Psi-5 Trading Company - 1986 Accolade

Accolade was arguably the publisher of the most consistently brilliant of C64 titles, until the talent pool started drying up and we got uninspired flops like Blue Angels. Psi-5 is definitely one of the high water marks of their tenure as Commodore publishers.

The premise is simple enough: you are the commander of an interstellar cargo ship, and you've got to get supplies from Point A in Point B as fast as possible. The only trouble is that the space lanes are a dangerous place for a lone cargo ship far from home. So to get there, you're going to need a crack crew: a top gunner, a wily navigator, a dependable engineer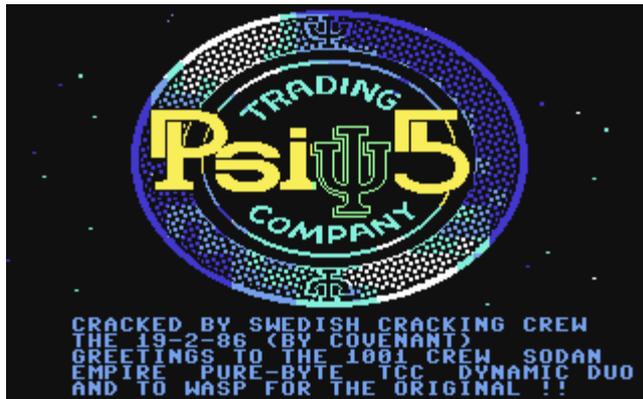, a competent repair coordinator, and a fast scanner operator. But the crew can't do it alone: they need you to call the shots and make all the right split-second decisions.

As the ship's commander, you communicate with the crew on a viewscreens with a data readout below. Although crew members will sometimes take the initiative, you have to issue the vast bulk of the orders, to lock on to a particular ship, open fire, change course and speed, reroute power from non-essential systems, and initiate repairs on key areas of the ship. A second viewscreen constantly shows the exterior action, which more often than not will be a hellfire of attacking enemy ships. The crew constantly relays their confirmation of your orders, or new information, through a communications panel you can access from anywhere in the ship.

 And before you even leave the space station, you have to prove yourself a good judge of character. There are six qualified candidates for each shipboard position-but some more qualified than others, and each with their own particular quirks and flaws.

Once you get off and running, this game is intense. Once you find yourself surrounded by more ships than you can order your gunnery officer to fire at, the repair list is running out of letters in the alphabet, and your ship is barely generating enough power to keep the ship moving, you'll know what I mean. Odds are that you will lose the first several games of Psi-5 you play. This is normal.

Here are some tips for success:

- Don't touch the joystick. Use the keyboard as your sole interface. (Notice how every command has a unique first letter?) It's MUCH faster. The backspace (inst/del) key backs you out one menu level, the slash key acknowledges communications.

 - Don't use auto-acknowledge. You SHOULD make a point to read messages, but it can be very annoying to have the data readout blanked by a fairly unimportant communique. You can always hit the acknowledge key rapidly if you need to clear through the routine messages to get to the important one

. - Don't leave the spacedock until you've got the shield batteries charged to full and the emergency batteries well-juiced (at least 60 seconds worth.) Use the Engineering Priority function early and often. Make it your friend. It will save your life

.- Speed is king. The faster you're moving, the faster you'll get to your destination, and the less time the bad guys will have to shoot at you. Of course, the most direct routes are sometimes the most dangerous, so be prudent.

- You can't have your cake and eat it too, so you'll have to disable some ship systems in order to achieve maximum speed on a regular basis. Obvious choices are the weapon(s) that your gunnery officer is weak in, and the info scanner (see below), but you'll often have to run with at least one shield down. If you're really good, and your engineer is fast, you can shift your shield "hole" to avoid the point the bad guys seem to be attacking the most.

- I find the info scanner to be a luxury you can rarely afford. Disable it for most of the flight, but get juice to it every so often so your navigation officer can update the risk assessments, and adjust your course accordingly.

- If you've turned off the info scanner, there's no good reason to have your scanning officer keep scanning a ship once you've established a target lock, so cancel scans as soon as you get a "y" under target lock.

- The scanning status chart is the most useful chart to have on screen, unless you're working on something else (in other words, when things are relatively quiet), because it lets you know what's going on outside, and helps you make your gunnery decisions.

- Don't be afraid to adjust your course every so often when things get too hot (see above), but course corrections slow down your overall journey, so try not to do it TOO often, or you guarantee a late arrival, and have to spend a lot more time in space being shot at

.- The ship cannot be completely blown up. The game ends when you're out of cargo. This happens if the pirates board and steal it all, or if the cargo environment systems stay damaged and the cargo spoils. Keep that in mind when looking at a huge repair manifest.

- Losing a crew member means a stiff monetary penalty at the end, plus feelings of guilt, but more importantly, the ship's computer does a really lousy job of replacing your humanoid crew. Don't let them die.

- Bru may be annoying, but that's her only real flaw. She starts an awful lot of repairs on her own initiative, which is a very good quality to have in a repair chief

.Even with these tips, Psi-5 isn't going to be a thrill-a-minute for everyone. Some folks just won't dig the commander's-eye view, and would probably be happier with a game that let them take over the gunnery post, for example. And it's certainly true that at some stages, the game becomes rather repetitive: tell scanning to establish a target lock, tell weapons to fire, cancel scanning, rinse and repeat. Even the shortest mission is a fairly long trip, and despite Accolade's often cinematic themes, this is actually one of the "longer" games-you could probably play three or four rounds of Law of the West in the time it takes to complete a cargo run.

But if you allow the game to become your reality, so to speak, and you really care about protecting your crew and reaching your destination with your cargo intact (and with the biggest possible payday at the end), Psi-5 will richly reward you with engaging gameplay.

GRAPHICS - 9/10

Proving that hi-res bitmap image don't have to look like they do in lousy Spectrum ports, the game is really something to see. It's not perfect, and perhaps the alien ships could have looked a bit better, but the graphics are immersive and that's what counts.

SOUND - 9/10

The themes that tie in with the action are great, if a bit limited by the need to keep the third voice open for sound effects. My favorites are the percussive battle music and the "condition green" organ voyage music.

PLAYABILITY - 10/10

Until you get your own space trading cruiser to command, this is as close as you're going to get.

OVERALL - 9/10

Everyone involved with this game should be proud of themselves. One of the best "starship command" simulations ever, deceptively simple but extremely challenging even with the first mission. There's always a new strategy to test, a new crewmember to bring along for the journey. This is a Classic with a capital C.