

Real time combat in pause mode?

Central to the entire UFO: Aftershock game is the combat squad, without which you're not going to be able to do a lot. These are the guys you use in the missions to either defend territory, take over new territories or attack enemy territories in order to expand your Commonwealth faction. The combat squad consists of conscripts taken from any of the territories you own, so they can be made up of a range of different types, each with different abilities and specialities. For example, Human soldiers are good all-rounders and by far the most numerous species on the planet. Cyborgs are part man and machine and can be upgraded with various implants making them good front line combat soldiers. Lastly come the Psionics, no, not people handy with palm-held computer, but people with mental powers, they offer up squad or area wide effects and are best used as support troops for the main squad.

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The squad is where a strong RPG element comes in as each soldier has 14 different skills and six different attributes. Their skills range from combat and missile skills through to stealth and observation... and just about every possible skill a soldier could need in a future conflict except perhaps flower arranging and interior design... The abilities are a little less wide ranging but still cover the usual like strength, dexterity and intelligence. In true RPG fashion, soldiers earn experience points that level them up and allow you to increase their attributes with a knock on effect to the skills related to that attribute. In addition to this levelling up, you can train your soldiers to give them extra abilities such as using specialist equipment, better hearing or a whole range of special abilities such as being ambidextrous for some John Woo style twin gun action or Enemy Sight to be able to see what an enemy is seeing. Of course, some of these abilities are species dependant.

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The combat itself takes place in real time but with a unique twist. When a mission starts the game is paused and that's when you issue orders to the squad. You can just issue one set of orders for the entire squad or set out orders for each individual member. Once you're happy you hit the play button and off they go. But what happens if your squad strolls straight into an enemy camp? Well here is where the game will pause again (you can actually set what events cause a pause in the options panel) and you now have a chance to take stock and issue a new set of orders. So if your squad spots the enemy you can then choose to either take an aimed shot, spread the squad out or just spray the area in the hope of a hit. As you're planning this there's a whole wealth of data produced to give you an idea of how effective your strategy will be, even to the point of warning you of the chance of a bit of friendly fire if you have snapshots going over the heads of squad mates. Success in these missions will see you winning the territory and then be able to head back to base to perhaps upgrade your troops, research some new kit and then plan your next move.

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