eview: Flightstick Pro

by Robert Dorsett

Type: Joystick
Publisher: CH Products (619/598-2518)
Retail Price: $129.25
Street Price: $79.95
Requires: System 6.0.7 or later, ADB port
Protection: None

he CH Flightstick Pro is the latest contender in an increasingly congested Macintosh joystick market.   Advanced Gravis has led this market since the introduction of the MouseStick in the late 1980s.   Their position was bolstered by the release of the GamePad and MouseStick II two years ago.

Heavy-hitters in the PC market, namely ThrustMaster and CH Products, released Mac-compatible versions of their products this summer.   Both companies' products are Apple Desktop Bus-compatible.   CH Products is the latest company to enter this market, offering Mac versions of two of its PC products, the CH Flightstick and the CH Flightstick Pro.

This article is concerned with the Flightstick Pro.   It emphasizes the stick's use with flight simulators.

Design. The FlightStick Pro is the "high-end" version, a heavy-weight offering, with a four-way "coolie switch," three thumb-buttons, a fire trigger, and a "throttle" flywheel.   There are also two potentiometers, which can be used to calibrate the joystick.

The ergonomics are excellent.   Unlike some competitors' products, there's no problem with pulling back on this stick: the heel of one's hand has a great deal of clearance with the base of the unit.   The weight of the stick is also a plus: it can be placed on a surface, and won't scoot.   It doesn't require suction cups or clamps to hold it steady during aggressive play.

Each of the buttons is "programmable" via a control panel.   This means that if you press a button, the stick's software will send an equivalent keyboard command to the computer, which can be interpreted by the software and be used to control the game.   So, for instance,

if you want to easily deploy speed brakes in F/A-18, just hit one of the thumb-buttons, and a space-bar command will be received by the game and the airplane will slow down.

onfiguration. The stick can be set to work in one of three major modes: relative, absolute, and keyboard-mapping.   The idea in all of these is to replicate and enhance upon the characteristics of the game's normal input mode.   So the stick isn't really adding a third input method, but just providing a way to imitate the mouse or keyboard.   Depending upon the type of game, this will result in superior, easier game play.

"Relative" mode builds upon the previous stick position.   So slow movements command gradual movements, and fast movements command fast movements.   The Flightstick control panel allows one to set up to seven gradients for each of the axes, so one can command linear acceleration, very gradual acceleration up to a certain point, etc.

Absolute mode is what one normally would use in place of the mouse.   It simply maps the stick to an X-Y coordinate, which can be used by the game package.   There are ways to enhance this: it has a "hurricane eye" which defines a null zone within which movement commands no effect.   It also permits the definition of an acceleration curve, as well as a way to specify which coordinates the stick sends to the program.   It also allows the stick to set the initial mouse position at a specific point (center screen, top left, etc).

The stick itself, and the throttle, can also be mapped to issue keyboard commands.   So, for instance, the stick could be set to replicate the movement-commands of Prince of Persia or Wolf3D.   Up to eight points can be defined to issue keyboard equivalents.

The "throttle" can be used with flight simulators that might use unusual throttle settings, such as the Hornet/Falcon +/- or the Electronic Arts-style 0-9.

All modes include the stick calibration option, and all allow all of the regular buttons to be defined as keyboard equivalents.

The stick's software is fairly intelligent.   One can configure settings for each game.   One can also configure settings and temporarily disable them for that particular game.   When the software loads, it can be set to emit a beep, as a reminder that the stick is (or isn't enabled).

The stick also has an option to set custom color depths and sound levels for each configured application.   This is extremely useful, and can be used with other, conventional programs, as well.

While the stick is in use within a program, the mouse may also be used, although it may be a bit jittery at first.

Nits. The one main downer in all this is that the Flightstick Pro doesn't recognize double-click and triple-click equivalents.   The Izu Products' MacFly stick, released last year, did.   Double- and triple-clicks would let one greatly increase the number of configuration options: instead of having the 8 possible inputs in the current stick, it would give one 24.   In a complex game like Hornet, this would allow one to almost completely control the game with the stick, and not need to use the keyboard at all.

While the game comes with a variety of pre-defined configuration settings, some of these are rather strange.   The default F/A-18 set is not very helpful.   The 20-page manual can also be confusing when trying to configure settings for a game: it's often not at all clear which mode--absolute or relative--will give the best performance, and it takes a great deal of trial and error to figure it out.

In Closing. The Flightstick Pro is a fine joystick, with excellent ergonomics and excellent production standards.   While it doesn't "look" like a fighter joystick (unlike   ThrustMaster, which is based on an F-4 grip), it also performs well with flight simulator games.

Pros
• Strong, robust construction
• Good, high-quality plastic
• Excellent ergonomics
• Flexible software

Cons
• No double- or triple- clicks via software
• The "throttle" is kind of hokey, just a fly-wheel
• It'd be nice if it auto-calibrated
• Needs a better manual