

Tom Clancy's H.A.W.X.

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Mach 1 is blisteringly fast! 761.2mph to be precise! What's special about it? Why give a seemingly random speed a specific name? For starters, very few of us will ever achieve this pace, and the decommissioning of Concorde has only exacerbated the situation. Of course this elusive velocity is also known as the speed of sound, anything beyond is 'supersonic', sounds good eh? So, how do you not only fancy flying in excess of the sound barrier, but also engaging in a spot of aerial warfare at only a few hundred metres off the ground? All you require is 20/20 vision, the reactions of a cat on Red Bull and a copy of Ubisoft Romania's H.A.W.X.

H.A.W.X. is a brand new genre within the Tom Clancy universe, you'll find no Sam Fisher or squad based shooter here. Those that read XboxGameZone's H.A.W.X. preview will be aware that you'll not find much in the way of simulator here either. Sure you can find the odd dial or six if you choose to use the obscuring cockpit view, but they're just 'detail'. Whether they're even giving any sort of realistic feedback is debatable, but they look nice. Enough with the instrumentation! The only readout needed is for your missiles and countermeasures; any other numerical information (even speed) is irrelevant. This game is primarily about blasting enemy planes out of the sky whilst travelling at Mach lots! The only things faster than your aircraft are the missiles that relentlessly pursue you through the skies. Hoorah for chaff!

So what you get is a very 'arcadey' feeling aerial warfare game, but let's not forget the Clancy influence. Underpinning all the dogfighting action is a story that kicks off with a direct link to GRAW 2. You are David Crenshaw, a crack pilot of the United States Air Force and newly promoted leader of the elite H.A.W.X. squadron. Your first mission sees you bailing Scott Mitchell and his crack Ghost team out of a sticky situation. Tanks, RPG emplacements and closing Apache helicopters surround your entrenched ground colleagues. So in you step to balance the odds, with a few joint strike missiles you not only tip the odds, but totally crush the opposition until they run with tails between their legs. Tank beats supersonic jet fighter? I don't think so! However, during the Ghost Team support mission you find out that the US Government has run out of lolly, and as a result is disbanding your squadron. H.A.W.X. is an acronym for 'High Altitude Warfare eXperimental squadron', so I guess the 'experiment' didn't work what with the credit crunch.

Fortunately a spot of work crops up with Artemis, a Private Military Company (PMC). Each mission for Artemis brings further success and of course more in the way of folding stuff for the private company. Eventually Artemis becomes the largest and most powerful PMC, even rivalling the might of the U.S. military. Hardly unexpectedly, the greed and power of the Artemis monopoly culminates in a direct conflict with the U.S. forces and you're stuck in the middle. Being the decent, patriotic thoroughbred that you are, you and your team abandon your employers and give their missiles back to them... Targeted and fired of course! The heroics of you and your wingmen not only earn U.S. government thanks but the reinstatement of the H.A.W.X. squadron. From this point on your missions solely revolve around the escalating conflict with Artemis. Tom Crenshaw your country needs you in it's hour of dire need...

The campaign takes place over 19 missions and all are nicely varied in both theme and setting. Although a lot of the missions do involve you defending a structure/aircraft/boat etc, it doesn't ever feel like you're just a high altitude babysitter. As you progress numerous planes are unlocked, however the default option is always the best. Should you wish to experiment with your choice of mount then that's all well and good, but for example taking an air-superior SU-27 on a slow bombing run isn't ideal. Nonetheless, you won't find yourself getting bored with the selection of aircraft available, there are said to be over 50 in all.

Now, as mentioned this game doesn't do 'sim', so when you start a mission you're airborne and generally heading in the right direction for battle. Navigation is by means of a 'TAC-map', which can be alternated with a close range radar. Waypoints are clearly marked on the TAC-map, updated as your mission evolves and complimented with radio instructions from your superiors. You may have the freedom of the skies but the missions do feel a little linear in the way they play out. However don't be dissuaded, you're more often than not kept far too busy to notice the event orchestration. One thing H.A.W.X. doesn't do is quiet. Multiple bogies? How about multi-multiple bogies, quadrupled, with a few extra thrown in for good measure? The targets also range between land, sea and air, so your bogies are not only plentiful but also varied in size, shape and speed. (Think about the handkerchief requirements!) Obtaining a missile lock is a cinch, just keep your target within your HUD (Heads Up Display), get close enough and Bob's yer uncle; a red lock-on diamond. Just in case you're not sure what you've targeted with your missile system, a small window on your HUD displays the tank/MIG/destroyer as applicable. When you unleash your hi-tech, heat guided death you can hold the fire button for a 'missiles-eye' view. It's very satisfying to get a first person perspective of your shot disappearing up your target's tailpipe (ooerr missus).

When the action heats up it's akin to flying within a swarm of deadly mosquitoes (the annoying insect ones). With enemy planes everywhere, missiles closing from all directions and anti-aircraft fire it can be a tad overwhelming for the novice. Thankfully Ubisoft has capitalised on a bit of near future technology to assist your plight for air domination. A handy device called ERS (Enhanced Reality System) literally has you flying through hoops. Once activated, following an onscreen vector path plots the optimum trajectory for lining up the next attack or dodging the 'incomings'. It makes lining up your next kill a sure-fire thing; however using raw unaided top-gun skill is undoubtedly the fastest route to target lock-

on. But it doesn't stop there! Part way through the campaign you get the opportunity to unleash the real 'Tom Cruise within' through the introduction of 'assistance off mode'. Not only can you now make death-defying aircraft equivalents of a hand-brake turn, but also fully stall your plane so you drop like a stone. What's the point of that then? Well, it happens to be particularly handy for dodging lots of missiles. Plummet to the ground for a bit and then hit full thrust to arrow away from the rapidly homing threats. Additionally 'assistance off mode' gives you a unique 3rd person isometric view that is offset by a reasonable distance. This gives the added benefit of a huge spatial view around your plane, whilst still being able to maintain control. Best bit though, it looks like those infamous movie dogfights!

As you'd expect with an arcade game, the controls are simple and intuitive. In fact your plane can be flown with the left thumbstick alone, brakes and thrust are applied with the left and right triggers respectively. Additionally you can make your plane strafe with the bumper buttons, and that really is all there is to it. The controls are sharp, responsive and everything works as it should. The only thing I would say is that the numerous planes don't handle significantly differently from one another. Also, as with pretty much all the Clancy games now, there are voice controls available if you have an Xbox headset. However, don't expect anything on the scale of Endwar, the commands are basic and can all be activated through the joypad. The voice recognition is a bit hit and miss, after a few failed missile launches I turned the system off and simply ignored it.

Let's not forget that H.A.W.X. is a squadron and you're in command, although don't get too power crazy, your options are somewhat limited. Basically you have the option to order your two wingmen to either attack your current target, or defend you. Whilst on the subject of your wingmen, don't expect anything too intelligent, they don't impress. In fact, they're about as much use as a cat flap in a budgie cage! However, there is a remedy for this – replace the stupid A.I. with a few mates over Xbox Live. Playing the campaign with up to four friends (or strangers for that matter) over Live is certainly the best way to get the most out of it. You'll find that some well organised teamwork will pay dividends in ensuring the success of your mission. If it's all too easy then crank up the difficulty to the max, you and your buddies will have to work well together to win. On it's most lenient setting H.A.W.X. is at it's furthest from realism as you don't even have to worry about the odd missile strike or two. Should you up the difficulty level then your plane is a wee bit more fragile and has a lower weapon load-out. Completing all the missions on the hardest setting without human assistance would be very difficult indeed.

One of the key selling points of H.A.W.X. is its use of GeoEye satellite imagery to generate authentic landscapes and cities. From up high the result is truly stunning and the scenery below looks real. If you get a bit closer then you notice that buildings are solid 3D polygons. Should you get real close then things can become fairly pixelated, any closer, and well, you're dead, or 'killed by natural causes' as H.A.W.X. eloquently puts it. For the amount of time you spend super-close to the ground the detail degradation isn't a major issue. The plane models also look very good and authentic to their real-life counterparts. There's a high level of detail everywhere and speed doesn't suffer as a consequence, the game runs silky smooth for the most part. Overall the graphics are very polished, right down to the little details like vapour trails from your wingtips. Sonically H.A.W.X. is about what you'd expect, lots of jet noises, lock-on warnings, panicked radio chatter and of course explosions; lots of them. As with all the Tom Clancy titles the presentation is clean, friendly and effective, giving a well-built feeling to the whole package.

So is Ubisoft's H.A.W.X. one for the Tom Clancy fans? Well, probably not for the diehard Ghost Recon and Rainbow veterans - The arcade elements are very strong and will undoubtedly put off a few of you cerebral soldiers. Equally, the teamwork is weak unless you take your conflict online with the co-op campaign missions, however it's here that H.A.W.X. really shines. Playing the missions with friends gives a huge replayability factor, particularly in view of the experience points system. Essentially your performance is measured with each kill, killing streaks and so on. The result is a Call of Duty 4 style reward system; more experience unlocks extra planes and weapons. This is a great and simple addition that will undoubtedly keep you coming back for more. There's also a multiplayer versus mode for up to eight players over Live, however this is limited to Team Deathmatch. Endlessly circling your adversaries whilst dodging and countering missile strikes is fun for a few games, but doesn't really offer much long-term other than a few Achievements.

Yes, H.A.W.X. is similar in a lot of ways to Ace Combat 6, but it brings a whole lot of extras to aerial warfare on consoles. Ubisoft Romania know what they're doing when it comes to dogfighting, as they demonstrated with Blazing Angels 2. The pedigree's there, the fun's there, just don't take H.A.W.X. too seriously and you'll have a blast.

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