eview: Carriers at War II

by Bart Farkas

Type: Naval war simulation
Publisher: SSG
Retail Price: $69.95
Street Price: $45.00
Requires: Color, System 6.07 or System 7 (4 MB RAM)
Protection: None

hen Carriers at War broke into the Mac scene a few months back, it gave the Apple faithful the strategic pleasure of crushing the Americans in the battle of Midway, or first striking the Japanese before they destroyed Pearl Harbour.   Fortunately, SSG continues to support the Macintosh platform and has released Carriers at War II, essentially a sequel in every sense of the word to the high selling CAW. So, for those that need a strategic fix, the battle for air supremacy in the Pacific theater rages on.

The original CAW covered many of the pivotal and influential battles involving carriers and air power (Midway, Pearl Harbour)   of the Pacific campaign.   And now CAW II continues in similar fashion by exploring the "what if's" of 8 built in scenarios and countless others that can be imported from the DOS Carriers at War Construction Kit.

As Before. As with it's predecessor, CAW   II is ripe with detail.   From diverting aircraft in mid flight to a land base, to organizing your search planes, to organizing a cohesive air strike, you can control as much or as little of the action as you want.   The beginning of the game involves choosing which of the task forces will have human or computer control, and in this way you can handle just one task force or the whole Japanese (or Allied) fleet!   CAW II is complex but has an easy enough premise and interface to let a novice get a feel for the action.   This is one of the appealing features of CAW II that enables you to work your way into the game slowly.   It is definitely a game that can be played without reading the instructions, which is something of a feat for this genre and bodes well for those that don't like to spend two hours painstakingly perusing game manuals.   However, while the manual is good (and the tutorial excellent), it lacks the detailed information about the Mac version that power users inevitably will expect. There is of course an addendum leaflet included for Mac users, but let's face it, that never makes up for a DOS manual.

The flexibility of CAW II enables you to play the game with or without the bells and whistles of graphical battles, both in air and on sea.   When battle action is displayed graphically, it is in the form of simple animations.   For example, if several dive bombers are attacking a carrier you will see a picture of the carrier and a little explosion and flaming plume coming from the area(s) that were hit.   Unfortunately, this becomes repetitive in the long run and I suspect that most will opt for the quicker method of resolving battles which is to just get the hit/damage results as the waves of attacks occur.   The attacking planes are shown in a pictorial fashion with a three-notch damage counter that informs you of the planes condition.   It is nice that SSG has included the ability to commit a plane to Kamikaze, a feature sadly omitted in the first version of CAW.

Game play is not turn based, but instead progresses at your discretion by selecting the amount of time you would like to elapse from a menu (or keyboard equivalent).   You   have control over the speed, heading, and formation of the Naval attack groups, as well as total control over the aircraft that line the decks of your flat tops.   If you are expecting an attack then you can put all your available Zeros up as a CAP (Combat Air Patrol) to protect your carriers, or you can mobilize them to follow your torpedo bombers in to take out the flagship!   If two convoys of ships get close enough together, then surface combat ensues with an overhead view of all the ships.   During surface combat, each ship can be instructed individually to fire upon groups of enemy vessels, or make a run for it and try to avoid the enemies big guns.   It is important not to let your carriers get involved in a close up shoot-out   with a battleship or it's good-bye flat top!   One of the annoying aspects of surface combat is the lack of simultaneous firing from both sides.   Sometimes one side gets off the first round of shots and this can affect the other side's retaliatory strike.   This is one aspect of CAW that I would have liked to have seen changed. However, surface conflict adds a lot to CAW and it is always hair raising when you are running under the cloak of night and you "bump" into a convoy of enemy destroyers!

New and Improved. Carriers at War II is basically the very same game as the original Carriers at War, it just has different scenarios. In fact, SSG recommends that you use the CAW II engine to run ALL CAW scenarios whether from the old game or the sequel. There are of course some changes included in the CAW II engine that will no doubt make those die-hard war-gamers perk up. The major adjustments come in the form of improved artificial intelligence. There is a greater variance to what the computer opponents will do when faced with sticky situations. This means that instead of just chasing a convoy across the screen and pounding it into oblivion you might get a slightly original tactic from the computer. I must say that this is a welcome feature enhancement to CAW II and the improved AI makes the game considerably better. There have also been some minor tweaks to the graphics and animation in CAW II but for the most part it is spectacularly reminiscent of the original CAW.

Of course the main reason most will endeavor to purchase CAW II will be for the 8 new scenarios and the ability to import pre-existing DOS scenarios to their Mac. This is a nice feature especially since SSG has not decided whether or not to make a Mac version of the Carriers at War Construction Kit. The new scenarios range from hypothetical to real and from 1936 to 1946 inclusive. They also include Australia, and some British and Dutch forces as well as a hypothetical invasion of Japan in 1946. This last scenario includes Kamikaze pilots which is one aspect of the Pacific theatre that needed to be included in CAW II. Importing from DOS is the other wrinkle that will give CAW II players a virtually unlimited catalog of scenarios to choose from, and although you will need Access PC or Apple File Exchange to do it, you CAN get those babies.

So What's the Point? Carriers at War II is a game that basically follows it's title.   It is an enhanced version of the first CAW.   You take command of the carriers at your disposal and manage the air power, and the destructive (not to mention deceptive)   force of the accompanying convoys.   If you are thinking about getting this series of games,   CAW II is your first choice because it is basically the most recent version of the game and allows you to play the older scenarios (when you get them) and every shareware scenario out there.   SSG has improved CAW greatly and should be applauded, however, the value for CAW users will come only in the improved engine, AI, and new scenarios.

Pros
• Improved artificial intelligence
• Better animation
• New scenarios

Cons
• Few bugs here and there