

BADGE OF THE ULTIMATE STAR JAM FIGHTER

CHAPTER 1: THE LITTLE STAR JAM FIGHTER

“ENTER THE FRAY!”

The audio clip was a familiar one to Markaius Alsatan; the arcade game *Star Jam Fighters* played it regularly during attract mode just as it started playing its demonstration game or when he started a level. He played the game every time his parents Lawry and Doris went there to buy groceries every Friday afternoon after picking him and his siblings up from school. The side-scrolling space shooter had sat near the entrance of the Highwood Gas and Grocery for as long as the young dog could remember. He knew from one of the game’s Attract Mode screens that one could earn badges—actual physical badges!—by accomplishing various objectives such as finishing the game, doing the side quests, or not taking any damage. The screen that displayed the full set of badges showed the address for Characo Games—the company that made the cabinet—whither photographic proof of these accomplishments could be sent, and the company would mail back the badges the player had earned. Those that had earned *all* the badges in a single playthrough would receive the ultimate prize: The Badge of the Ultimate Star Jam Fighter.

Markaius knew he would get that ultimate badge one day. He had made it his *goal* to perfect the game and get that ultimate badge so he could show it to his older cousin Kraggan, who was a programmer for video games, highly-experienced computer technician, and champion of several low-level gaming tournaments (he also mopped the virtual floor with Markaius every time they competed). But for *this* game, Kraggan had only the badge for completing it and Markaius wanted to get the entire set so that he could say that in *one* game, he had beaten his cousin. And so, every time his parents came to buy groceries, he would make a beeline for the game and drop a quarter in to play it.

The cabinet had a few oddities—while the joystick made sense, why it would have two rows each having a blue, white, and red button when one such row would suffice was almost as big a mystery as why it would have a light gun attached, but Markaius was sure that it would all make sense when he aced the game.

Every week he hoped he would be able to finally beat it before his parents finished their grocery shopping. He already knew the first five levels by heart and despite how often he’d seen it, the initial cutscene never ceased to make his tail wag.

THE YEAR IS 2525. THE FURRY SPACE ALLIANCE HAS KNOWN PEACE FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS. BUT ALL THAT HAS CHANGED. THE EVIL BLACK VOID TYRANT IS INTENT ON CONQUERING THE GALAXY, AND HAS SENT HIS DARK STAR FLEET TO INVADE THE PEACEFUL HUMAN SPACE ALLIANCE

YOU, A CHAMPION STAR JAM FIGHTER, HAVE BEEN SENT TO FACE THIS FEARSOME ARMY AND TO TAKE DOWN THE BLACK VOID TYRANT.

DO NOT FAIL THIS MISSION! THE ALLIANCE NEEDS YOU!

CONTINUE >>>

He tapped one of the buttons to continue, his tail wagging faster. He knew why there were three colours of buttons—the blue buttons fired his primary weapon, his white buttons gave his shield a temporary boost, and the red buttons fired his special weapon that used a special ammunition the game called Unnilennium-278 torpedoes that were dropped by destroyed enemies. But why there were six of these buttons arranged in two rows with the three colours paired vertically paired, well that was a mystery to him.

LEVEL I: PORT INVASION

THE FORCES OF THE BLACK VOID TYRANT'S VANGUARD, COMMANDED BY THE BRUTAL COMMANDER MORGHASS TORGH, ARE TRYING TO CONQUER FORT BALSOTH. CIVILIANS FLEE FOR THEIR LIVES AS ENEMY CRAFT SWARM THE PORT. TAKE OUT HIS VANGUARD, BUT BE CAREFUL NOT TO HARM ANY OF THE FLEEING CIVILIANS.

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He tapped a button again, and the phrase "ENTER THE FRAY!" played. The game started off with a swarm of grey and red enemy ships flying towards the ship Markaius controlled and firing constantly at him. Civillian ships were cyan and white and flying away from the port. He'd mastered this level so long ago he'd needed a stepstool to reach the controls. His shots were made with the precision of much practice, taking out each enemy ship while the civilian ships got nary a ding. He even managed to keep enemy ships from landing in a bay with a door that had been blown in. The enemy ships dropped canisters of Unnilennium-278 Torpedoes (their name was revealed in the messages that showed every time he got them); while this ammunition would one-shot any of the smaller ships, he knew he would need it for for the boss Morghass Torgh.

He also knew where powerups such as double-fire, spread fire, and shield upgrades would appear, making it a cinch for him to get them all.

Soon he was up against the massive ship of Morghass Torgh himself, which sent out wave after wave of smaller ships which Markaius dispatched with ease (whereupon they would drop more Unnilennium-278 torpedoes) and torpedoes he either shot down or dodged. Sometimes Morghass Tor's ship would

capture a civilian craft, and Markaius had to shoot it free. And between rescuing civilian ships and taking out enemies, he managed to take out Morghass Torgh's ship with well-placed shots of his hoarded UNE torpedoes.

LEVEL I: PORT INVASION RESULTS

DAMAGE SUFFERED: 0

CIVILIAN SHIPS DAMAGED: 0

CIVILIAN SHIPS DESTROYED: 0

ENEMIES DESTROYED: 100%

POWERUPS GATHERED: 100%

UNE TORPEDOES GATHERED: 100%

CONTINUE >>>

LEVEL II: RED STAR GAUNTLET

MORGHASS TORGH HAS FALLEN, BUT AS HIS SHIP DISINTIGRATES, IT SENDS OUT A SIGNAL TO A DISTANT SYSTEM. YOU FEEL A CHILL AS YOU RECOGNIZE WHERE IT IS GOING: A POWERFUL EVIL BEING KNOWN ONLY AS THE RED STAR. THE REST OF THE VANGUARD MUST BE THERE, GUARDED BY THE VILE STELLAR ENTITY.

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This level was a bit more of a challenge. It had more enemies and in greater variety with different firing patterns—at least they still dropped the all-important Unnilennium-278 torpedoes. Moreover, the Red Star—a constant presence in the background—would try to send up flares which could do tremendous damage to the ship.

Like the first level, Markaius had long mastered this one; the way the star flickered told him where the flare would pop up and what shape it would be, making it easy to avoid it. The only thing Markaius couldn't do was damage one particularly large ship which appeared midway through the level, never mind defeat the thing. Not even the special ammunition seemed to do anything to it, so he just avoided it.

The boss was a massive standing pillar of fire that was called The Living Flare, and could only be hurt by the special ammunition that was dropped by destroyed vanguard vessels throughout the level. If you didn't pick up enough ammunition, well you only had yourself to blame, as not only did it drop in such quantities you had to be actively trying to miss it, but you also carried over what special ammunition you had left from the previous level.

LEVEL II: RED STAR GAUNTLET RESULTS

DAMAGE SUFFERED: 0

ENEMIES DESTROYED: 99%

POWERUPS GATHERED: 99%

UNE TORPEDOES GATHERED: 100%

CONTINUE >>>

LEVEL III: THE LIVING ASTEROIDS

WITH THE COLLAPSE OF THE LIVING FLARE, THE EVIL RED STAR IS FORCED TO GO DORMANT AND LICK ITS WOUNDS FOR THE NEXT FEW CENTURIES. BUT YOU'RE NOT IN THE CLEAR YET, FOR ITS ASTEROIDS ARE EQUALLY ALIVE, AND THEY SEEK TO AVENGE THEIR HUMILIATED MASTER. FIGHT BRAVELY, LEST THEY GRIND YOUR SHIP TO SCRAP OR, WORSE, FEED YOU TO THEIR LEADER, THE DREADED MYNORGH PLAANETOYD!

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This level was a *challenge*, as his guns could not destroy any but the smallest asteroids in time, so it was mostly dodging. Sure, the Unnilennium-278 torpedoes the little asteroids dropped would blow the larger asteroids in one shot, but again, he was saving them for when he faced Mynorgh Plaanetoyd. And making things even more difficult was a massive white asteroid shaped like a potato with a flat spot that chased his ship the entire level. The boss was sheer bullet hell; it spewed out rocks in waves of at least a dozen, and those rocks would shred your ship if you got hit. At least shooting them dropped more of the UNE torpedoes. The Mynorgh Plaanetoyd itself was an absolute damage sponge—and of course that stupid white asteroid got in on the act, moving up and down in front of the Mynorgh Plaanetoyd and acting like a shield that not even the UNE torpedoes could damage.

LEVEL IV: THE BLACK HOLE ACCRETION DISK

YOU HAVE BLASTED THE MYNORGH PLAANETOYD TO RUBBLE AND ESCAPED THE RED STAR SYSTEM. BUT IN A FINAL ACT OF SPITE, THE RED STAR SENDS UP A FEEBLE FLARE THAT MAKES YOUR NAVIGATION SYSTEM MOMENTARILY MALFUNCTION. ONCE YOU GET IT WORKING AGAIN, YOU FIND YOURSELF IN THE WORST PLACE TO BE IN THE COSMOS: THE ACCRETION DISK OF A BLACK HOLE. YOU NEED TO FIND A WAY OUT, OR FACE THE ULTIMATE OBLIVION!

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The debris in The Black Hole Accretion Disk forced one to guide the ship up and down through a path, and if Markaius took the wrong path, he'd either collide with something and be sent straight into the black hole (an instakill) or he'd have to turn around and find his way back and pray that the debris field hadn't disintegrated yet, which meant Markaius's ship would be sucked back down into the black hole. But Markaius had long memorized the path out and by now it was little more than a breather level; it didn't even have a boss.

LEVEL V: THE INFECTED NEBULA

THE BLACK VOID TYRANT'S CORRUPTION IS FELT STRONGLY HERE. THE ONCE-BEAUTIFUL GIRSHON NEBULA IS NOW CRAWLING WITH EVIL SPACE-DWELLING VERMIN, MAKING IT A PERILOUS PLACE TO BE. LURKING DEEP WITHIN IS ONE WHO WAS ONCE FURRY SPACE ALLIANCE'S GREATEST COMMANDER BUT NOW THE TYRANT'S MOST POWERFUL WARLORDS, THE TREACHEROUS LORD THUNDERSTAR, WHO INTENDS TO TURN THE NEBULA INTO A BREEDING GROUND OF HIS VILE CREATURES. DESTROY THE CREATURES AND TAKE DOWN LORD THUNDERSTAR BEFORE THE NEBULA BECOMES A PIT OF HORROR!

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This level had a change-up of gameplay, as the enemies were now arthropoid creatures of all manner of shapes and sizes—tiny bugs that skittered about the screen and spat projectiles at the ship, long centipede-like monsters that would crawl up and completely block the way unless they were destroyed (headshots took out the creatures in one go; anywhere else only created a gap in their wriggling bodies), and everything in between. He set his jaw, racing through the level and intent on getting to Lord ThunderStar before—

"Mark, it's time to go. We're done shopping," said Doris, coming up behind Markaius.

"But Mom, I wanna—"

"Mark, we're done shopping, it is time to go."

"But Mom—"

"Markaius Jothan Alsatan, it is only a game! Let's go!"

Markaius groaned and left the game, knowing it was no use to argue. A worker glanced over at them. "You know, ma'am, maybe you should just let him finish the game. Or lose it honestly."

"He needs to learn it is just a game," she responded.

Markaus flattened his ears. His mother would never understand how this was more than just a game, it was a quest to prove himself to Kraggan once and for all. As his mother gripped his wrist, he heard the game play the dreaded sound clip "YOU HAVE FAILED THE MISSION!" as his now-uncontrolled ship fell prey to its enemies. Again, the level started, but he was not there to guide the ship through its enemies. "YOU HAVE FAILED THE MISSION!"

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Markaius looked back at the game, gritting his teeth with a soft whimper.

"The game will be there for you to play next week," Doris said primly. She put her paw on his shoulder and firmly guided him out the door.

The next week arrived, and Markaius knew he would finally finish the fifth level, and maybe even the game! His parents were going to be cooking for a potluck and that meant they'd be buying groceries in greater variety and quantity than usual. They might even have to look for some of the ingredients they needed, which would mean even more time for him. As soon as they parked outside the grocery store, Markaius jumped out of his dad's truck before the older dog put it in park and dashed inside, heading straight for the place where the old game stood.

A soda fridge was there instead.