Faster Than Light

What happens when you cross traditional fantasy adventuring with lasers and vacuum asphyxiation? We send **Alex Cox** into space to find out.

In brief...

❯❯ A deep space *Rogue*-like game. Sort of. Adventure, pillage, then die. See also: *Stellar Edge*, *Nethack*.

We're in a genre conundrum. *FTL* has been tagged from its inception as a *Rogue*-like title, and while the Kickstarter-funded space adventure certainly exhibits qualities of the genre – permadeath, a top-down viewpoint and a harsh difficulty curve to name but three – it's not really like *Rogue* at all. It shares more in common with classic European board games such as *Space Alert*, or at least board game-inspired games such as *Xcom: Enemy Unknown*, mixing a vaguely turn-based structure with blind, unerring panic in a confined area. It's a delicious concoction.

The core of *FTL* sees you hopping through the furthest reaches of a randomised outer space. Your fuel-limited ship launches from encounter to encounter, sometimes stumbling upon something good, more often plunging into something very bad. Enemy craft must be defeated (or escaped from) with whatever crew and equipment you have managed to scrounge, all while you manage your ship's power levels precisely and micro-manage the effects of lasers and missiles on your fragile hull and the vital systems within.

Sometimes, these will be organic systems, and your trusty pilot will be killed, or a rogue alien will beam aboard and start kicking up a ruckus. Sometimes, they'll be physical, knackering your engines or plunging your ship into darkness. You might need to fight fires by flushing the corridors of
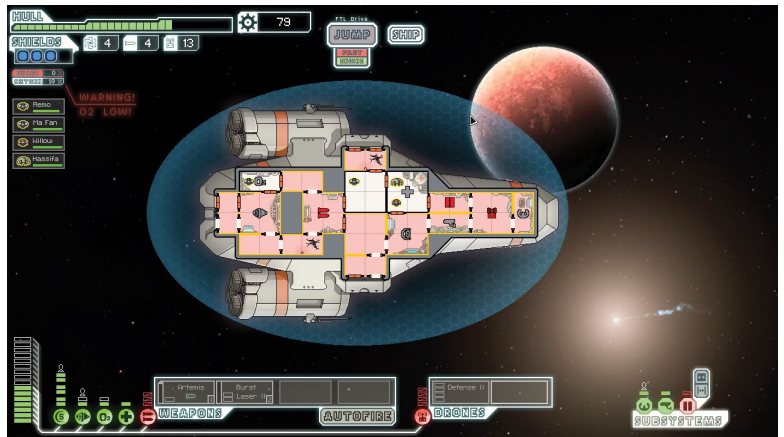
❯ Ideally, you'll avoid a post-combat situation where your ship is starved of oxygen, cracked and full of broken systems. Ideally.

your ship of oxygen, or command your crew to fix a system while they choke to death. The life of an ethereal starship deity is not an easy one.

Risk and reward

Games such as this live or die by their economics. *Nethack*, the classic traditional example of a *Rogue*-a-like, covers every step of your journey with a risk to balance out later reward. *FTL*'s exploratory overworld game offers choices, but it's nowhere near as involved or varied as its fantasy cousin. You hop between stars, and sometimes you're given something to do. The direct, text-based multiple choice scenarios reflect the old *Choose Your Own Adventure* books more than anything else. There's something

happening. Want to interfere? There's little skill or judgement involved in choosing the right answer.

Early on, you'll take perceived risks in order to potentially bolster your ship or your crew. Later, you'll avoid them. Very rarely, you'll get a bonus option based on an upgrade you've applied to your ship, and you'll take it because it's the obvious choice. Although you won't stumble upon the same situations very often, mechanically this doesn't feel very special.

The monetary economics of *FTL* do, to its credit, work very well. There's always a balance to be found between repairing your ship's hull at one of the lightly scattered shops or choosing to pick up pricey new crew members or weaponry. You'll rarely, if ever, have

Step-by-step: Fighting for fun and profit
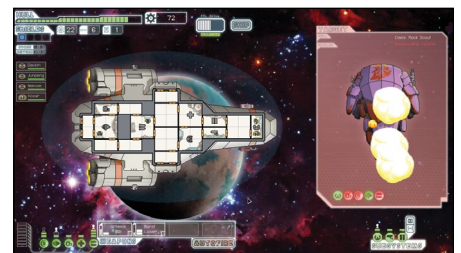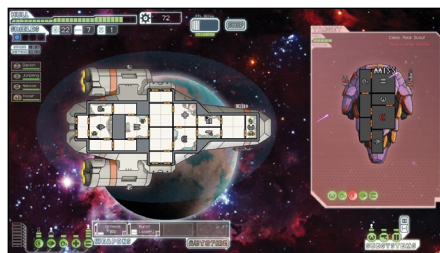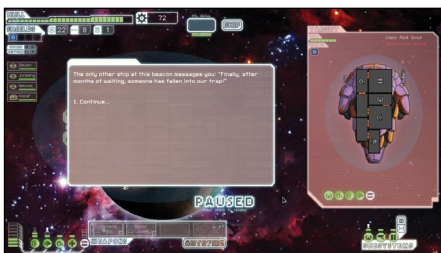
1 Oh, it's on
Roll up to a node within a galaxy and you may well be faced with a confrontation. You could always decide to run away instead, but where's the fun in that?

2 Pick a spot
Now decide how best to take them down. We've started by lobbing a missile at their shields, then pelting their weapons area so they can't fight back.

3 Boom
Batter your foe successfully, and they'll fall to bits and leave a cache of precious loot for you to gather up and help you on your journey to the next star system.

❯ **Choices, choices.** There's no way of reliably determining the outcome of either option, so your fate is squarely in the hands of the RNG.

enough coin to do both. Random chance is king; if you make a run through the first five galaxies and don't find the weapons or upgrades you need, you're screwed. If missiles make it through your defences in deep space, you're screwed. If you inadvertently jump into an asteroid field with a weakened craft – well, you get the idea.
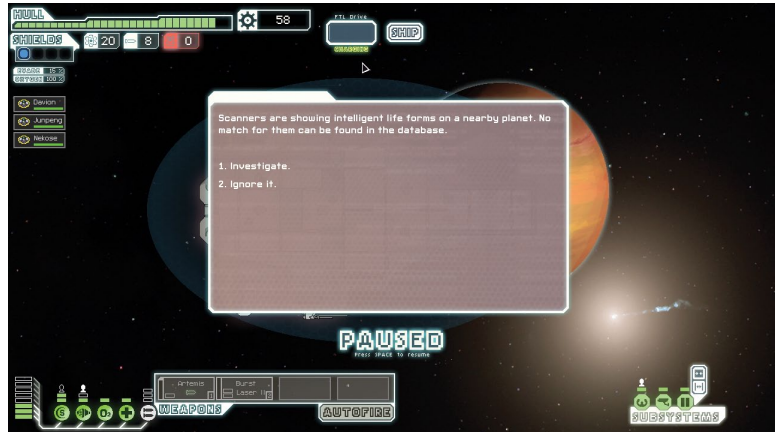
Good luck

FTL is a game about luck as much as it is about skill. That's not to say there isn't skill involved. Properly managing your crew is some kind of dark art, which is probably why we spent most of our time with *FTL*'s interface paused, considering each action carefully. Each crew member needs to be in the right place at the right time, because manning stations on your ship gives you bonuses, and a crew member experienced at piloting, for example, will boost these bonuses further.

Faster-charging engines mean you can run away from unwinnable fights more quickly, and having a manned weapons station increases the speed at which your arsenal recharges, which gives you a vital upper hand in the near-random back and forth of combat. Then there's managing power, a juggling act if ever there was one; if you've not spent enough money on upgrading your ship's systems, you'll need to switch certain subsystems off in order to power others.

Later on in the game, the enemies become much stronger and more powerful. Passage through the last couple of galaxies, particularly given the ever-encroaching fleet of extra-tough enemies that keeps you moving

forwards, is not straightforward. It's hard, even on *FTL*'s easiest mode. The temptation is to hang around, cover every node, and collect all you can before moving forward. That would seem to be *FTL*'s optimum strategy, but the fact that you're being chased means it's just not possible.

Although we struggled to come to terms with the cruel whims of the random number generator while

> ## "FTL is a game that tells you stories, so it's hard not to get attached."

playing *FTL*, it's the thing which really does turn it into a proper *Rogue*-a-like. Not every run will be successful. Some will end at your first proper encounter, some will take you most of the way to the end, and you never know what you're going to find in the randomly-generated galaxies. There are enough encounters and situations that

exploration never feels directly repetitive, and enough creative, tricky situations possible within the scope of *FTL*'s mechanics that it doesn't get boring quickly. Disheartening, though? Certainly. When your carefully named, nurtured and managed crew is slaughtered in the name of random chance, you'll be gutted. *FTL* is a game that tells you stories, so it's hard not to get attached.

Long term, though, you won't stay attached. There's one thing that makes most *Rogue*-like titles eminently replayable that *FTL*'s random encounters and questionable rewards for success can't possibly provide: learning. Every death in *Nethack* teaches you something about how the intricate game works, and you get progressively better because of it. Your reward is knowledge.

Leaping through *FTL*'s galaxies, once we'd worked out the basic mechanics of crew and system management, left us arguably more stupid – and definitely more annoyed – than we were before. There's a cruel challenge to it, particularly in the end game, and various amusing achievements to work towards. But mastering *FTL* just doesn't feel as valuable as it should. **LXF**

❯ **Before you begin your mission, you can customise your loadout.**