Hailing Frequencies Open

Sneak Previews are not designed to be reviews. They are feature articles based on "works in progress" which CGW's editors have deemed worthy of early coverage. These articles are not intended to provide the "final word" on a product, since we expect to publish appropriate review coverage when the game is completely finished. Sneak Previews are designed to inform our readers about upcoming games and generate excitement about the "state of the art" of computer game design in general.

Interplay's goal, in *Star Trek: The 25th Anniversary Game* (*Star Trek*) is to help round out the five-year mission that was never concluded in the three-year run of the television series. The original concept for the game was to enable the player to experience an entire "season" of adventures which were to be designed, essentially, as television episodes.

Starfleet Command Performance

As of this writing, the game will contain about one-third of a season's worth of television-style episodes (nine) and the player will experience the episodes by guiding the familiar landing party of Kirk, Spock, McCoy and the ever-expendable "red shirt" through the stories. Each "episode" contains anywhere from four locations (in the simplest scenario) to 12 locations in order to unfold a given storyline. Hence, from the time one beams down to a planet to encounter the puzzles, banter and fiction that drives the game, *Star Trek* feels right.

Exploring the "final frontier" involves a universe of trade-offs, however. One begins with instant familiarity with the main characters and their setting, but that very strength brings with it a "parallel universe" of script approval, Trekkie expectations and character limitations. Veteran game designer and novelist Michael Stackpole wrote the original fifteen scripts for the game, but the film studio rejected some of the detailed references to shows in the television series because they felt that certain TV episodes were of lesser quality and untrue to the basic universe. Stackpole had known that he would have to be careful with details and characterizations in the *Star Trek* universe, but must have figured that his experience in writing *Battletech*

novels would put him in good stead for developing plots for existing universes. What he could not have expected was for the film studio to decide against plot elements derived from episodes which were already part of the *Star Trek* legend. Eventually, Liz Danforth came in to craft new "episodes" (i.e. mini-quests) to take the place of those which **Paramount** was unable to approve.
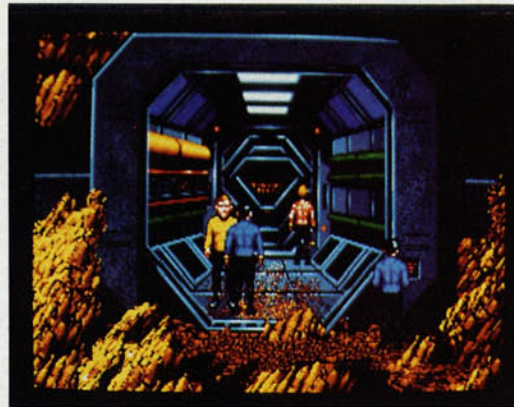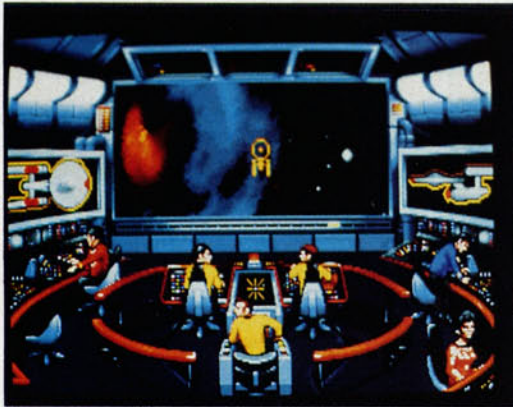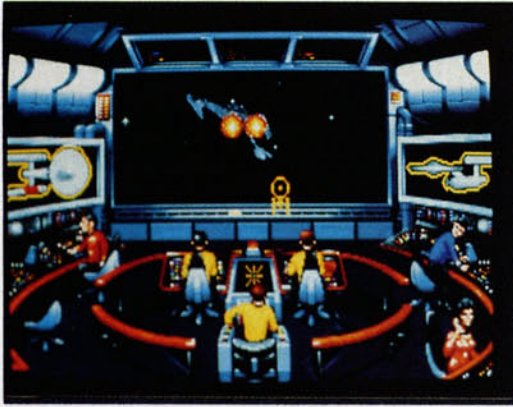
She Canna' Take Inna More

That was not the only "trade-off" to be experienced in designing for the *Star Trek* universe. The design team found themselves confronted with a problem related to starship combat. In the television series, conflict was limited to a couple of orders to the crew on the bridge, a few photon torpedo runs and the actors throwing themselves around the bridge to simulate the *Enterprise* taking hits. This was effective enough for television in the '60s, but it wasn't very entertaining as a game.

So, the design team elected to have the Enterprise cavorting like a "fighter" in dogfights at sub-light speeds. These action sequences are somewhat reminiscent of *Wing Commander* and should be fairly entertaining to those who enjoy arcade-style sequences, but we can already hear the howls from "Trekkie" purists who, like Scottie, will imagine the stress required for a starship to handle like that and will cry, "Captain, she canna' take inna more!"

The action sequences themselves serve an admirable purpose in providing tension and drama between "episodes" and they allow the programmers to show off the impressive planetary graphics they have designed, but one wonders if the design decision will not alienate some members of the target audience. Fortunately, the artistic presentation of the rotating planets already looks better than most of the Class M planets orbited by the television version of the Enterprise.

Interplay's Star Trek: The 25th Anniversary Game

by Johnny L. Wilson

niversary Game. There are warning signals when the player is being too irresponsible. After all, losing the "red shirt" will not exactly endear the good captain to Starfleet Command and it is a warning to the player that he/she may not be approaching a conflict in the right manner (i.e. the "red shirt" will always die before Kirk is endangered). None who watched the original television series ever really believed that Kirk would die. In the game, however, we will have to be more careful as the death of Kirk (as the player's alter ego) ends the game.

It Is Only Logical, Captain

The "episodes" themselves have a very nice variety. In one episode, there is a religious community that seems to be seeing demons behind every bush. In another, a group of pirates have hijacked a tug. Romulan diplomacy serves as the focal point of another episode and Harry Mudd returns in yet another. We were fascinated by the neo-Aztec religion which crops up in two episodes and the return of Kirk's corbomite gambit as something more than a bluff in yet another. The pirates have to be handled something like the "gangster" world in "A Piece of the Action" in an episode near the end. The final episode is still awaiting that necessary script approval from **Paramount**. Suffice it to say that the final confrontation of the adventure should be something very special.

"I'm Just a Country Doctor"

Another trade-off in the design is in the non-typing interface. The very intuitive, non-intrusive and effective interface pops up when one clicks on an on-screen character. A humanoid outline is depicted on a window which covers a portion of the selected on-screen character and one simply clicks on the humanoid's hand to "touch" something, its foot to "go" somewhere, a globe it is holding to "use" an item (or, as Captain Kirk, to "command" someone), its eyes to "examine" anything and its mouth to "say" something.

In fact, the command interface is so unobtrusive that many will ask, "What's the trade-off?" The trade-off can be seen in the fact that the *game* is icon- and puzzle-driven while the *series* it is based on was largely *dialogue* driven. The design team has been sensitive to the *dialogue*-driven nature of the universe, however, and has managed to fill the data files with classic lines like: "Dammit, Jim, I'm a doctor, not a miracle worker!" and "He's dead, Jim." Some plots will have to be solved by making menu-driven dialogue choices

in sensitive diplomatic negotiations, just as one would expect on TV.

Indeed, the goal of the game is not to hack and slash one's way across the star map. Rather, the emphasis is on thinking one's way out of difficult situations rather than shooting one's way out of them.

If one is successful in resolving the conflicts arising during this "fourth season," the game gives the player a certain number of skill points. These points can be cashed in and used to purchase better skills for party members. These skills, in turn, may determine how successful the player will be in future "episodes."

He's Dead, Jim

One very courageous design decision was allowing the possibility for Captain Kirk to die. Most publishers do not like to put their protagonists at risk and most gamers will not be expecting it to be any more *possible* for Captain Kirk to die than it would be for Luke Skywalker to die. It just isn't done in film and television.

Fortunately, Captain Kirk is not handled capriciously in *Star Trek: The 25th An-*

Enterprise, Report

Star Trek: The 25th Anniversary Game is, at once, more successful and more potentially controversial than any of the previous *Star Trek* computer games. Although the stories and characterizations capture the heart of the series with a zest as yet unseen in a computer game, the *Star Trek* universe has engendered such a devout band of purists that one wonders how they will react to the trade-offs necessitated in this new design. Nevertheless, one impression seems clear—*Star Trek: The 25th Anniversary Game* offers both a visual and verbal richness that should seem like warp speed compared to earlier *Star Trek* products. **cgw**