ON A MISSION

For those who become disorientated and confused unless they're told what to do, *Freelancer* will also feature a tightly focused story, set around 13 key missions, many of which will be split up into small bite-sized chunks. At any time however you can elect to go off on your own, take on smaller escort missions for cold hard cash, trade valuable commodities between the game's 200 planets, bases and cities or just turn on anyone who comes across your path.

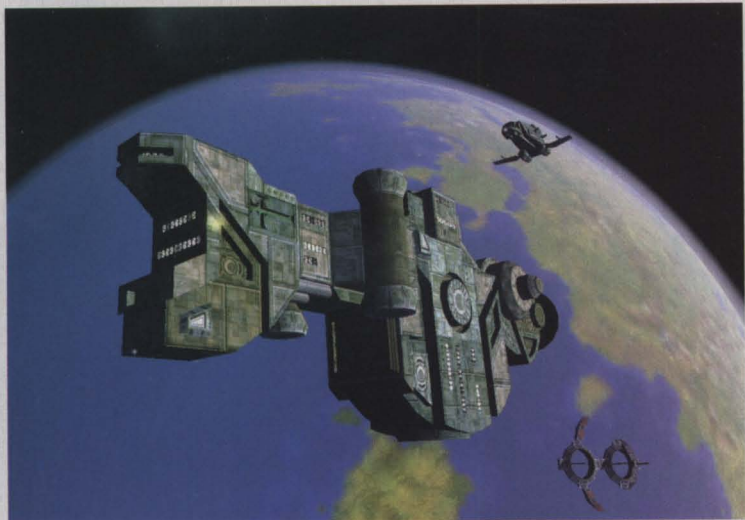
"The story is linear, but the universe is wide-open," says Hartman. "We've been talking for all these years about building this vast universe that is just alive, but only now is it really happening: armadas, traders, the four major and numerous minor factions generating situations – where for example pirates may be attacking a naval outpost, and you can just get involved or fly on by."

The dynamics of the *Freelancer* universe has perhaps been one of the biggest hurdles Digital Anvil has had to contend with. Each ship has a character flying it, and each character has their own aims and allegiances with each of the 48 factions in the game.

"You'll start knowing some of the pilots by their reputation, and in the same way your reputation will precede you," says Hartman. "You can go off in the world and just focus on being, say, a pirate, and the pirate factions may try and recruit you while all the others will hate you. You can be friends with certain factions and make enemies of others, or try and stay neutral to everyone. You can do whatever you want. You and everyone else in the game are basically on a mission."

#### SOUND AND VISION

It's difficult to gauge just how convincing the AI is at this stage, but while we'll have to wait to test out the gameplay, the graphics have already been turning heads. The visual interface appears sleek, simple and modern, the ship and station designs are suitably varied and the sense of scale light years ahead of any current games. Most importantly, to move the adventure along, rather than boring text messages or grainy video, Digital Anvil



To dock with planetary buses you must fly through docking gates.

has created a stunning character animation system featuring around four hours of actual story footage, plus all the other real-time cinematics that are generated on the fly whenever you land or go to talk to people in bars or stations to ask for information or missions.

Less obvious but just as important are the small innovations Digital Anvil has forged. In a sense it all comes back to variety and focus. As is usual in space combat games, you can jump from system to system via gates, but within each system there is a network of trade lanes; high-speed ringed superhighways where ships can quickly jump between stations and planets. And like *Elite*'s infamous witchspace, the trade routes can be a costly way of getting about.

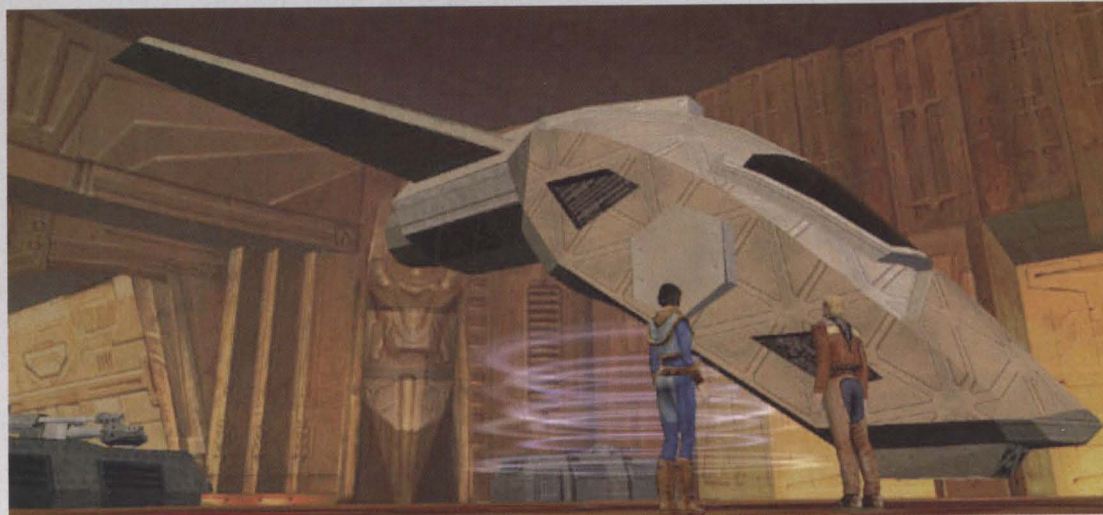
"The idea behind the trade lanes is to give the game points of focus," says Hartman. "If I'm a pirate I can hide out in a debris field near a trade route, shoot one of the jump nodes on the trade lane, which will disable it for a short period of time and then when ships come along they will have to drop out. I can then take out the transports and hide back into the debris field."

#### PRIVATEER PLUS

As you progress, building up fortunes and knocking down reputations, you will of course begin to upgrade your ship: adding weapons, restocking missiles, patching on-board tactical software – whatever you need to increase the functionality of your craft. As for the

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## THE PAST IS CATCHING UP

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPACE TRADING

#### 1984-1992

The space trading genre began with *Elite*. While other space games were concerned solely with killing aliens across a 2D universe, *Elite* brought its universe to life in 3D, borrowing – perhaps unwittingly – the concepts of role-playing, where the aim wasn't just to rise through the ranks, but to develop a character, namely your ship. So groundbreaking was the Braben/Bell classic that it remained the benchmark for a decade.



*Elite* finally arrived on PC in 1987.

#### 1993-1998

If *Elite* put the 'trading' into space trading, *Frontier: Elite II* put in the 'space'. It was a massive and ambitious game, incorporating a detailed



*Privateer* from 1993.

physics model, full-scale planets and a truly immense universe to get lost in. *Frontier: First Encounters*, despite initial bugs, carried on the same principals.

While Braben was taking *Elite* further down the simulation path, *Wing Commander*'s creator Chris Roberts was keeping things more action-orientated in *Privateer*, adding a rich and colourful story, culminating in the FMV-rich *Privateer 2* from 1996. Despite being set solely on one of Saturn's moon, Gremlin's *Hardwar* was probably the game that most closely resembled the original *Elite*.

#### 1999-2001

In the last few years space trading games have found a

natural home online. Despite their marginal popularity, both *Terminus* and *Jumpgate* successfully managed to transfer *Elite*'s established gameplay to a massively multiplayer universe, the latter being the best example of online space combat available. *X - Beyond The Frontier* however bucked the new trend. Single-player only, this game remains the closest in spirit to the 1984 classic, while *Edge Of Chaos*:



*X - Beyond The Frontier*, the German *Elite*.

*Independence War 2* brilliantly managed to marry every aspect of the space combat genre up to that point; role-playing, story,

simulation and action – into one cohesive whole.

#### 2002-2003

While online and off *Freelancer* remains the game



*Freelancer*, out November.

to keep the closest eye on, this year should see the eventual announcement of *Elite IV*, which will see the series head back to its roots, both in terms of gameplay and story. Online we have high hopes for Westwood's first foray into space trading, the promising *Earth & Beyond*. For a whole new perspective on space combat *Eve: The Second Genesis* has also been turning a few heads with its third-person, almost C&C-style control method.



Nebulae, ice fields, asteroids and mine fields. Space is not a vacuum.

equipment and the ships themselves, not much has been revealed. Each of the four major houses will have its own trio of pilotable ships, each offering varying characteristics over their rivals. There will be around 15 playable craft in the game, none larger than a freighter. However, though we won't be able to fly any of the large cruisers and battleships, there will be around 40 ships in total, a couple of which there may only be one or two of in the entire game. Again for *Elite* fans, remember to have your screenshot key ready when you chance across *Freelancer's* version of the Constrictor.

As for the flight model, Digital Anvil is keeping to the tried and trusted arcade dynamic rather than going down the Newtonian route. As such the game will be simple to get to grips with, as was *Wing Commander*, *FreeSpace* and the *X-Wing* series. What is radical however is the control system. In a bid to bring space combat to the unwashed masses, Digital Anvil has maintained throughout *Freelancer's* development that the game has been designed for mouse control only. It is unclear whether you'll be able to plug a joystick in, but even if you can, the game will be optimised for mouse users. It's a slightly disconcerting development, but it does work and after some acclimatisation is a joy to use.

#### OPEN UNIVERSITY

With its rich, detailed universe, open-ended gameplay, expansive multiplayer game and innovative control method, it's hard not to go a little overboard on a game that promises to provide the biggest shake-up in the space combat genre for a number of years. Five years is a long time to be making a game, and there have been a few shaky bumps along the way, but (if you'll allow me to put a personal spin on things), there is no one game that I am looking forward to quite as much as *Freelancer* – aside from of course the long-awaited announcement of *Elite IV*. If I am as impressed after 40 hours of playing the game as I have been watching it for 40 minutes, then *Freelancer* is well on course for a Classic score, which is about as close to a guarantee as you're going to get. **PCZ**

#### Q&A

##### ALAN HARTMAN



Microsoft's group program manager, Alan Hartman, comes clean on *Freelancer Online*

**PCZ** Originally we were told *Freelancer* would be a single-player game only, with an online game to follow soon afterwards. What's the plan now?

**AH** There was a lot of talk about that, but we decided to put a multiplayer option back into the game, which is part of the reason why it has taken us so long to get where we are.

**PCZ** So what can we expect?

**Deathmatch? Capture The Flag?**

**AH** Actually what we are doing is a client/server model for multiplayer, so you can set up your own server, maybe just allow your friends onto it, and play through the whole universe.

**PCZ** Pardon! The whole universe?

**AH** Well the game probably won't look any different. For example, you won't be able to tell which ships are player or computer-controlled unless you select them and scan them. And you won't be able to play through the story, but all the systems, ships and everything else will be in there.

**PCZ** That could take a while to play through. Can you save the game and will there be any sort of persistence?

**AH** People will only be able to save in the multiplayer game on the server.

**PCZ** So will there be a *Freelancer Online* at some point in the future?

**AH** If you mean a massively multiplayer, pay-to-play game, then perhaps. It would be a long way off in the future of course, but I think we've come pretty close to that already with our client/server model. We shall just have to wait and see.

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