

neak Peek: Carriers at War

by Karen Kaye

NOTE: Screen shots and information presented in this article are based on a pre-release version of Carriers at War and are subject to change before final release. Screen shots have been adapted to a system palette and then dithered, and thus may not represent the precise look of the game. This article is not a review.

If during the early eighties you owned an Apple II, chances are good that you also owned the original version of Carriers at War (CAW). It was a very successful game that tested the abilities of both the players and the 64K machines they were using. Strategic Studies Group has gone on to develop other products since the Apple II faded away, but over the years they were consistently receiving requests to update CAW. For all of those who bided their time patiently — or otherwise — the wait is nearly over.

While other nations experimented with and deployed carriers during World War II, Japan and the United States were the only forces to field them in large numbers. Despite the widely held pre-war opinion that battleships would decide the war between Japan and the US, a handful of carriers became the primary focus of naval operations. These weapon systems, with their rapid response time and ability to project air power, quickly emerged as the dominant force in the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. Carriers could project phenomenal striking power through their aircraft, but most were very vulnerable due to minimal armor protection, large size, and high quantities of aviation fuel carried on board. Carrier operations relied on deception, accurate intelligence, thorough planning, and a large dose of luck.

Overview. CAW is a simulation of World War II air/naval operations in the Pacific. The game covers nine major engagements: Pearl Harbor, Wake Island, Coral Sea, Midway, Guadalcanal, Eastern Solomons, Santa Cruz, Tarawa, and Philippine Sea. The players can choose to command either the Japanese or American forces, or engage in a two-player game on the same machine. Players accumulate victory points as the game progresses for such things as sinking enemy vessels and safely delivering invasion forces or cargo to a particular location.

Gameplay. After players select a scenario, they are given the choice of selecting which side to control. Furthermore, both sides have several command positions — both army air forces as well as naval task forces — which the players can choose to lead personally or allocate to computer control. Once the above parameters are specified, the scenario can be customized through the WarRoom™, to which SSG refers to as a revolutionary framework for customizing the Artificial Intelligence. It is an appropriate description. The WarRoom allows for a basic scenario to be modified to any number of variants and difficulty. Each scenario in the game is published with several WarRoom variants already included. Through a Construction Kit to be released at a later date, players will be able to modify the scenarios and include their own plans for the conduct of the battle.

Game play runs in five minute increments, and players may manually stop the action to give orders, or set up their preferences to induce an automatic break when a significant event occurs, such as the arrival of a new sighting report. The primary focus of the game is on maneuvers and the delivery of the first air strike on the enemy carrier task force, from which the other player rarely recovers. Surface action plays a secondary role, much as it did historically. The game depicts surface action from an overhead view, and breaks the task force up into the traditional components of rear, line and van, as well as a screened carrier/convoy area. Players are given the option to designate the targets for their torpedoes, main and secondary guns. Submarines are also depicted by the game, but they operate beyond the players' control. They do report their sightings, and will conduct independent attacks.

however, the real crux of this simulation is carrier operations. Sighting reports from one's search airplanes are invariably inaccurate at first. The prudent thing would be to wait and have further reports come in from the same search airplane, but time is a priceless commodity. What if the enemy's airplanes have already spotted the player's carriers, and are already on their way? What if the sighting report turns out to be inaccurate, and 200 aircraft set out to bomb a relatively harmless seaplane tender? These questions become even more nerve racking if the players elect to control only one of the command positions on their side. Why is the other commander failing to respond to this threat? Will the land based bombers arrive in time to contribute to this attack, or will they arrive piecemeal and be cut up by the enemy's Combat Air Patrol? CAW does a fantastic job of recreating the uncertainties facing a commander.

Players are given complete authority to plan for the forces under their command. Aircraft can be pre-armed in expectation of a dawn attack, squadrons can be sent out alone or joined up for a cohesive attack — which carries a higher chance of success but will take longer to get organized. Players can even gamble with long range strikes, where aircraft taking off from a carrier will strike a target at a range normal beyond their capabilities, then land at a nearby airfield. The following day the aircraft return to their carrier. Players make the same the gambles that were faced by Admirals Yamamoto and Nimitz.

The Interface. CAW contains a typical point-and-click interface, and players are presented information through two main windows. On the left is the Action/Data Screen where the map and the action of the game are displayed. The window on the right is the Command Screen, and this is where the controls for the game are predominantly located. Besides displaying the map, the weather conditions, the locations of one's own fleets, and sightings of enemy task groups, players can also display a wealth of data about the ships and airplanes under their control. The data banks give information on the performance of aircraft in four categories: (Engine) Power, Fire (power), Man(uverability), and Vul(nerability). The game even differentiates between various models of the same aircraft type. Ships are rated on their speed, armor (belt and deck), armament, and dimensions. In addition, carriers are restricted by two factors: the total number of aircraft that they can have dispatched, as well as spot number (the maximum number of aircraft that can be crowded onto the deck for take-off as a single strike).

Graphics. CAW takes advantage of the power of the Macintosh computer to display graphics. Information is clearly depicted on all screens. In the databases, each ship and aircraft is individually depicted. The air strike combat sequences can be configured to show each impact on a vessel, and as these add up, the entire ship can be engulfed in smoke and flames. Torpedo wakes and splashes from missed bombs are also depicted in the attack. The depiction of combat sequences is more than adequate for a strategy game, and for many will provide an insight on the effectiveness of their aircraft and pilots. Overall, the graphics contribute to make this simulation a visually pleasing experience.

Nuances. The game features many nuances that avid wargamers will really appreciate. Some of the WarRoom variants allow for hypothetical engagements and the inclusion of ships which were not historically available for a particular battle. For example, the Japanese carrier Shinano — a conversion of a Yamato class battleship, which the Japanese completed during the war but never operationally used — is included in one of the variants for the battle of Tarawa.

The game has been designed to support add-on scenarios. SSG has already announced the second game in the series: Japan Sweeps South. It will feature battles from the early years of the war, as well as a hypothetical engagement in 1936, when tensions between the two nations ran high. The company will also publish additional scenarios in RUN 5 magazine, which is published quarterly. Buyers can be assured that this will be a product that the company has strong plans to support.

A Final Look. CAW will require system 6.0.7 or higher, a hard drive, and 2.6 MB RAM. It is expected to ship in July. Those operating B&W machines will be disappointed. Due to a perceived reduction in this market, SSG plans to distribute only a 256-color version of the game. On the other hand, the flexibility of the interface and the ability of the player to control the complexity of the game should ensure its appeal to a broad spectrum of potential buyers. This is a much anticipated game in the Macintosh wargaming community, and when the wraps are off, SSG is likely to have another winner on their hands.

Those wishing to reserve an advance copy may contact the company directly. Information on telephone numbers and mail/on-line addresses can be found at the conclusion of the Gregor Whiley interview in this IMG issue.