

review

video game

Tron 2.0

Buena Vista Interactive/Monolith 2003

by Patrick Lichty

The movie *Tron* (1982), despite its admittedly campy story line of a rogue programmer who, digitized into a corporate mainframe, unwittingly becomes the instrument of freedom for the computer world, became a cultural icon for 80s computer culture. The emergence of Silicon Valley, the advent of personal computers, and the Pac-Man / Galaga-dominated suburban video arcades set a colorful backdrop for Disney's fanciful exploration of the digital world. And, in creating *Tron*, Buena Vista / Disney spared no expense in the creation of revolutionary computer graphics techniques while relying on the vision of now-venerable designers such as Moebius, Ron Cobb, and Syd Mead. The result was a highly stylistic film with an entertaining but often dodgy story line, which has remained a cult favorite for two decades.

All right -- let's face facts. I'm an old *Tron* fanatic who wanted to do computer animation and get behind the bar of a Light Cycle. As I said before, the story line and acting was far from perfect. However, the technical advances and stylistic achievements aptly captured a moment in electronic culture, and in my opinion, represent one of the more wonderfully stylized worlds on film, ranking with *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*.

Now, on the 20th anniversary of *Tron*, Buena Vista Interactive has released what I would call a first-person 'shooter' that almost doubles as interactive machinima with *Tron 2.0*. In this scenario, the protagonists of the prior film (Warner and Flynn) have risen to the top of their own software company (assumed to have come from the original ENCOM) and are under threat of a hostile takeover by the evil FutureCom Corporation, possibly to acquire your company's secrets of digitizing matter. Your character is Jet (short for Jethro -- a bit of a stretch) Bradley, son of Alan, young prodigy of the company, and erstwhile hacker. In short, when there is trouble in the network, the Net accidentally recognizes you for your father and digitizes you, so that you can fight a viral infection called 'the Corruption' and then make your way back to the physical world.

To go beyond that would mean to spoil the plot of the game, but I was somewhat skeptical about whether the world of *Tron*, which relied so much upon inter-'program' relations, would translate well into a First-Person Shooter. But perhaps the lower-tech culture of social interaction that unfolds through playing *Space Invaders* at the local arcade does translate into the more solitary existence of an avatar in a level-based FPS. One could

draw an analogy and declare that while the early 80s were *Pac-Man* and *Defender*, the 00s are more akin to *Max Payne* and *Quake*, which would make perfect sense. In this way, *Tron 2.0* might be seen as a fine translation of the cultural mirror that its cinematic fore-runner created.

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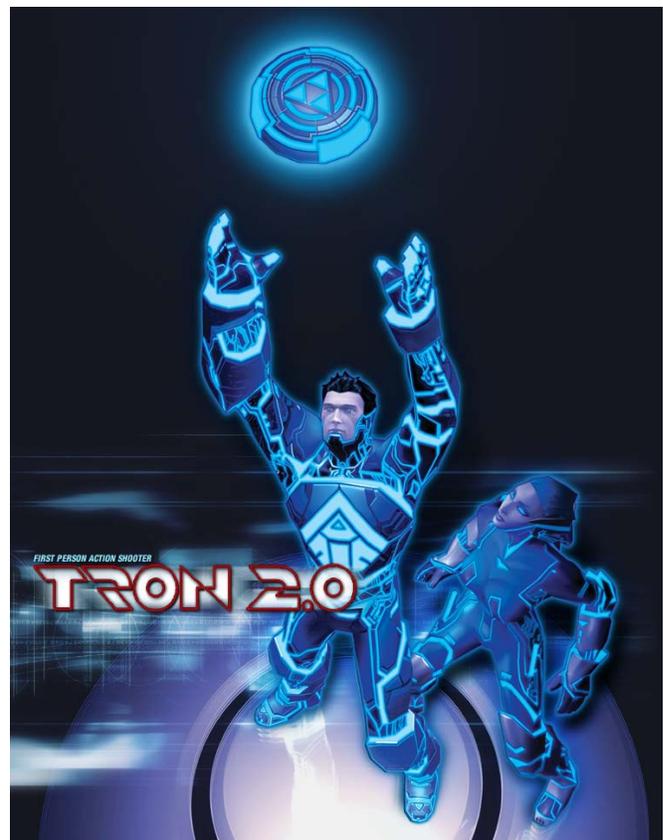


Image Courtesy of Buena Vista Interactive

Another point of interest referred to by the game is the change in the online world that has occurred after twenty years. The mainframe has given way to a net of clusters, networks, and connected devices, and your avatar (Jet) must make his way through the Net to battle the Corruption. This takes you to a number of contracting digital environments, from a cutting edge server to ENCOM's old mainframe (it's still hooked to the Net) and even a PDA, which is obviously made up only of a scant handful of rooms.

Gameplay kept me on the computer for about a week, and although I had a few misgivings about the recreation of *Tron* as a FPS, I was dazzled enough by the graphics and not distracted by the story line (*Gandhi* it isn't). The look of the movie has been recaptured with help from NVidia, who developed new real-time rendering techniques to recreate the look of the movie (and pretty well). Bruce Boxleitner and Cindy Morgan are back to somewhat reprise their roles from *Tron*, but the voice acting for your character, Jet, is enough to make you hit the SPACE bar immediately. Let's hope that he isn't part of any possible film sequel. The music picks up elements from the original Wendy Carlos tracks, but soon devolves into tolerable, but somewhat grating techno-mush that is vaguely reminiscent of Carlos. I would almost recommend getting an old soundtrack CD off Ebay and put it in your CD player.

Buena Vista / Monolith have also included a level editor for your own scenarios, a multi-player disc arena (where I repeatedly got annihilated), and the light cycle arena. If you ever wanted to get behind the han-



Image Courtesy of Buena Vista Interactive

dlebars of one of these bit-rockets, here's your chance. *Tron 2.0* offers a number of challenges to go through, and even has a new Super Light Cycle that Disney asked Syd Mead to design specifically for the movie, I mean, game. Although you can drive from a first person perspective, I highly recommend using the third person mode as the reaction time is split-second and you can't run your head from side to side while in the cycle.

Buena Vista Interactive has nothing to be ashamed of in *Tron 2.0*, although I'm not sure that it's the next Quake. For old *Tron* aficionados, it offers an excellent experience of stepping inside one of your favorite universes, and for gamers, it offers a good mix of different puzzles and challenges in combination with a beautiful terrain to keep you entertained, even if it isn't as radical an advance in gaming as its predecessor was compared to film. However, *Tron 2.0* has maintained the original's ability to wonderfully reflect the computer culture of the time, and from a cyberculture studies perspective, is quite worth having on your hard drive.

Get behind the controls of the new Super Light Cycle, designed by Syd Mead



Image Courtesy of Buena Vista Interactive