Joining the Evil Galactic Empire
A Review of Star Wars: Tie Fighter
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STS 145

"The Emperor welcomes you into his Imperial Fleet...."

As soon as I read those first words in 'Tie Fighter's Starfighter Pilot Manual, I was hooked. Fresh off the experience of 'X-Wing'[1], I was ready for its sequel. And with 'Tie Fighter', LucasArts promised to deliver a very different gaming experience. While previously my exploits in the Star Wars universe had been limited to the perspective of the benevolent Rebel Alliance, this time, I was joining the ranks of the Evil Galactic Empire. And I was very excited to finally be playing the role of a bad-guy. So much so, in fact, that not ten seconds into the opening crawl I had already embraced the Empire's 'proactive' stance on Galactic defense. And while it's important to realize that there are two sides to every conflict (the Empire can't be all bad, can it?), somehow I sensed that my concerns we no longer with the unalienable rights of the galactic inhabitants. My allegiance was to law and order now and the Rebels, I was told, were trying to undermine it. So let's crush that traitorous Rebel scum! Serve the Emperor!

Building on a Giant

When LucasArts went about creating 'Tie Fighter' (the definitive, single-player, space-combat simulator) they had the enormous success of 'X-Wing' to build on. Indeed, 'X-Wing' combined many features that have now become standard on like-genre games, like pre-rendered cut-scenes, multiple crafts and weapons, 3D shaded graphics, mission objectives, and in-game training. And all this, when allied with the cultural backdrop of Star Wars, make an intimidating act to try to follow. How many of us haven't dreamt about being Luke's wingman when he made his final attack run on the first Death Star, after all? Yet even with all the expectation that comes after a masterpiece like 'X-Wing', 'Tie Fighter' somehow manages to improve upon it. And while 'X-Wing' might have been the game that revolutionized space combat simulations, 'Tie Fighter' certainly came closer to perfecting the single-player game than anything before or since. And left only the problem of multiplayer options to be worked out by later games.[2]

When searching for ways to improve upon 'X-Wing', LucasArts took a hard look at all the aspects of its game design. The graphics engine (which basically took wire-frame graphics with hidden line removal to the next level of 3D shaded graphics), the game engine, the game sounds, mission complexity and cut scenes were all improved upon. But the real triumph of 'Tie Fighter' was its fabulous story line, which subtly plants the seeds of suspicion and intrigue without ever distracting from what's really important... the gameplay. And the gameplay shines. Never before had there been such a fantastic level of control, without any of the annoying overhead. The controls are just complicated enough to keep the game interesting, yet simple enough to keep it fast. The mission briefings, designed as a series of questions you ask your commanding officer and supplemented with a dynamic mission map[3], are clear and detailed, yet avoid needlessly

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[1] Published 1992 by LucasArts.
[2] LucasArts originally claimed there would never be a multiplayer version of the Tie Fighter because they couldn't allow Rebel forces to be shooting at each other...
[3] It diagrams at least how the mission is supposed to go.

overburdening you with too much information. The menus are well designed and easily navigated. And the cockpit controls, while numerous, are intuitive and ultimately easy to learn. For distractions between flights, there is a tech room that contains a complete inventory of all the ships involved in the game[4] and a film room where you can analyze your exploits in the combat chamber.[5] In fact, all of 'Tie Fighter's game elements combine in a way that serve to only enhance your enjoyment. This is game design at its highest level.

Setting the Stage

The major advantage 'Tie Fighter' has over its competitors is that it combines quality graphics with an unbeatable back-story. Anyone familiar with the Star Wars movies instantly knows where in Galactic history our journey begins. Right smack in the middle. But even if one had zero familiarity with the Star Wars saga, 'Tie Fighter' still provides an engaging prologue and an absorbing story. It might even turn you into a fan, if you weren't already.

A long time ago time ago in galaxy far, far away…

At the battle of Yavin Rebel terrorists, aided by spies and traitors within the Empire, struck a cowardly blow at the new symbol of Imperial power… the Death Star!

Darth Vader brought swift justice to the Rebels by destroying the main base on Hoth. The pitiful remnants of the Alliance have now scattered to the Outer Rim.

In the days ahead, the Emperor with call upon the Imperial Navy to eradicate the last vestiges of rebellion and restore law and order to the Galaxy![6]

Life in the Imperial Navy

'Tie Fighter' follows the career of a young Imperial pilot from his/her enlistment to, hopefully, his/her promotion to Imperial General and acceptance as a senior member of the Secret Order of the Emperor. But before any aspirations can be made to such honored positions (in fact, you don't even know about the Secret Order when the game

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[4] Where you can read the various ship specifications and rotate their 3D models as well.
[5] This feature can be particularly helpful when trying to discover what went wrong (or what went right) with a mission.
[6] This is the actual opening crawl from the Tie Fighter game

begins. The organization is secret after all.) you must prove yourself worthy through demonstrations of skill, courage and cunning.

First, you need to show yourself to be competent at the controls of the spacecraft you will be flying during the first missions, and throughout most of the game. You prove this by flying each craft in a training simulator through a series of obstacle courses[7] that work on both your gunnery, and piloting skills. The craft that are available to you at the beginning of the game include the basic Tie Fighter, the maneuverable Tie Interceptor,[8] the slow but more heavily armed Tie Bomber, the powerful Assault Gunboat, and even the shielded Tie Advanced[9]. As the game progresses, more ships become available to you, such as the near-invincible Tie Defender[10].

Once you prove yourself proficient enough in the training simulator your next step is the combat chamber. This device allows you to experience historic battles and other training combat situations that together creatively function as the game's tutorial. Although its fairly easy to climb into a Tie cockpit and fly around, much practice will be needed before you have the skill to fly your ship into the heat of battle and accomplish anything on a large scale. That requires mastery of your weapons systems, energy management, dog-fighting skills and above all, the ability to work as a small but important member of a squadron of fighters. But thankfully, the combat simulator provides adequate on-screen help to familiarize yourself with all the essential Starfighter controls, and a broad variety of missions and dog fighting opportunities that continually challenge your skill. While sometimes you'll be asked to destroy waves of fighters or capitol ships, other times you'll be asked to escort or inspect, possibly even capture other ships. Some of the missions are hard, in fact, even in the first training mission you can find your one lonely, shieldless Tie against twelve Rebel X-Wings[11], but the lessons you learn in the simulator will help you in the cold, depths of space. This in-game preparation is one of the many strengths of Tie Fighter and it is one of the many ways that it has paved the way for the games that have come after it.

The Real Deal

Once you've mastered the combat chamber, you're ready for a real tour of duty. And the missions in 'Tie Fighter' have a beautifully varied pace and sequencing. Sometimes you'll find yourself on what seems like just another ordinary inspection mission, and then it'll erupt into chaos. The complexities and surprises of the missions are shuffled just right to create the most thrilling effect.

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[7] Designed as a long winding pipe populated with a variety of objects

[8] My all time favorite ship to fly, because its combination of speed, maneuverability and no shields, keep the odds just enough against you, that flying is a whole lot of fun.

[9] You won't actually get to fly this spacecraft until much later in the game.

[10] This ship is seriously God-like. A good pilot can take on whole squadrons of rebel fighters, a few waves of corvettes and even a frigate or Mon Calamari Cruiser all at the same time in this bad boy.

[11] And this is *after* you've already dealt with wave after wave of Z-95 squadrons of increasing number and difficulty.

Combat in 'Tie Fighter' is very similar to 'X-Wing' for the most part. You still have to decide if you're going to attack with laser at full recharge, or whether shields (if you have them) are a higher priority.[12] But these same situations are applied with a much more interesting and exciting result in a tiny, maneuverable Tie. You just can't help but feel very, very vulnerable.[13] And that means flying smart or getting blown out of the sky only seconds after launch. In short, you dodge or you die. This on the edge of your seat atmosphere, together with 'Tie Fighter's methodical, almost Chess-like mission composition creates a wonderful feeling of battle excitement. And that realism is further enhanced by the artificial intelligence controlling your wingmen and enemies. As your piloting skill increases, so does that of your enemy. And sometimes the enemy pulls off some incredible examples of coordination. More than once I've been suckered into going after an apparently easy target only to realize I've been positioned right in another enemy's crosshairs.

Twist of Fate

This section contains some spoilers. If you don't want to know anything about the plot then skip it.

Star Wars is at its best when it highlights the moral ambiguity of its surrounding universe, and in that respect 'Tie Fighter' delivers. Your opponents, while including the required serving of Rebels forces, also include smugglers, pirates, defectors, traitors, and various alien races in need of the Empire's iron hand. Tie Fighter even has a very interesting subplot, which develops along with your progression through the ranks of the Secret Order of the Emperor. At one point, you have two mission commanders[14] each giving you orders to carry out during your next mission. At first their orders complement each other, but eventually this cohesion is broken and a deep ambiance of suspicion left in its place. This creates a level a depth that is missing from most games.

As the fight against the Rebels progresses, it becomes obvious that someone high within the Empire is supplying the Rebellion with intelligence and Imperial technology. A rumor starts within the Order that your Admiral is the one selling-out to the Rebellion. This is all very mysterious until he unexpectedly decides to defect to the Rebellion (if I could get my hands around that traitor's...).[15] This masterfully arranged sequence is choreographed for maximum surprise and excitement. And what happens (I won't spoil it!) created probably the coolest game playing moment I've ever experienced!

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[12] Personally, when I have a craft equipped with a shield system, I like to dump all the shield energy into my engines. This makes the ship much faster and more maneuverable, and once you get used to flying a shieldless craft it isn't a big deal. By the way, your ship is a much smaller target when shields are down anyway (because shields extend beyond the hull of your Starfighter).

[13] It usually only takes three shots to kill a Tie Fighter. Considering that there may be many enemy Starfighters around and even large and small capitol ships, this is a small number indeed.

[14] One is your flight officer and the other is a representative of the Secret Order.

[15] The immersing power of Tie Fighter is hard to resist. I honestly felt betrayed during this sequence.

Overall

'Tie Fighter' ranks as one of the all-time great games, standing out as a milestone in game design. How did this happen? LucasArts managed to do it by combining a beautifully designed story arc with fantastically designed missions that are loaded with surprises. Few games manage stay at the top of the sales list for more than a few months. Tie Fighter lasted for more than a year. And in fact, a graphically updated version of Tie Fighter, together with a few extras, is currently selling on Amazon.com for almost 45 dollars, more than 7 years after its initial release. In an industry that is ruthless to bad games, these are very big complements indeed. The Emperor would be pleased.