Hellcats over the Pacific
by Martin Walser

There are many people out there who are flight sim fanatics. This is the type of person that buys just about every simulation for everything from the F-16 to the Sopwith Camel and there are numerous flight sims out there to satisfy the most ardent fanatic. I, however, am NOT one of those people. I do enjoy a good game, though, no matter what style it is. Realism just isn't as important to me as fun.

In Hellcats Over the Pacific you are a Navy pilot flying the F6F Hellcat in the Solomon Islands area of the Pacific. You can fly 7 different mission as well as a "Flight School" mission which allows new pilots to practice maneuvering and shooting down drone planes. The missions range from a fairly simple one plane dogfight and carrier bombing to a multiple plane and ship naval engagement complete with wingman.

Hellcats is called a "World War II Flight Simulator" by its parent company. I call it a damn fine game.

The graphics are full 256-color as well as options for lower resolutions. All the objects in the game are three dimensional multi-polygon images. The detail is excellent and can be toggled from Highest to Lowest (5 settings) for smoother action on slower computers. I own an original 16mhz 020 Mac II and I left it on Highest without problem. It wasn't choppy as far as I could tell. There are also toggles for clouds, haze, ground clutter (like trees, etc.) and real time shading (takes position of sun and objects into account!). Though the game runs on the SE/30 and Classic II, the black and white graphics are only mediocre. Not to fault Graphic Simulations, they did the best they could with only two "colors". There are only so many shading patterns usable in black & white. As a result, objects are not as easily distinguishable on screen. This makes a big difference when you suddenly realize you're bombing one of your own ships!

The controls are fairly straight forward. A pilot can use the keypad or mouse for aileron/elevator control (bank left-right/nose up-down), +/- for throttle and "b,g,f,a" for bombs, landing gear, flaps and auto pilot respectively. The mouse button or space bar controls machine gun fire. The game also offers a number of viewing angles. The pilot can look in every direction (using the arrow keys) and can also toggle chase plane, tower and even enemy views. The game also has instant replays if one wants to watch a moment of triumph from a 3rd person viewpoint. The detailed instrument panel gives all the necessary information right in front of the pilot including anachronistic radar (later F6Fs did have a radar of sorts, but nothing as advanced as it is in the game although I'm no expert).

Admittedly, controlling the plane via keyboard or mouse seemed a bit clumsy to me. I couldn't quite get the hang of steady flight using the keyboard as I could with my Gravis Mousestick. I, however, am not a pillar of tremendous hand-eye coordination and I've heard many a testimony to the playability without a joystick. If you're like me, you may think about investing the in the Mousestick. It is well worth the money, but that is another review entirely.

Kudos:

I found the many viewing angles and instant replays add tremendously to the fun of flying the F6F and splashing zeros. Of the seven missions included. I only mastered two somewhat easily, three with a good deal of work and the remaining two not even yet! I expect to work hard to get my medals for the Divine Wind and The Duel scenarios. The graphics are more advanced than

most games out there and the action is never dull. The flight model is quite accurate, so I'm told; it's certainly realistic enough for me and, most importantly, loads of fun. The game also comes with a cool reproduction of the original F6F Handbook and a W.W.II style map of the Solomon Islands.

Minuses:
With the exception of my lack of coordination when using the keyboard or mouse, I find little to fault in this game. The Gravis Mousestick does an excellent job for people like me or people who want a "flightstick" feel. The only other con is the black and white graphics. If you have a Classic II or an SE/30, I wouldn't stress buying this game. It's still good, but it really does need the vibrant colors to make it playable enough. If and when you purchase a color monitor, you should definitely then go purchase Hellcats.

Miscellaneous comments:
It is interesting to note that Graphic Simulations broke Apple's Human Interface Guildlines and used CMD-X as both the Cut option and the "Mission Status..." option on the Edit and File menus respectively. They only got away with this because only one or the other can be used at a given time. Mac users don't often put-up with this kind of slip. Also, there is no save option for missions. A mixed blessing indeed. On one hand, one needs a good stretch of time to complete a mission because you can't come back to it later. On the other hand, it doesn't make the missions easy by allowing "preventative saves". Lastly, the copy-protection is the annoying look-up-the-word-in-the-manual type. However, registered users receive an "unlock code" via mail which disables this annoyance. I received my code very promptly after sending my registration card. Their promptness balanced out the initial minus of the protection. It's a decent solution to the difficult problem of piracy.