Captain Skyhawk

Developed for the Nintendo Entertainment System by Rare

Published by Milton Bradley

1990

Review by Doug McCune
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Overview

The flying shooter, Captain Skyhawk, made for the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1990, developed by Rare and published by Milton Bradley, combined solid gameplay and innovative graphics to create a gaming experience that was, in many ways, ahead of its time. The somewhat ridiculous storyline and lack of multiplayer capabilities are made up for in other areas of the game.
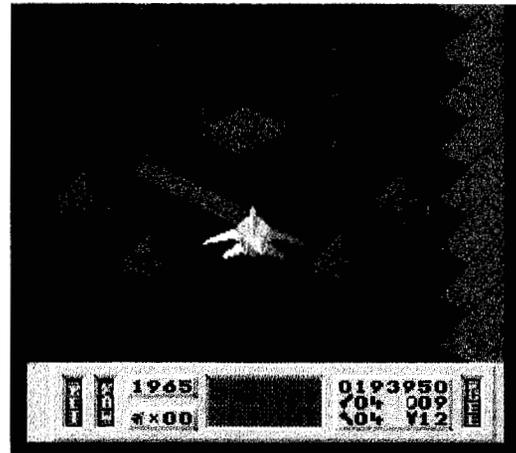
Storyline: 3/10

The game starts off with the player as Captain Skyhawk, the fearless hero who is in charge of saving the Earth from alien invaders. The aliens have landed and are draining the Earth's energy, storing it in their space station. Should Skyhawk fail in his mission the aliens will obliterate the planet with a giant laser blast. As the player, the fate of the world lies in your hands. Of course, since the game revolves around aliens there must be a scene that takes place in space, which explains the part of the game in which the player must dock with a space station. Flying your F-14VTS fighter jet into space is never explained, and I suppose it does not have to be.

This story is merely an excuse to fly and shoot. The game would have been unaffected had another story been substituted. Whether shooting aliens or mutated monkeys, the gameplay would have been the same. For the average player, the storyline goes unnoticed anyway. Most people will simply pop in the cartridge and start shooting; the reasons for the mission are trivial.

Gameplay: 6/10

There are three modes of play: the overhead-view shooter, the behind-view dogfight, and the space station docking. The alternating levels break up the monotony and create a more varied gaming experience.

The overhead-view is given the most emphasis and is by far the most enjoyable portion of the game. The player is in control of the fighter jet, viewing the entire scene from above. While avoiding hazardous terrain, the player must destroy enemy air and ground targets. At the end of the level the player must destroy an alien base, which is always an unbelievably easy end to even the most difficult level. These bosses are always a letdown, especially since the end levels of the game are fairly difficult, and this sense of difficulty is instantly destroyed.
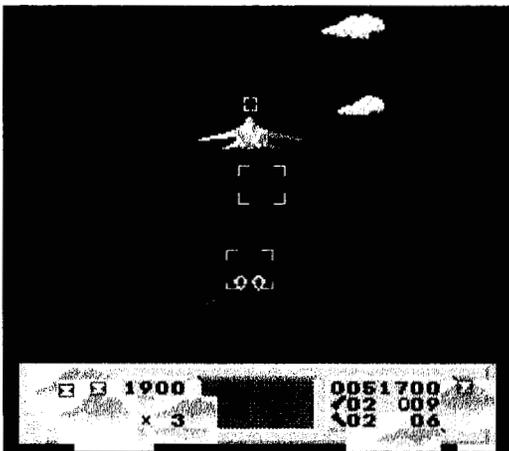

The back-view dog fighting levels provide an interesting twist to the game. These stages of the game are not as fast paced or exciting as the overhead levels, and the controls are considerably worse. While it is not extremely difficult to control the plane and shoot down enemies, there is a certain, hard to

define, element that makes it frustrating. Hitting enemy planes takes practice at first and, for some reason, feels counter-intuitive.

The third element of the game is docking with the space station. This part of the game is absolutely pointless. Hardly any skill is required to position your plane in front of the spinning space station and hit the button once the space station and plane are lined up. The game developers must have wanted to include an extra element in the game to enhance the game, but these levels are simply a nuisance. The game would have been improved if this had been completely left out.
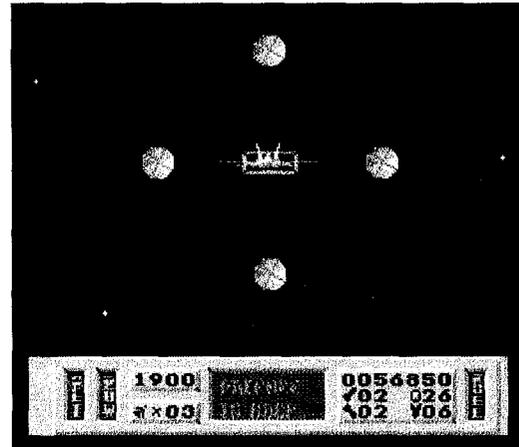
One major drawback of this game is the lack of two-player gaming. The game works well as a single player game, but multiplayer capabilities could have made Captain Skyhawk a much more entertaining experience. The first overhead portion of the game would have been especially enhanced with the addiction of a second player.

Graphics: 9/10

The highlight of Captain Skyhawk is, without a doubt, the graphics. While this game is an 8-bit game, like all others created for the NES, the graphics appear to be polygonal in nature. Everything in the game seems to be a 3d model, when in reality all the graphics are sprites. This graphical approach is most clearly seen in the levels with the overhead view. The mountains act as three-dimensional terrain, allowing the player to

crash into the sides of the hills. Also, the bombs and bullets shot at the player appear to be three-dimensional as well. Everything in the game has an altitude as well as x and y coordinates. It is therefore possible to fly over a bomb that is below the level of the plane. One negative effect of this is that when an object explodes it throws shrapnel that looks very much like enemy bombs. It is difficult to tell the difference, and so if a bomb is in the middle of an explosion it is nearly impossible to tell what will kill you and what is harmless.

This three-dimensional approach to the graphics is what makes this game great. In 1990 there were no truly three-dimensional games, as are so common today. This game seems to have paved the way for the future of video games. The back-view levels can be compared to the game Starfox, created much later for the Super Nintendo and Nintendo 64. While not nearly as complex as these more advanced games, Captain Skyhawk still has many similarities, which is remarkable for such an old game.

Compared to the overhead view portion of the game, the second part with the back-view is a huge letdown graphically. The ship looks like the same three-dimensional model, but the enemy ships are simply flat, two-dimensional images. If this portion of the game had been done using the same three-dimensional graphics it would have fit better with the rest of the game.

Controls: 8/10

The controls for Captain Skyhawk are fairly straightforward, since there are only two buttons and a control pad. One button shoots the gun's cannon, and the other shoots secondary ammunition, such as bombs or missiles. Bombs are dropped by holding the B button, while missiles are launched by lightly tapping the button. This is the one aspect of the controls that does not seem intuitive and often results in using the wrong type of secondary ammo. These secondary weapons are not very important in the game, however, and most of the shooting is done with the cannon. As pointed out before, the controls for the back-view portion of the game are slightly unresponsive. Besides this flaw, controlling the ship during the rest of the game is a piece of cake.

Strategy: 7/10

The basic strategy is simple to understand: shoot everything and don't die. Like most shooter games, understanding how to play is intuitive. There is no deep game strategy to win; all you do is kill the enemies. This aspect of the game is both positive and negative. It means that anyone can pick up the game and start playing, without learning complex rules and tactics. However, it also limits the gameplay in such a way that after a while it becomes monotonous. Even the different stages of the game do not provide enough differing strategic elements. In the end the game is fun to play partly because of this lack of complicated strategy. Captain Skyhawk is an easy game to quickly start up and play, without worrying about how to go about playing.

Overall Success: 7/10

Captain Skyhawk is simply a fun game to play. The level of playability is high because of the simple objectives. The graphics are unbeatable and give the player an exciting and unique atmosphere to play in. The psuedo three-dimensional graphics are a huge leap forward in the genre, and even games today continue to have the same look and feel of this ancient Nintendo game.

The replay value suffers in part because of the repetition of the same levels, but this is only a minor factor. Replaying the game is still fun and fairly challenging, even after you have beaten the entire thing, but a two-player mode would have been a great improvement.

This game is important, if not for anything else, for its graphical achievements. Gameplay aside, the three-dimensional feel of the game is far ahead of its time. This game has some of the best graphics ever seen in a Nintendo game. At first glance I was shocked that I was actually playing on an NES. The illusion of three-dimensional models was so convincing I was hooked on the game. Captain Skyhawk is a great game for the NES and well worth playing.