

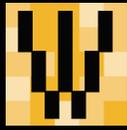


THE HISTORY OF STAR WARS VIDEOGAMES

EPISODE II

LUCASARTS STRIKES BACK

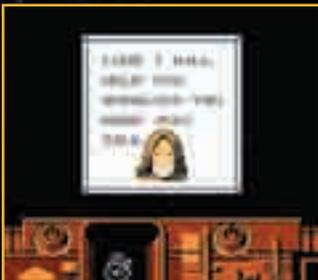
Last issue we looked at the period we'll call the Old Republic, back when 8-bit Jedi Knights kept the gaming world safe from scum and villainy. That brought us up to 1987, when Domark ported Atari's wire-frame arcade classics to every home computer in the known galaxy. As Dan Whitehead discovers, 1987 also marked the beginning of a new era in Star Wars gaming. Although we didn't know it at the time...



While we were prodding away at rubber keys and trying to find the optimum cassette volume at which to load Sabre Wulf, over in Japan they were getting very excited about a new console from popular Game & Watch makers Nintendo – the Famicom.

It was on this fledgling system that arcade stalwart Namco released its own take on George Lucas' galaxy far, far away. As the game was never released outside Japan, it's one of the few commercially available Star Wars games to have gone largely unseen by fans. Even today, the original cartridge is something of a rarity.

The game itself is a mixed bag. As far as gameplay goes, it's pretty cool and serves up side-scrolling platform action, the first ever use of this in a Star Wars game. Up until this point, the games always focussed on vehicular combat, so just being able to see and control recognisable characters like Luke Skywalker was something of a novelty.



Very much in the Mario vein, you proceed from left to right, jumping over conveniently step-shaped rocky obstacles and using your lightsaber to kill the various baddies along the way. Each enemy only takes one hit to kill, but as the same is true of Luke you can't really complain that it isn't hard enough. In fact, as the game progresses it's easy to run out of your meagre allocation of lives when confronted with a tricky jump or an awkwardly placed Tusken Raider.

Graphically, it was certainly the most faithful adaptation of the time. Stormtroopers, R2-D2, and even Darth Vader himself are all instantly recognisable. The game also avoids the Japanese tendency towards the cute 'super-deformed' big head look, making its non-appearance on Western shores all the more mysterious.

Where the game does stumble slightly is in its adherence (or lack thereof) to the *Star Wars* storyline. The action starts on Tatooine, understandably enough. You see some Jawas swipe R2 and Luke set off in pursuit. OK, so that's not strictly true to the movie (and Luke's wispy, blonde 70s barnet has been dyed black) but we're still in the realms of artistic licence. Things start to go a bit bandy when you enter the Jawa Sandcrawler to find an unarmed Imperial stormtrooper marching up and down. When you climb into the attic of the

craft and find Darth Vader waiting for you, alarm bells start to ring. And when he transforms into a huge scorpion with a human face... well, it's safe to say that we're through the looking glass.

Despite its weirdness, the Japanese game was something of a template for the Star Wars games released well into the nineties. Up until Namco's game, it had been all X-wings and snowspeeders, but for the next eight years the platformer was where it was at.

Easy as JVC

Of course, Western gamers wouldn't be aware of this change until several years later. In 1991, JVC finally published a Star Wars game for the US version of the Famicom, now re-branded with the less effeminate title of NES, or Nintendo Entertainment System.

Superficially similar to the Namco release, the Western version of this game was developed by LucasArts (then Lucasfilm Games) and blends the predictable side-on jumping action with some role-playing adventure elements and a little bit of top-down exploration. Zipping around the sands of Tatooine in a landspeeder, you must explore various caves in order to find R2 and get the whole adventure rolling. So far, so familiar, but Luke isn't the only playable character in this version. As the story goes on,

you are able to control Han, Leia and Obi-Wan, while C-3PO and R2 can be used for hints and assistance. In fact, if you don't rescue R2, you can't get Obi-Wan to join your party. This sort of RPG element really helps the game feel true to the movie and the simplistic platform appearance conceals a rather clever little game.

Of course, it's not all good news. For one thing, Darth Vader doesn't appear in the game at all. Nor does Chewbacca, but then he was a mere sidekick. Producing a game without a lead villain – one of the most iconic villains in movie history, no less – was a much bolder decision. The game is also skewed towards the tougher end of the play scale, with some annoying pixel-perfect jumps unfairly diminishing your stock of lives.

Star Wars was a strong seller and was also rolled out across three other formats, including a version for the Sega Master System, which was almost identical to the NES original, to later handheld editions for both the GameBoy and GameGear.



Namco's original Star Wars game for the NES – surprisingly good and highly sought after by fans



Star Wars was a strong platformer for the NES, complete with basic RPG elements

System Wars

By the early 90s, Star Wars and the SNES had quite a cosy little alliance going in the Great Console War, but 1993 saw US Gold cross the battle lines to release a port of the NES Star Wars game on the Sega Master System. Only released in Europe, the adaptation (handled by Tiertex) actually improved on the original in several ways – it featured improved visuals, as the Master System offered a subtler colour palette and better digitised images of the characters in the films. With the SNES and Megadrive dragging gaming into the warm glow of 16-bit heaven though, the Master System was already a dying format – hence the Europe-only release for the title.

Back to basics

So successful was the Star Wars game that The Empire Strikes Back swiftly followed the next year. This all but ditches the RPG elements of the previous game, slight though they were, and concentrates on delivering a stronger platform game with some nifty vehicle sections to boot. Opening on Hoth, the game follows the movie almost scene for scene (if you pretend that Mark Hamill does a lot of jumping up and down) – you ride your tauntaun, see Obi-Wan's spirit, battle the wampa monster (several of them, actually) and make your way back to the rebel base. You don't get to snooze in tauntaun guts, but hey, you can't have everything.

The game engine is much the same as the one used for Star Wars, but the levels are better designed and there's a feeling of progress that isn't as noticeable in the first game.

Things switch to vehicle action for – you guessed it – the AT-AT attack. There are various ways to bring down these metal monsters (blast them from behind or fire your harpoons at their feet) and this was a logical improvement on the old Atari coin-op rendition of the same

scene. As the NES graphics chip was being squeezed for all it was worth, the end result looks pretty spectacular too.

The game then takes you to Dagobah (and even features the encounter with the phantom Vader) via a quick space battle with TIE Fighters. Then it's on to Darth Vader's ship (rather than Bespin), where you battle Boba Fett, enjoy a quick cameo from Lando and endure an epic fight with the real Darth Vader that traverses many screens and ends – in a franchise-destroying sort of way – with Vader being impaled on spikes.

While there's no denying that the game is fun and looks great for a NES title, it does suffer from the switch of focus to just Luke. The rest of the characters are reduced to little more than bit parts, and after the ensemble effort of the first JVC title, that's a shame.

You'd be forgiven for expecting Return of the Jedi to put in an appearance as well, but the 16-bit era was dawning and the decision was made to simply start afresh on the new technology. Once again, the final chapter of the story was dealt a bum hand as far as games were concerned.

Super powered

In 1991, the Super Nintendo Entertainment System debuted in America, and it was clear that continuing the Star Wars saga on the clunky old NES while the Sega Genesis mopped up the 16-bit market was out of the question. As a result, Super Star Wars – once again developed by Lucasfilm and published by JVC – was one of the first SNES games to be released, debuting in early 1992. It was also one of the first to really show off the potential of Nintendo's new wonder beast.

As the name suggests, Super Star Wars was a remake of the NES original, but was substantially beefed up in every respect. From the stereo renditions of John Williams' iconic themes (finally sounding like they are being played on actual instruments rather than digital watches) to the large colourful sprites, which leap and roll around parallax-scrolling levels with lifelike animation, this is about as glamorous as Star Wars games ever got.

As in the NES version, the game starts out with Luke on Tatooine beating up Jawas and assorted desert beasts. As the game progresses you meet up with characters like Han and Chewie and can choose which character to use in each level as you plot your course to the Death Star. Apart from a slight increase in resilience for those opting to go Wookiee, the decision is purely cosmetic. The game also features an attempt at a 3D space section, which includes the final trench run – this made early use of the SNES Mode 7 chip to shift the graphics around.

The game also inherits its ancestors' fussy difficulty levels and it's likely that most gamers never find the other characters or get to try the vehicle sections. One particular part of the game, in which Luke tries to scale the side of a sandcrawler by leaping from moving platforms, deserves to go down in history as one of the most joypad-smashing feats of programming.

The game also hurls wave upon wave of respawning enemies at the player, making it more of a side-scrolling shooter than a pure platformer, so standing still for any length of time is suicidal. Apparently the developer realised that it may have tipped things a little too far towards 'rock hard' on the difficulty scale, as practically every enemy drops a health power-up when killed. The result is a game in which your health



While ambitious, Super Return of the Jedi is the weakest of the SNES Star Wars trilogy

bar yo-yos up and down as you march relentlessly from left to right, finger firmly pressed on the fire button.

In 1993, the second instalment of JVC's new trilogy, The Empire Strikes Back, was released, which leapt towards full-on 'Super' mode. Perhaps wisely, this game didn't mess with the winning formula established by Super Star Wars – big colourful sprites and non-stop action are the key ingredients here. Deviating from the NES Empire game, this edition drops the Luke-centric gameplay, giving Han a look in on the action as well.

If the game has one failing (apart from yet another ridiculously steep difficulty curve)



Empire was the last Star Wars game for the NES, as LucasArts turned its attention toward the new Super Nintendo



it's that the locations are dragged out over lengthy levels – Hoth alone takes you up to level 12. After that, you get to enjoy the good ol' AT-AT battle in glorious Mode 7, but you need to be a pretty stubborn gamer (or a cheater) to get that far. One important addition to Super Empire Strikes Back is the password system that lets you return to where you were up to. Considering the length and difficulty of the games, this is more than welcome.

Third time unlucky

The LucasArts/JVC trilogy was finally completed in 1995, with the release of the slightly disappointing Super Return of the Jedi. It wasn't in the same lowly



Star Wars on the SNES concluded with a 3D Death Star trench run (top), while Empire ended with a deadly lightsaber duel with Vader (above)

league as Atari's clumsy isometric 1984 arcade machine, but even so, a sense of formula was creeping in and some unusual gameplay choices had been made that compounded the 'been there, done that' feeling.

For one thing, the game starts with a scrolling Mode 7 vehicle level that doesn't seem to bear any reference to the movie. Presumably meant to illustrate Luke's journey to Jabba's palace, this fussy race sequence in what looks like an upside-down satellite sees you leaping over mysterious black voids, collecting tokens and being bounced around by irritating little pillars of rock. Pointless and aggravating, the fact that it has no relevance to *Star Wars* means you start the game feeling peeved rather than excited or challenged.

Once you've got past that irritation, the game's technically a steady improvement on the previous two. Faster paced and with much smoother control, it's an eyeball-searing experience. You can also choose from three characters to play as (Luke, Chewie and Leia in her bounty hunter disguise), as you make your way to Jabba's palace. However, the hectic gameplay is also combined with sprawling level design in which missing a platform means you fall down to... more platforms beneath. As you sprint from left to right, collecting tokens (another new addition), it's hard to avoid the sensation that you're playing *Sonic the Hedgehog* or something similar.

Even the presence of some giant boss encounters – such as with the Rancor monster – and a Mode 7 speederbike chase on Endor can't hide the fact that this is a pretty dumb game. Few of the enemies are taken from the films and generic creatures jump, roll and run into you constantly. Like the much-maligned movie, it feels like it's pandering to an easily distracted audience at the expense of franchise continuity. As if to prove this thesis correct, Super Return of the Jedi allows you to play as an Ewok. A bloody Ewok.

The game climaxes in a rather bizarre boss battle with the Emperor, who flies around the screen like the demon from *Ghosts 'n' Goblins* and blasts the walkway out from underneath you. If you defeat him – which is practically impossible, since your health's dwindling and you're running out of surfaces to stand on – you move on to one of the most ill-conceived final levels in a game. Ever.

In one of the worst uses of Mode 7 in SNES history, the game attempts to recreate the Millennium Falcon's journey into the heart of the second Death Star from a first-person perspective. In reality, this is just a series of blocky geometric shapes jerking towards you, while the occasional TIE fighter floats past. Hitting the sides damages your shields, but as you can't really tell where the sides are, it's a confusing challenge to say the least. Aiming for the black bit in the middle of the screen seems to work, but that gets smaller and smaller (presumably because the tunnel is getting narrower, though you'd be hard pushed to tell from the graphics) until you reach the reactor. Blow that up and you've finished one of the hardest and most annoying *Star Wars* games.

Super Return of the Jedi's flaws are made all the more noticeable because the 'Super' trilogy is still the most complete and graphically impressive rendition of the saga, even today. It also marks the last time companies used the classic movie trilogy as a basis for our videogame

>Star Wars Arcade

Although the *Star Wars* gaming franchise had radically evolved after spreading to home consoles, Sega realised that Atari's wire-frame arcade titles were still extremely popular with fans of the movie. So, taking the licence right back to its X-wing-flying roots, Sega released *Star Wars Arcade*. Featuring fantastic 3D visuals and a *huge* sit-down cabinet, *Star Wars Arcade* put you in the seat of an X-wing (and a Y-wing) and featured missions taken from the original movie trilogy – most of these were simple 'destroy all enemies' affairs, while others took place on and around the Death Star, reproducing Luke's epic trench run.

On the home console front, the Megadrive wasn't equipped to handle the power of *Star Wars Arcade*, so the game eventually arrived on the ill-advised Megadrive add-on, the 32X. Along with only a couple of other 3D titles, like *Virtua Racing* and *Doom*, *Star Wars Arcade* was one of the few reasons to own a 32X.



entertainment. From that point on, games makers would step outside the confines of what George Lucas had put on screen and explore the galaxy on their own... ❄️



NEXT MONTH
The History of Star Wars Videogames Episode III: X-wing, Rebel Assault and Dark Forces games on PC