



The arcade-like action is fast, furious and incessant.

FREELANCER

£29.99 | Pub: Microsoft | Dev: Digital Anvil | ETA: April 18
www.microsoft.com/games/freelancer

REQUIRES PIII 600MHz, 128Mb RAM and a 16Mb 3D Card
DESIRES P4 1.4GHz, 512Mb RAM and a 64Mb 3D Card

A game about waking at noon and watching *Neighbours* in your pants? Paul Presley is about to be sorely mistaken



Fair enough, you may have criticisms of this free-form space combat sim/trading game's simplistic level of combat controls, its fixed and unrealistic economy system, the repetitive nature of the animated sequences and the annoying way pirates will always track your ship no matter who

else is around. But the one thing you can't accuse *Freelancer* of being is boring. It'd be like having a go at *Boys And Girls* for being highbrow. And unless you are even less evolved than the sub-detritus of British humanity, which appears on that show

INPERSPECTIVE

EARTH AND BEYOND

Reviewed Issue 126, Score 75%
 Supposedly an online *Elite* for the next generation. Except that it wasn't all that great.

X - BEYOND THE FRONTIER

Reviewed Issue 82, Score 90%
 Well, it's a little long in the tooth now, but it was great in its day and the sequel (see our preview on page 42) promises to give you everything *Freelancer* wasn't able to deliver.

HARD AS IT may be to believe, I've actually read people criticising *Freelancer* (or the recently released demo at any rate) for being boring. Boring! Unless these people are regularly employed as naked lion riders, live in naturist communes with groups of frisky supermodels and list their hobbies as starting South London turf wars, then it's impossible to see where they're coming from on this.





Controlling your ship with a mouse is intuitive and easy to pick up.

as contestants (using the term 'human' as loosely as possible), you're hardly likely to do that.

Anyway, *Freelancer*. I don't think I've ever come across a game that tries harder to keep things happening around you at all times. Barely a minute goes by that you're not blasting ships from the sky, zipping from one colourful part of the galaxy to another, or becoming entangled in some malevolent conspiracy involving aliens (as every conspiracy has to do at some

point these days - have you heard the latest one about Kennedy and... well, perhaps I've said too much already). If you looked up the phrase 'action-packed' in a dictionary, there'd just be a big picture of *Freelancer*. Blowing something up. While parachuting off a mountain. Nude.

So, onto the obligatory recap paragraph for newcomers. Although considering the amount of buzz being generated in website forums,

on newsgroup servers and at gatherings of the Women's Institute in Burnley, you'd have to have been living in a cave for the past three years not to know anything about *Freelancer*. *Freelancer* is the latest attempt to bring *Elite*'s style of open-ended space trading goodness to a Modern Gaming Audience.

As they are aiming their game squarely at a Modern Gaming Audience (quick, call the trademark office) there's no way *Freelancer*'s developers, Digital Anvil, would have got away with just plonking a free-form universe on your doormat. Instead we have to suffer the almost

MAKING A QUICK BUCK

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TRADING GAME GENRE

Of course, this all kicked off with *Elite*, the original and, in many a view, the best space trader of all time. Ferrying narcotics, human slaves and luxury foods about the galaxy in your Cobra Mk. III is an experience the few of us lucky enough to have had will forget.

There have been many takes on the genre since. *Privateer* was the first to combine space trading with a storyline. *Ultima Online* saw a whole community gathering resources and selling them to each other. *High Seas Trader* saw you ferrying silks and spices across 14th century Europe while avoiding scurvy.

But the zenith (or perhaps nadir) for me has to be *Minder*. Based on the popular show off the telly, it was the only game that let you deal in used prophylactics and cardboard *Blue Peter* presenters. *Class*. Go here (www.minder.org/mindplay/mindplay.htm) now and feel the love.

By the way, I was on a train with Dennis Waterman last week. I couldn't believe how rough he looks these days...



mandatory sci-fi story (or 'sciffy' as my grandmother used to call them) that weaves its way through the randomly generated missions and trading routes much as a gastric ulcer weaves its way through the lining of your stomach.

TALE-TELLING

Actually, that's unfair. *Freelancer*'s story sequences are very nicely done. The introductory sequence is one of the finest I've seen in many a year, the engine-based cut-scenes that accompany your travels are extremely well scripted, edited and, yes, acted. The plot is intriguing

enough to keep you going through the early stages, and the way that story missions add moments of genuine tension and nerve-shredding action to the slightly repetitive free-form parts of the game is as welcome as it is effective.

Except that it doesn't last long enough. Much like the male orgasm, just as the story starts to get going, it's all over and you're left with a strange feeling of emptiness and uncertainty as to whether you should hunt for your pants and leave, or stick around a bit longer in case this brief moment of excitement ends up somewhere more lasting.

"Freelancer is the latest attempt to bring Elite's style of open-ended space trading goodness to a Modern Gaming Audience"



Fly from one star system to the next trading your wares.



There are a multitude of weapons and ship upgrades to be bought and exploited.



SECOND OPINION

KEITH PULLIN

I'm not looking for the modern day version of *Elite* for the very good reason that it's never going to happen. Let's face it – no matter how hard anyone tries, that work of art will never be beaten. Personally, whenever I get the urge to play *Elite* (and it happens about once a year) I play it on an emulator – and that's good enough for me.

So, while I agree that *Freelancer* is indeed a lot shallower than the *Elite*-bashing hype from Microsoft and Digital Anvil was suggesting, I still find myself hopelessly addicted simply because it's a superbly executed arcade game.

The action is relentless, the twisting, conspiracy-based plot is gripping, and as a nice little bonus, it's probably the single-most gorgeous-looking game I have ever seen.

In short, when it comes to pure, compelling entertainment, *Freelancer* is by far the best title I've played this year.

Whereas the story drives your progress in the first part of the game – your trading, bounty hunting, pirating and so on are all helping you work towards reaching each new chapter – once it's over you're left to explore the rest of the universe by yourself, free to make money however you want. Except that you can't really think of a reason why you should bother.

Save that you're a graphics whore and you can't wait to discover which colour theme the designers have picked for the next star system.

MORE OF THE SAME

Early on it becomes obvious that each new planet and space station is just a slightly different version of the previous one (sometimes not even that dissimilar). A Rhineland freighter doesn't handle very differently to a Bretonia freighter. Running assassination missions for Cryer Pharmaceuticals is the same as running assassination missions for Samura Industries. Only the names change.

What Digital Anvil needed to do was make the background story far deeper than it was, having it stretch on way into the higher levels, rather than peter out around level 20 or so. A quick look back at the somewhat chequered production history of *Freelancer* is probably enough to let you realise why there wasn't the time and/or resources to do this (Digital Anvil has been the subject of more changes of leadership than an Italian government, and *Freelancer* has undergone more restarts than a 100m Sprint race run by hyperactive nine-year olds after a sugar injection). But that doesn't change matters. It ends

“Freelancer doesn't create a realistic universe for you to live in, but it does create a playable one”



Graphically, few other games come close to *Freelancer*.

up feeling like DA made half a great game but was then forced to get it out the door before it had a chance to finish it off. Even if it did take it five years to get this far.

FREEDOM IS ILLUSORY

Everywhere you look you can see the veneer of freedom, but any lengthy inspection soon shows up the abundant limitations. Enemy ships will always target you, no matter what the situation. They may be surrounded by police ships or bounty hunters, but it's always you they come after because you're the only really living thing around. Sometimes it feels like *The Truman Show* in space.



Your ship can be comfortably controlled from two viewpoints.

Running freelance missions is supposedly the driving force of the game – hence the name – with the option to offer your services to several dozen different employers. But since there's only a stock of about five mission types to choose from (the only differences being the names of the people involved and the number of enemies you face), the whole system soon feels like more of a repetitive chore than a game with infinite freedom. There aren't even any of *Elite*'s passenger or delivery missions that at least allowed you to combine freelancing with trading runs for extra cash and variety.

Freelancer constantly presents an exciting impression

of a gloriously detailed universe rich in colour and variety, but it rapidly displays its own shortcomings whenever you start looking too closely. Sort of like Ant & Dec.

BUT, BUT, BUT

Now here's the rub. Despite all of that, despite all the ways in which *Freelancer* gnaws at your patience like an insane beaver, it's still an incredible blast to sit down and play. In the same way that I found myself able to look past all of *Hidden & Dangerous*'s bugs, able to cope with *Operation Flashpoint*'s idiosyncratic game design and able to forgive *Counter-Strike*'s flagrant abuse by hacking tools, so too



Pure, unadulterated mayhem. Action fans won't be disappointed.

WOT, NO JOYSTICK?

IF IT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR HAN SOLO...

A lot of the online fuss has been caused by *Freelancer*'s lack of joystick support. Much wailing and gnashing of teeth has issued forth from die-hard *Elite* fans who refuse to countenance playing a space game with anything other than a Thrustmaster Special stuck between their legs.

Well, the good news is it doesn't make a whit of difference. Actually, it improves the game. Using a mouse, the controls are as fluid and as non-intrusive as you could hope for, and the game is all the better for it. Besides, Han Solo didn't fly the Falcon with a stick, did he? And you wouldn't argue with him, would you?





“It’s Wing Commander with a touch of Elite bolted on the front for a bit of added scope”

I find myself more than able to get beyond the flaws that run through *Freelancer*. Somehow none of it matters. Something about it all hooks you in regardless of the manifest limitations – something makes you willing to let yourself be fooled by the paper-thin mask of completeness it wears. You may know what lies behind the Wizard’s curtain but you’re willing to live the lie because Oz is such a nice place to be in. There’s a lot to be said for atmosphere and it’s here that we witness one of *Freelancer*’s key strengths.

BACK IN KANSAS

As I said right at the start (well, near the start. About three paragraphs in. I know – we’ve

Even if it is the same something over and over again. *Freelancer* doesn’t create a realistic universe for you to live in, but it does create a playable one. You never fool yourself into forgetting that it’s all just a game, and the majority of the time you’ll be approaching the various challenges thrown at you with a gamer’s eye, looking for ways to beat the game design rather than developing exciting tactics to defeat blood-thirsty space pirates. But that’s no bad thing when you consider how bad *Freelancer* could have been, considering its history.

Even so, for a great many of you, the limitations and repetitiveness will probably be too much to get past. Which is fine. Try the demo which we’ll have on next month’s coverdiscs and see for yourself. If you don’t think it goes far enough, then hold fast as *Freelancer* will more than likely be completely overshadowed when the truly epic-looking *X2: The Threat* finally arrives

been through so much since then. But I still respect you, even after the, the err... unpleasantness), there’s always something going on.



Another bogey bites the cosmos.



Some of the large ships are simply immense.



Not quite sure what that means but it sounds nasty.

MISSED OPPORTUNITY (O)

STRETCH YOUR LEGS

Obvious really. We want to walk about on the planets and space stations we dock at. How hard can it be to implement some kind of basic FPS engine into an already 3D universe? *Frontier: Elite II* pulled it off years ago and even Derek Smart managed a crude form in the *Battlecruiser* series.

More immediately, though, Digital Anvil should really get to work on a sequel that provides far more variety, and takes far less time to produce. Rather than just visual differences, make each area of space feel different. Add cultural differences between the races. Let them do it – Microsoft, it’ll be worth it in the long run.



More freedom and diversity is what’s needed.

later this year. Then you’ll have all the dynamic economic systems, alien worlds and realistic universes you can contend with.

Those of you that do decide to give it a go will find a game that refines the existing space sim genre rather than radically reshaping it. It has the arcade immediacy of *Wing Commander* with a touch of *Elite*’s sprawling open-endedness bolted on the front for added scope. But while it captures the mechanics of both games perfectly well, what it doesn’t manage to do is capture the spirit behind these classic titles.

But providing you don’t mind playing a game rather than a simulation, you’re going

to enjoy *Freelancer* simply for what it is – a harmless slice of action-packed entertainment. Which, after all, in this day and age we simply don’t see enough of. [C]

PCZONE VERDICT

- ✓ Immersing atmosphere
- ✓ Simple, but effective interface
- ✓ Very well told story bits
- ✓ Great combat
- ✗ Very repetitive in the long-term
- ✗ Story is way too short

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Not perfect, but good enough