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The Gravis Firebird joystick for the Mac is a quantum leap from the venerable and long popular MouseStick II that Gravis has offered for the last several years. This comes at a time when there are many other sticks in the Mac gaming market, but the Firebird offers a great deal in the line of features and flexibility. The basic look is very nice and has a style of having two units that mold together, which is essentially what it is in its setup. It has a great new ergonomic handle that is the joystick proper. One of the greatest features of this is a very comfortable handrest. The stick is also metal reinforced and not just plastic. It sports the normal fire button plus an eight-way hat switch and three more programmable buttons. The console has nine more buttons of different types in a convenient arrangement. There is also a throttle control and an elevator trim adjustment, as well as a jack where the user can hook up any of the rudder pedals available from other manufactures, if so desired. The software is easy to install, and the Firebird plugs into any of the Mac's ADB bus ports. Unfortunately like so much software these days, it is best that you only load the system extensions that you absolutely need as recommended.

The Gravis Firebird comes with a bunch of control sets for the many games available that one might use. This is a good start although many of the sets weren't made with the usual care that had been the case with past Gravis software. It is easier than ever to make ones own sets, and this, of course, works with the Firebird whether the game supports it directly or not. This is nice with things like the trim control. The making or editing of control sets is

very smooth in that one has the picture of the Firebird and moving the cursor over any of the buttons highlights it and tells you what it has been set to do. There are many and varied approaches to configuring so almost anyway one tries to do it "intuitively" will get the desired results. If you double click on one of the buttons, a button change dialog box comes up. It is complete with a keyboard that can be used to drag key commands to the stick control window. The notes about what the key does are important. Just typing "Button 5: E," is not as good as explaining if the "E" is "enemy view" or "eject," depending on what the program does. This is handy in telling what you have programmed when using the set at a later date and it has become a bit foggy what all those commands mean. A very nice feature of the Firebird is that the commands can easily be printed out. You just select "Print" like any other program and then you get an outline of the Gravis Firebird with the description of what each button has been set to do. It also gives you a list of other notes about whether the application aware feature is on and whether the Trim is on or off.

The application aware feature has been made very simple. To set it up, you are offered a selection box to track down the actual application on your hard drive and connect the setting that way. No more fooling with getting the name exactly right and bracketed. Another nice touch is when you launch a game that is application aware, the software now gives you a verbal sound that the "Firebird is configured."

another GREAT feature is that the software supports what is called Hot Set Switching. This allows one to make two complete sets for the more complex games and flight sims that have just short of a billion key commands to deal with. How it works is the user sets up a command set, for instance, all the takeoff and landing commands. Then you set one button as the Hot Switch button. Upon pushing this button, you change the Firebird to a whole other set of commands. In the case of a flight sim, the ones needed to deal with the enemy in the air. When you have successfully completed your mission, you simply hit the Hot Switch that you have set in that group and you are ready to use the landing/takeoff group of controls. It is a good idea, to make things smooth in the heat of battle, to use the same key for the Hot Switch in each control set. Each button can be set with a whole series of control commands.

This is handy when playing games like X-Wing that require a lot of configuring when one arrives at the mission area. How you want the weapons and everything configured can all be placed in a series of commands on one button. This seems to be a feature that is under utilized on the MouseStick II. The buttons offer more programming options than most people would ever need so with a little creative thinking and experimenting, you can make the buttons do more than most people would ever need or dream possible.

Until a couple of years ago, the early MouseSticks and the MouseStick II's used a very high resolution optical control. This had the advantage of being more exact in its control of the pixels on the screen than other sticks but were hard to repair and expensive to produce. The Gravis joysticks now use high quality potentiometers which offer a more cost effective approach to game control.

he only down side is the software could have been made a bit more stable, and the included sets should be made by someone that has played the games involved and thus utilized the abilities of the Firebird. As it is, gamers that don't look at the instructions and are use to lesser joysticks may never discover the advantages of the Firebird with so many of the buttons in the various control sets provided which may be left in an unconfigured and thus useless mode. The rumor is that Gravis is working on the software to further utilize the stick's features and straighten things out such as the enclosed settings files. If this happens, I would recommend the highest rating for the Firebird.

In conclusion, the Gravis Firebird is a tremendous value. At a very low price, one is offered most of the functionality of multiple stick systems costing much more. The Firebird is a

tremendous piece of equipment that offers not only flight sim pilots a great combination of functions but is friendly to the commands of any other game made for the Mac. I love configuring the buttons for the controls in Crystal Caliburn for instance, as a button seems much more like a pinball flipper button than trying to hit the right key on a keyboard in the heat of a multiball battle.

Pros

- Great price feature ratio, the best on the market
- The new design of the joystick is very functional and comfortable
- Offers a tremendous variety of ways to easily configure the controls

Cons

- The software is in need of more polish
- Better online support presence, not just the Internet

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