

# review: ThrustMaster

by Tuncer Deniz

Type: Joystick

Publisher: ThrustMaster (503/639-3200)

Retail Price: FCS: \$149.95, WCS: \$99.95, RCS: \$149.95

Street Price: FCS: \$109.00, WCS: \$63.00, RCS: \$129.00

Requires: Mac with ADB port, System 7, the ThrustMaster Mac WCS and RCS require the ThrustMaster Mac FCS.

Protection: None

here was a time (not to long ago) when joysticks were almost non-existent in the Mac game market. But thanks to companies like Advanced Gravis (who gave us the MouseStick I, MouseStick II, and the Mac GamePad) and IGU Products (MacFly), the Mac market has seen a recent boom in joysticks for the Mac. After nearly a year in development, ThrustMaster Inc. recently released the ThrustMaster controls. These highly advanced flight controls bring a new sense of realism to arm-chair pilots like never before. Modeled after the controls found in real military aircraft, the ThrustMaster is a flight simmer's dream come true.....for a price.

**Briefing.** The complete ThrustMaster controls are 3 separate pieces (which are, naturally, each sold separately). The one required piece is the Flight Control System (FCS) which is basically the joystick and is used to control flight. The FCS is modeled after the stick found in the F-4 Phantom and is made of hard, lightweight plastic. It features 3 buttons, a trigger, and an eight-way half switch (used to change view directions). The Weapons Control System (WCS) is like the one found in the military's F-15 and is used as the throttle and also features 6 buttons, and a 3-way rocker switch. Finally, the Rudder Control System (RCS) is used to control the yaw of the plane. Yaw is used to point the aircraft's nose in a different direction from that of the flight path. The rudders can also be used to increase the rate of turn of the aircraft.

**Pre-Flight Check.** Installing the ThrusMaster and accompanying software is a relatively painless task. All you have to do is plug the ThrustMaster FCS to one of the ADB ports on your Macintosh. Like the MouseStick II, the FCS comes with a "Y" plug so you can plug the keyboard or mouse cable onto the back of the FCS plug and not lose one of your ADB ports.

The optional throttle and rudders plug into the base of the joystick.

The current version of the ThrustMaster software is 1.03, which fixes some drift problems found in previous versions of the software. Users have reported that the drift problems have all but disappeared with the new version of the software.

After you've installed the software, you must first calibrate the ThrustMaster controls with the ThrustMaster Calibrator software. This quick and easy 5 step process takes just a few minutes and ensures that the ThrustMasters are calibrated and working properly.

The ThrustMaster Strokes software allows you to customize the buttons and switches on all of the ThrustMaster controls. The software also allows you to customize the ThrustMaster to work with applications that don't directly support the ThrustMaster. About 25 customized sets come with the software for popular games like F/A-18 Hornet, Chuck Yeager's Air Combat, Prince of Persia 2, and more. Like the MouseStick II, the ThrustMaster software is "application aware" which means that once you have customized the buttons and switches for a particular game, those settings are automatically loaded when you launch the game. In the coming months, ThrustMaster will be releasing updates to the software and providing more customized sets as new games are released.

The ThrustMaster software also ships with an application called Tactical Advantage, which helps users get a visual representation of the button sequences. For example, when selecting the F/A-18 Hornet set, a picture of the joystick is shown with the accompanying

settings for all the buttons. This makes memorizing the buttons easier and quicker.

Overall, the entire ThrustMaster software is well done, virtually bug-free, and easy to use. However, reading the manual is a must if you plan on creating your own custom sets or modifying the existing ones. The only problem I found with the software was that there were 3 applications to deal with. A more practical approach would have been to create one application or control panel to do all the calibrating, assigning keystrokes, etc.

[eady for Takeoff](#). One of the biggest problems I found when setting up the ThrustMasters was where to actually place them. Putting the rudders on the floor is a no-brainer but finding a suitable and comfortable place to put the joystick and throttle was a bit harder. I first tried them on the my desk but this set-up meant you had to extend your arms forward to control the devices, a most awkward position. This didn't work well, so I then got two tall thin boxes and planted them on the left and right side of my seat, right next to the arm rests. Placing the ThrustMasters on them made a perfect and comfortable fit. Now I was ready for take off.

The first game I tried was Graphic Simulations' F/A-18 Hornet. As I lurched the throttle forward and slowly pulled back on the stick for take off, I felt a sense of power and invulnerability, something I had never sensed in a flight simulation. The ThrustMasters gave the game more realism, more control, and more freedom. Simply put, the ThrustMasters felt....well, as Linda Richmond would say, "like butter."

I flew for a while, got a hang for the buttons on the joystick and throttle, and then proceeded to kick some Iraqi butt. Upon return, I noticed I hadn't looked or touched the keyboard once, and realized the enormous value of all those buttons on the joystick and throttle. At first the number of buttons had seemed overwhelming, but as I learned which ones did what, I began to appreciate the ThrustMasters for what they represented, total control.

I tested other games like Chuck Yeager's Air Combat, Hellcats over the Pacific, Valkyrie, and Pathways Into Darkness (among others) and all ran flawlessly and perfectly with the ThrustMaster.

[eaven...For A Price](#). There's no doubt that the ThrustMaster and flight simulations are a match made in heaven. The high quality construction of the ThrustMaster, coupled with the excellent calibration and customizing software give the ThrustMasters the competitive edge in the Macintosh joystick market.

However, there is one major drawback that comes with the ThrustMaster, and that is the price. If you want the complete ThrustMaster set up, it'll cost you around \$300 if you shop mail order (we called MacZone for our prices, 800/248-0800). Even if you didn't go with the whole set up, the one required piece (the joystick) is a little over \$100, which makes it quite an expensive initial purchase. But taking into account the amount of time, money, and effort the fine folks at ThrustMaster put into these fine products, it's easy to understand the need to price them initially high, especially in the Macintosh game market (which is still considerably small compared to the IBM PC game market). As time goes on, prices for the Mac ThrustMaster should fall a bit.

Besides a lower price, the only other thing I wished for in the ThrustMaster was that it was a little heavier. The lightweight plastic makes it feel "toy" like and I often found the joystick moving from its base because of the light weight. One remedy was to add velcro to the bottom of the joystick and throttle so they wouldn't move. But it seems the company has realized this drawback too when it released the Flight Control System Pro for the IBM PC. This aluminum built (and heavier) joystick should make its way to the Mac later this year.

So do you buy the joystick AND the throttle at the same time? Are the rudders really necessary? Well, of course, that all depends on your economics. I would recommend buying the joystick and the throttle. This combination should keep most flight simmers happy for a long time. If you're a flight sim fanatic, the rudders add yet another layer of realism and control to the whole picture. But if you're on a tight budget, the joystick will do just fine, for now (just make sure you save up for the other two pieces).

Pros

- Well built, sturdy
- Good software
- One year warranty
- Adds realism to any flight sim game

#### Cons

- Expensive
- A little too light weight
- Needs all-in-one software