

# Upgrade

By IronDuke

Mark finally had enough cash to purchase a new ship. His old piece of trash was barely enough to pay the bills, let alone make a profit. Those special runs he had done definitely helped though. Now he was browsing the selection of ships at the shipyard, looking for something of a trader/fighter combined, with a little snazzy attitude, and the ability to do other jobs fairly well if he felt like it.

None of the ships quite fit the bill, however. He tapped the "Request assistance" button on the screen, and waggled his head side to side as the computer voice burbled cheerily, "Please wait for assistance" like a 21<sup>st</sup> century grocery self-checkout. After a couple minutes of foot-tapping, a man about five feet nine inches, glided around the corner. It took Mark a moment to realize he was gliding on a hoverboard, which made the pilot a little jealous. It also meant the man was actually a little shorter than he looked.

"How may I help you, sir?"

Mark pointed to the screen. "Howdy, I want to try the custom ship generator, but it says it needs someone to unlock it."

The man nodded as he glided next to the terminal. "Ah, yes, that policy was instituted about nine months ago. Some crankster entered too many contradictory parameters and nearly destroyed the shipyard. What kind of ship were you wanting?"

Mark swiped a few ships past. "A fighting and trading ship that has the ability to do at least decently any other job I try. It also needs a little je ne sais quoi; I'll know when I see it. None of these ships quite have it, except possibly... (swipe swipe) this one."

The man, whose name tag read "Billy Boy" for some reason, studied the vessel outlined on the screen. It was indeed a fighter/trader about ninety meters long, with some spare ability, and had sharp, clean curves. "Billy Boy" gave Mark a once-over, noting his rakish hair style and dark blue uniform, which had an abundance of oval elements. Thinking for a moment, he brought up the ship customization screen after tapping in his access code. Mark watched with interest as the man rapidly tapped a few parameters in, coming up with a ship fairly similar to the premade one, but oh-so-much more beautiful.

The ship had triple curved-oval shaped thrusters on front and rear, arranged like a triangle, with a quad layout of main weapons mounted on short wings in an interesting configuration. The wings looked like someone had taken an albatross wing when raised for a flap, and one when pushed down all the way, combined them, and stuck them on a ship. Turrets lined the rear half of the ship, concentrated around the two cargo hatches. The premade ship had had twin engines shaped like giant parentheses, which were definitely impressive looking, but not nearly as nice as these.

“Now that’s what I like! That’s an excellent shape. I just want to see the stats.”

“Not a problem.” Billy tapped a couple times and brought up an additional window. Mark quickly read the medium speed, high maneuverability, high firepower, medium cargo capacity, medium expandability.

“If it’s not too hard, I’d like the speed cranked up a little, as well as the cargo. You decrease the firepower if you need to.” Mark would have said more, but was made slightly speechless when Billy simply tapped a button to turn the stats into sliders, and changed them as requested, then pressed “Confirm.” A loading bar appeared for three seconds, then disappeared. The ship on the screen had changed. The quad weapon layout had been pulled closer to the hull and given a swept-back appearance, which would definitely help with atmospheric flight, and looked more like his own personal style. The engines had been given a slight elongation, with a slant to keep them from becoming obtrusive, which again fit his style. The turrets had been rearranged to permit a longer hull, which in turn meant larger cargo space. Best of all, when he looked at the stats, the firepower had not gone down at all.

“That’s incredible! I like it even better this way. What are the drawbacks of this change, if any?”

Billy glanced at the screen as he tapped the “Expand” button. Additional stats filled the screen, such as shielding, size, and detectability. “The slightly larger hull makes for an easier target, but that’s offset by the higher speed. The detectability has gone up as well. Also, the larger size is harder to shield by the stock shield generator, but larger size means you can fit a larger generator if you need to. I’d say the only real drawback, when all is said and done, is the higher detectability. Oh, and the price went up ten percent.”

Mark glanced at the listed price. Custom vessels weren’t exactly cheap, but he’d anticipated that, and had saved enough. “Not a problem. I think I’ll take this one.”

“Just enter your credit information and where to deliver the ship. The estimated construction time is two weeks.”

Mark quickly tapped through the menus, asking one final question as the transaction completed. “I’m just wondering now. The program for this thing managed to account for personal style, aesthetics, and previous ship design. Even when you simply moved up a slider to increase a random stat, the program not only did so without unduly compromising anything else, but managed to make the ship even more like what I wanted. What kind of software can do that? What’s it called?”

Billy replied promptly with a smile. “Procedural generation.”

The end.