

PUBLISHER: DreamCatcher **DEVELOPER:** 3000AD **GENRE:** Universe Simulator **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 128MB RAM, 1GB install, 32MB videocard
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 1.7GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet (2-64 players)

Universal Combat

Burden of dreams

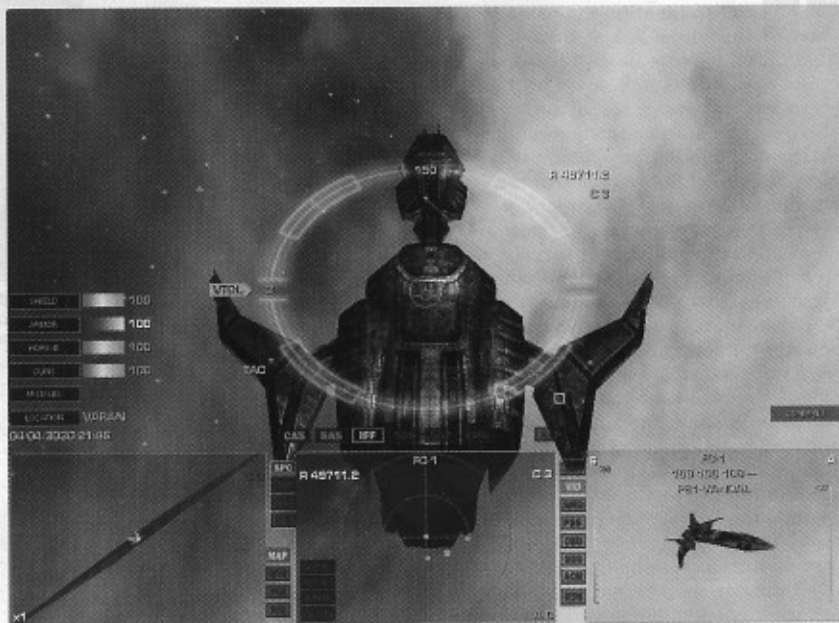
In 1982, maverick German director Werner Herzog released a film called *Fitzcarraldo*, which detailed a 19th-century robber baron's attempt to drag a riverboat over a mountain in the Peruvian jungle. A documentary on the making of this movie came out the same year. It revealed that Herzog, rather than relying on special effects, had actually dragged a real boat over a real mountain in a real jungle in the real Peru—and in the process, drove himself and everyone around him insane. The minor tragedy of the whole episode is that the documentary is a lot more entertaining than the ponderous film.

Such has been the case with the long-running *Battlecruiser* series of space sims. The very public lawsuits, countersuits, cease-and-desist orders, heated debates, stalkers, tantrums, threats of physical violence, and general miasma of controversy that surrounds the series' visionary creator, Dr. Derek Smart, have been more thrilling than any of the rickety, awkward games that resulted from his decade-long obsession with creating the ultimate space-combat simulator. The good news is that with the fifth entry in the series, *Universal Combat*, Smart has made a game that's closer than ever to being almost as interesting as the drama that surrounds it. The bad news is that it still isn't very good.

In the year 3000...

For the uninitiated, *Universal Combat* simulates the year 3000. Not any particular part of the era, like, say, the blowing up the Death Star part, but pretty much the whole thing. It plops you down in the middle of the universe, gives you access to more than 100 vehicles—including spaceships, jeeps, tanks, submarines, ships, and jets—and lets you do more or less whatever you want. That is, assuming you take the time to learn the absurdly complex interface. It's hugely ambitious in scope but unpolished in its many, many details.

Gaining basic knowledge of the controls should occupy the average person for longer than it takes to finish *Max Payne*. To get you started, there's a 100-page printed manual, a 200-page downloadable appendix, and an 80-page downloadable tutorial. Every key on the keyboard is used for something. Twice. There's an undeniable nerd satisfaction



The TLD in action! Or maybe it's the LTD. Or the TTD. Anyway, that's definitely the TDD there in the middle.

that comes from mastering the interface, but once you accomplish this task, the game itself doesn't work very hard to reward you for your efforts. Expect lots of aimless wandering and long periods of tedium punctuated by visually unimpressive combat.

With its daunting interface, an over-the-top fixation on the most trivial details of starship control, and a general disregard for any kind of satisfying, flashy production values, *Universal Combat* goes beyond simply targeting the average starship-combat enthusiast. This is a game designed for people whose routine space fantasies at some point turned the corner into actual fetishism. Not that there's anything wrong with that. If you've enjoyed previous installments of the series, this is a bargain-priced (selling for \$19.95) incremental advancement on everything you already like. For anyone who doesn't share Dr. Smart's very specific obsessions, however, *Universal Combat* is an exhausting, impenetrable bore. **Erik Wolpaw**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆
An ambitious but ponderous chore.

The planetside visuals aren't exactly state-of-the-art.



Landing on a big, flat bitmap of a city.

