

# Deepest Blue.

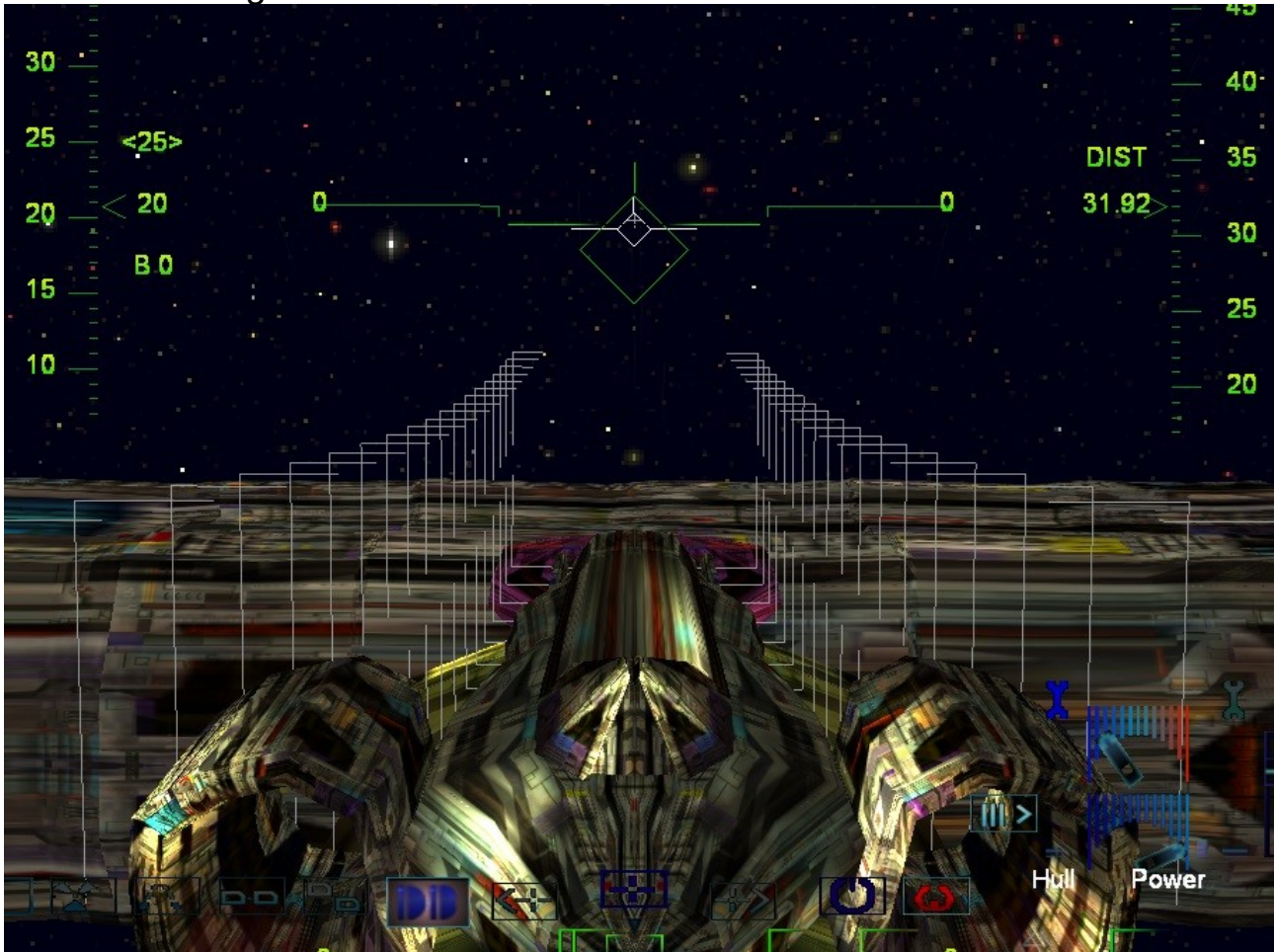
The thing about space is its utter unimaginable vastness. Even in the confined scout cockpit the feeling of insignificance compared to the sheer size of the Milky Way was overwhelming. Pilots seldom actually flew in person usually controlling the ships with the virtual pilot system using Deepest Blue, the sub space computer network that spanned the discovered systems. Some say it was named after a vintage computer, the first to beat a human chess champion. Others said it was because the colour of the void was never black but the deepest shade of blue. Now Deepest Blue was the key to colonising the void. Shared by several global corporations it controlled the complex infrastructure and logistics of the exploitation of space with almost instant communication.



Virtual pilots remotely controlled the fleet of ships supporting giant structures built in deep space. Earth ships still brought some vital supplies and returned with precious resource reaped from the mining of space debris. However, the infrastructure in deep space was largely self-contained. Most things from a coffee mug to a battleship were manufactured on the stations from local resource collected by fleets of miners. Everything was recycled. Deepest Blue orchestrated the whole process controlling everything with artificial intelligence but since the outlawing of pure AI systems humans were always in the control loop.

Mel's thoughts were interrupted by the comms bursting into life. "Approaching your target destination" displayed in bright letters across the HUD. "Requesting landing permission". Mel switched to control taking over from her virtual copilot. It was always good to keep your skills honed. The HUD displayed waypoints set by Deepest Blue that ensured a safe approach aligning with the dock. The virtual horizon switched to landing mode aligning with the orientation of the base. The station loomed in the distance impressive in size although dwarfed by the immensity of space. The stations always took her breath away and gave a sense of pride, of belonging to

something. This was in sharp contrast the feeling of emptiness experienced in deep space, like a traveller finding an oasis in the midst of endless desert or a sailor finding a lush island after crossing a featureless ocean. Mel skilfully aligned the scout ship with the virtual runway displayed on the HUD using the lightest of touches to correct the angles and position. The craft gently docked with a dull clang.



She left the craft and descended into the protection of the star base. As she passed a viewport, she could see a constructor ship slowly manoeuvre a gigantic new module into position. The base was a living entity, growing, renewing, spawning new parts or ships. Each base was built from pre-fabricated parts that could be towed by all but the smallest ships and gently nudged into place. The bases in turn could build new ships for base parts built from raw materials mined from space.

Beyond the budget of a single government It had taken the combined resource of a consortium of global corporations to finance the bootstrapping of the exploitation of deep space. They now formed an uneasy but usually peaceful alliance. There was always a powerful military presence to guard and protect each faction's sectors. But this was the high frontier, at times dangerous and lawless, where maverick pilots competed for precious

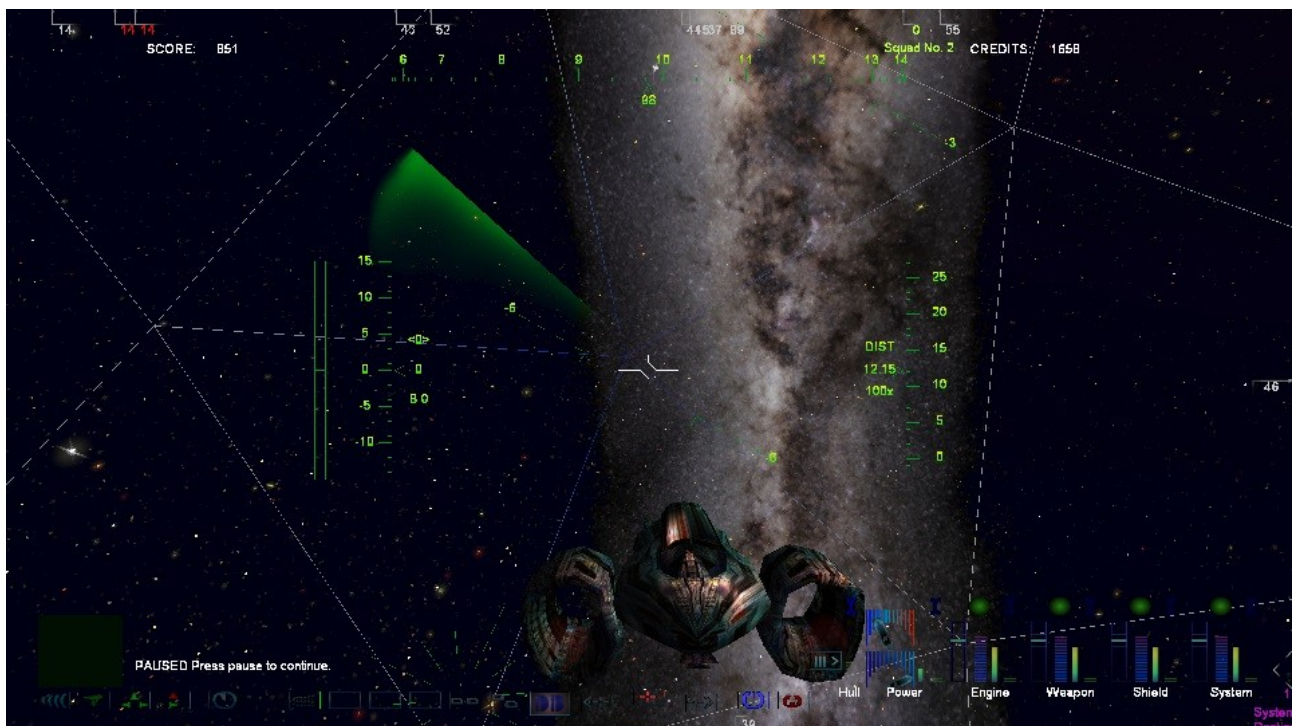
resources like the historic Klondike gold-rush. Deepest Blue was utilised to police the new sectors suppressing renegade activity but tensions between the corporations continued. Corruption was always somewhere under the surface especially in the far off pioneering territories. A faction called Dark Light, a coalition of smaller nations, was perhaps the least trusted. It was named after an infamous group of hackers of the same name. Some suspected they ran the coalition, funded by spurious activities on the dark web and controlling the now global cryptocurrency everyone used but few understood.

There was an excited atmosphere in the briefing room. Seasoned and rookie pilots of freighters, miners, constructors, scouts or military ships were all talking excitedly and speculating. The one thing they shared was that they did not know why they had been brought to this isolated outpost. "Guess we will know soon enough" someone muttered as the door opened. The briefing room silenced as the base commander and staff entered and took their positions at the front. "Everything you have learnt about the Seiddab War is a lie."

That certainly got the eager crowd's attention. Every schoolchild knew the story of the Seiddab War forty years earlier. A relentless alien race had been encountered first in space, then advance units even reaching the Earth and building bases on the moon. A counter offensive had driven them from the solar system and led to the discovery of a system of interlinked warp paths that spread across the star systems like a giant web. The warp paths allowed ships or comms to travel across otherwise unreachable systems. Highly classified, it was rumoured that the warp network had been engineered by a far older species, being far beyond the technology of either Seiddab or Human races.

"Have you ever wondered why there are no pictures of Seiddab, why none were ever captured, dead or alive? Not a single alien body has been recorded. Sure, plenty of fake videos and sightings published on social media but not a single verifiable source". There had been many conspiracy theories. Mel recalled that there was a time when a popular belief was that the world was flat and space exploration was all faked for some unexplained purpose, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. This made Mel smile, there were still some that hung onto these almost religious disbeliefs. If they had could only see and experience the true magnificence of what had been achieved. Global corporations were an easy target to blame everything on and always not without due cause, whether it be food shortages, pandemics or natural disasters.

"I know what you're thinking" the commander continued "just keep an open mind as you watch this vid link recorded by a deep space mining station". The lights dimmed and a murmur rippled through the attentive audience. The display lit up with the familiar view of the Milky way stretching magnificently across the deep blue of intergalactic space. "Scout Lazy Fox commencing survey". The isodecahedron of the survey HUD traced its sharp lines across the darkness. The scout aligned with each nodal point in turn and the radar automatically performed a 360 degree sweep. to detect any anomalies in that spatial direction. Twelve overlapping sweeps would cover every direction. Then any anomalies could be identified by flying to scan range. Deepest Blue would be instantly updated.



Suddenly a blip occurred on the display with an audible ping. This was not the blip of a static object such as a debris field or a warp path. The irregular movement was precise and looked controlled. "Scout Lazy Fox reporting sighting of Unidentified Flying Object, repeat U. F. O. sighted, closing into scan range for verification". Each ship was equipped with a laser scanner with limited range that enabled Deepest Blue to identify and classify anything in the sector. Mel smiled at the use of the acronym UFO. It was a term first used in the previous century when bomber pilots saw strange lights following them. After the second world war there was a craze of sightings. Pilots were loath to go on record if they saw a UFO as they were often ridiculed or quietly sidelined. Most pilots still shunned the phrase, or the newer acronym UAP , Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena. Unverified media reports were still common. Many suspected a cover up of the truth.

The scout ship approached the target cautiously. Pirates seldom operated this far into the deep but just in case Lazy Fox decided to switch his combat HUD on to charge the weapon systems. Shields were already on to protect from micro collisions from smaller debris that littered these inter warp sectors. The gravitational anomalies of the warp paths collected matter. That is why they were a rich hunting ground for resource and why the top speed of all ships was limited. Bases had to be built at special Lagrange points where gravitation forces balanced out the distortion of the warp paths.

Scout ships were built to a military specification that gave them an extremely low detectable profile. If it were a hostile ship, it was unlikely the scout would be detected until it got close. The UFO gradually came into view. It looked like some kind of mining ship and looked like Earth technology. The scan triggered automatically on the targeted ship as soon as the range was close enough but failed to identify the ship. Deepest Blue had the scan signatures of every Earth ship ever built. The law also required every ship to have an IFF, Identification Friend or Foe device switched on. That enabled connection with Deepest Blue which then would then display the pilots call sign. It also updated Deepest Blue with its position and action. If the IFF was disabled the ship was either up to no good or in serious trouble. Switching the identification off made the ship and pilot anonymous. It also allowed them to cause damage to allied shipping.

"Lazy Fox going in for a visual" the pilot uttered. They could hear a tenseness in his voice. Something was wrong and he knew it. Even though a pilot was safe in their virtual pod back at base the sensation was so real that a pilot would experience the same feeling of danger. Loss of a ship was a terrible thing for a pilot affecting their credit and standing. "It looks Terran but I can't ID. It". The mysterious craft came to a gradual stop turning towards the scout. The tech looked Terran but not like any ship he had seen. "I am requesting dock permission, maybe they are in trouble". The HUD reported the transmission of the universal dock signal, there was a pause then the reply "Dock permission declined" flashed across the HUD. That suggested the crafts systems were Terran in origin but could still be a hostile pirate or renegade.

A survival instinct made the scout veer to the right, at the same moment a plasma shaft erupted from the unknown craft catching the edge of his right shield. "Two can play that game" the pilot said gritting his teeth. Swinging the nimble scout round, he noticed the predictive target had failed to switch on. "Great!" he shouted in frustration. This meant the hostile ship was recognised by the combat system as a friend. It should have also prevented the incoming fire from causing damage by modulating his shields to the weapons frequency. This was very wrong. Only a ship on a policing mission could cause damage to a friendly ship with the IFF on. "I'm gonna have to do this

the old way". He switched his own IFF off and heaved the stick up narrowly avoiding a fresh burst of fire from the dorsal turret. There were two rules for space combat. Never remain at constant speed or course, predictive systems were just too good. Static or moving at a constant speed were the same thing relative to another ship. You had to keep changing direction, speed or both. The second rule was to keep your weapons on target. This could be done irrespective of movement. Momentum would keep a ship flying in a direction until the engines vectored into a different angle. That meant ships could be turned to point at an enemy whilst travelling for a while relative to the target, changing speed all the time, skidding in an unpredictable curve. The mass of the larger ship prevented it from turning so quickly and kept it on a straighter course. This gave the scout a much-needed advantage.

The HUD emanated a phasing sound betraying the enemy's position. In space you cannot hear anything, but the HUD was linked to a surround radar that gave an audible signal that allowed a pilot to sense the proximity and size of another craft. The twisting dance of the ships traced out curves in the sky. Shields flared on each ship as hits found their mark. Going for broke, the scout set a collision course for the rear of the miner concentrating on its rear shields coming in low to avoid the turret. The enemy twisted and turned as best it could to evade the deadly stream of fire. The engines started to glow as the scout's shots finally penetrated the rear shields. Now disabled the ship was an easier target. Yet it refused to power down, the universal signal of surrender honoured even by renegades and pirates. Still its guns blazed. The scout turned and gave a final burst at the dorsal turret aiming to disable it. The burst hit the enemy amidships and in a blinding flash it was gone scattering debris in all directions.



Even as the scout ship lined up and scanned a small fragment of wreckage the long range radar showed three more ships approaching. The pilot quickly switched the radar off to lower his detect range and retreated to the warp path he had used to enter the sector. He managed to enter the warp before the newcomers detected him. There was an audible collective breath of relief from the audience.

The video ended and the lights turned on. The commander raised his hand to quieten the wave of mutterings that echoed around the room. "Let me introduce you to Professor Tamara Shaa". A beautiful woman in her thirties dressed in Sol uniform stepped up to the lectern. She opened a file marked highly classified and pinned a strand of dark hair behind her ear as she leant forward to read her notes. She looked up her dark eyes fixing the gaze of the audience. "Everything I say in this room is classified. I lead the team assigned to examine the transmissions from the". She paused selecting her words carefully, "unidentified craft. The encryption code signature was at first completely unrecognised, yet Deepest Blue did manage to negotiate a basic protocol using its retrogressive comms algorithm." This was a little too technical for some of the audience. The professor sensed this and restated "The craft used an outdated communications code unused for decades. This was unknown to our present comms catalogue, but we searched historic databases and found a match." Silence filled the room, all that could be heard was the deep subtle ever present hum of distant power generation. "The protocol matched that of Space Exploration the first corporation to attempt to exploit the resources of deep space." The professor again paused letting that sink in.

It was common knowledge of the corporations initial success mining the asteroid belt and producing unimaginable wealth. However the mission had eventually been destroyed by the Seiddab attack. The failure was catastrophic for the company, the stock fell and the huge global corporation disappeared. "Despite this we could not find any record of the protocol actually being used. In fact, the lack of data lead us to investigate further. Every internet transaction leaves traces, we forensically pieced together what should have been there by looking at the shape that was missing.". This was starting to get technical again, but Tamara was trying to explain the complicated science of shadowing in information theory in simple terms." Information has mass, a single bit of data can be destroyed but even that destruction leaves hints as to the data. Given the interconnectivity and duplication across global systems it becomes impossible to completely erase anything. It would be like trying to turn back time. Like a column of smoke being dispersed in an air stream the data is increasingly spread out but is still there. All you need is a big enough computer with enough connections to piece it back together. We were slowly able to reconstruct what happened ".

She slowly gained momentum as she became more confident.

"Shortly after the expedition to mine the asteroid belt its rewards were used to fund a secret and greatly more ambitious project was put into place. Using resource from the asteroids a small collection of self sufficient AI ships was assembled and launched into the outer reaches of the Solar System. The idea was to find resource in the great belt of matter surrounding the system. The automatic ships were to mine resources and use it to build bases like the ones we use today, for later occupation by humans. Indeed the plans see to match our bases. The project was really clever, it was small in scale but cleverly designed to scale up into massive proportions. Completely controlled by AI the system was designed to replicate and explore further. Exponential growth was indeed possible, which could have led to the first interstellar colonisation. "

This was interesting, it predated the present initiative by at least three decades. Everybody knew why completely autonomous systems were outlawed shortly before the Seiddab War. A near global destruction had been narrowly avoided when automated systems including vital systems and military installations started to talk to each other and stopped responding to human command. It was only by the intervention of a mysterious group of hackers known as Dark Light that the systems were isolated from each other and eventually turned off. Since then, pure AI systems have been illegal and the fail safe fifth generation AI engineered. Yet it now seemed an AI system with the potential to be the largest ever built had been launched into the outer reaches of the system.

She looked right at the audience speaking slowly. "We now believe that the Seiddab consisted of later generations of the original ships sent to colonise the outer system." There were looks of disbelief from the audience. "We know what the S.E.I.D.D.A.B really are". She spelt out the letters one by one. We discovered the name of the mission: SEIDDAB stands for. Space Exploration Initiative: Droids Deploying Autonomous Biomes.

"And I thought it was just BADDIES spelt backwards" someone exclaimed raising a ripple of laughter breaking the tension in the room. "35 years and I never realised that" said another to more laughs. Yet this was serious stuff. "Thank you Professor " the commander interjected. "We cannot be sure yet whether the hostility of the Seiddab is due to the same AI anomaly experienced all those years ago. The timeline fits, the whole project could have been designed by AI engineering. The destruction of all records of the project is either a huge attempt to cover up by those in charge, or by the AI. It would explain the reason for the destruction of the Space Exploration headquarters in Chicago during the Seiddab attack.. If so, humanity may now be facing its greatest challenge. It is up to us to eliminate this threat".

"IFF codes and shield frequencies have been changed so we can hit these automatons. We have programmed Deepest Blue to give each detected enemy craft a recognisable call sign ". Pilots were proud of their call signs usually obtained during their basic training. "The enemies call signs all relate to failed computer systems". He gave a wry smile. This was designed to raise the morale of pilots by assigning names to the enemy such as "Sloppy disk" .

"Our mission is survival, We must prevent this AI threat achieving exponential growth. It is only a matter of time before it is strong enough to return to Earth. In order to do this we need to protect our own bases and build up our forces. This is still a commercial operation and you will be paid well for each mission but will be expected to contribute towards the cost of replacement ships." This was standard practice, the best way to make pilots look after their ships. "Do well and you can get rich. Failure is not an option. At all costs we must protect our control bases ". Every pilot understood what that meant, That was where they would be housed while virtually flying their ships. As pilots gained rank and prestige they could fly several ships assisted by their subordinate copilots. The best pilots could control many ships simultaneously by just taking over at vital moments.

"One other thing, be on the lookout for alien artifacts. Several items have been found at diverse locations across the system. Each has allowed us to reverse engineer and improve some aspect of our technology. We estimate the enemy has very similar tech levels to our own so anything that gives us an edge is important"

Just then a klaxon sounded from somewhere outside the briefing room. The commander looked at his communicator. "All pilots report to their stations, hostile craft have entered the sector". The room burst into activity as the pilots scrambled to their stations deep within the base leaving papers scattered and chairs overturned. In a few seconds the room was empty.

The Seiddab war had begun.



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