# Steel Beasts Professional - Personal Edition

by **John "Spoons" Sponauer**



*Disclosure - While I am not involved in the testing or development of Steel Beasts Professional PE or any other current product in development by **eSim Games**, I was involved in the testing of the original Steel Beasts in 2000, and several missions created by me were included with that game, credited as such in the manual. In addition, another SimHQ writer at the time was a multiplayer tester. I have no formal or informal agreement with eSim Games.*

## Overview

When the original Steel Beasts was released in 2000, an online friend of mine, a veteran of the gaming industry and a tank sim enthusiast, once described it as "the sim the others could have been."



What he meant was that even though other modern tank sims had then recently been released, none felt realistic after you'd gone through a few missions of Steel Beasts. Although it was somewhat hobbled by a fixed resolution of 640x480, a lack of 3D accelerated graphics, and no campaign, Steel Beasts developed a solid fan base as an armor sim that was stable, aimed at realism, and very replayable, including as a multiplayer game. The Steel Beasts brand's reputation for accuracy had been — and continues to be — enhanced by the use of the game and more commercial variants by the armed forces of the United States, Denmark, and others.

More than four years later, the first consumer-market offspring of Steel Beasts is nearly ready for release, and work seems to be progressing fast and furious. With a comparatively hefty price tag of $125, "Steel Beasts Professional - Personal Edition" will only be sold online at the eSim site. While the limitations of price and availability may ward off some sales, from what I've seen, those people will be missing another solid release from eSim. To paraphrase my friend, this is "the tank sim many wished Steel Beasts was in 2000."

## What It Is and What It Ain't

With three new products in the pipeline from this small, specialized developer, there's been some confusion about what each one actually does (and doesn't do). The bottom line is this.... they are each DX9-based sequels to Steel Beasts, aimed at different markets, with major differences between them.

The original Steel Beasts (and the bundleware release of Steel Beasts Gold) was followed up with Steel Beasts Professional, which is / was strictly custom-designed for eSim's professional clients, operating for the most part in large, networked environments. It features limitless multiplayer capability (restricted by the hardware / network, essentially), special instructor modes, greater map editor flexibility, and more detailed after-action reports, as well as some new advanced tactical features like a detailed artillery call procedure, battlefield obstacles, minefield breaching, dug-in positions, refueling, and more.

The product being previewed here, **Steel Beasts Professional PE** (or 'PE,' from now on), is a stripped down version of that really designed for soldiers to practice on at home, or for very, very dedicated fans of Steel Beasts wanting the latest and greatest in the product line. It removes the limitless multiplayer capability (capping games at eight players), instructor modes, the larger maps, and after-action reports, but retains the tactical features mentioned. It will be available "soon."

**Steel Beasts 2** will be a consumer-focused product, due for release next year. It certainly isn't going to be "tank Quake;" it will retain the high-end sim qualities that the Steel Beasts family is known for. But while features are added to the Pro Edition and the PE version based on the needs of military contracts, you'll hear the eSim folks talking about things like "game balance" when discussing SB2, something they don't think of when designing simulations for professional clients. As SB2 progresses in development, existing PE customers will likely benefit from the enhancements created for SB2, in the form of patches. I say "likely" because nothing is confirmed or definite yet, but you can see some of it creeping into PE already.… some unused textures, grayed out menu options, and the like.

While many things in PE still aren't "pretty" because there's no client need for them to be so, SB2 will be a consumer product through-and-through, leaving out some features (one mentioned was the hand-cranking on the M1's .50 caliber machine gun) that will likely just confuse the average gamer. Similarly, the detailed, multi-step task of breaching a minefield will be greatly simplified in SB2 over the Pro edition or PE.

What version should you buy or wait for? Read on to learn more about PE, and see what it offers you before you make that decision.

## What's New

It's simplistic — but not completely incorrect — to call PE "Steel Beasts with much better graphics and a lot of new features in the editors." The purpose of this preview is not to get into great detail on what the SB line tries to do…. for a good overview, the SimHQ review of Steel Beasts may prove important background reading for new users. Download the zipped file **here**. The basics, to a large extent, haven't changed since that review. What has changed, however, is significant.

### Graphics



The first and most noticeable change to PE worth mentioning is the addition of 3D accelerated graphics. Gone are the original's limit of a 640x480 resolution; PE users can now display the game up to 1600x1200 in 32 bit color. Something to bear in mind is that PE was designed to be an offshoot of a professional version…. pretty graphics are not automatically something a customer will pay for. Because of that, there are many areas that will likely be updated as work continues on Steel Beasts 2.

The largest environmental change I noticed in PE, aside from the much more attractive vehicles and world, is the addition of fog effects. The original game also offered reduced visibility options, but only varying degrees of long ranges. PE allows mission builders to reduce visibility down to 10 meters…. to the thermal sights go the spoils!!!!



The landscapes look, for the most part, great, with new realistic-looking trees, underbrush, and obstacles like boulders and rocks. Vehicles vary greatly in graphical quality, seemingly based on whether the time has been taken to skin them specifically for PE. The M1A1 and T-80 look excellent, as do several other vehicles, but many more look essentially unchanged from the originals; eSim tells me all will be replaced with new models by the release date. Some interior graphics are not in the version I have at all…. for instance, as you sit in the HMMWV machine gun mount and look down, you see a black placeholder graphic. My guess is that new skins and graphics will be added as time permits. As in the original SB, the game continues to use sprite-based infantry graphics, but they are much more detailed, with new color and camouflage patterns; eSim has alluded to me that additional work on them is planned. An interesting, but logical (given PE's focus), omission is that there are no human characters to be seen in any of the game's vehicles…. no driver's heads, tank commander's bodies, or the like. Does it knock the immersion factor down? Not really to me, but it brings to mind the old debates about F/A-18 sims a few years back…. some had small crewmen running around the carrier deck, and others didn't. User preference, I suppose.

There are some environmental effects which I would certainly love to see in PE, but will likely have to wait for SB2 development, including nighttime, vehicle shadows, and inclement weather. Again, eSim's bread is being buttered by the professional contracts at this point, so if clients don't ask for features, they're likely not going to be in the Pro edition or PE. I don't have much doubt they will be in the future as development continues.



The interior of some vehicles bears mentioning, because it looks spectacular. In the Beta version I have, nice 3D interiors have been completed for the M2 / M3A2 Bradleys and the Leopard 2A5. Both are rotated and viewed with the mouse, but the Leo's is far more advanced in its creation…. the cannon movement, the way the various sights move up to the player's perspective when selected, and more really add to the game's immersion factor. Screenshots don't really do it justice…. it's very well done. Many of the switches and buttons are clickable and useable as well.

## The Leopard's New Spots

Several new crewable variants of the widely-used Leopard tank are included in PE…. in addition to the Leopard 2A4 from the original Steel Beasts, eSim has now also included the Leopard 1A5 and the Leopard 2A5.



The former is a comparatively lightly armored tank designed in the 1980s to give the Leopard 1 family (a circa-1960s design) an ability to handle the threats of that era. The bottom line on it is that while it can dish it out, it can't take it as well. I think it will be a fun multiplayer tank to level the playing field at times.

While not the newest Leopard model in the world, the 2A5 is a step up

from the 2A4 largely (for the sake of the game's players) because of the commander's independent thermal sighting system. As mentioned earlier, the 2A5's clickable turret controls and interior graphics are modeled very nicely.



## M2 and M3 Bradley

For virtual American tankers, the addition of the M2A2 / M3A2 Bradley is the largest change in crewable vehicles. I'll jump to my summary of the experience…. the Bradleys are a hoot. While I wouldn't advise virtual Bradley commanders going mano-a-mano against tanks, they can definitely deal out punishment and offer players interesting capabilities for missions.



The Bradley's primary offensive firepower is a 25mm. chain gun, which fires both HE-I (High Explosive-Incendiary) and sabot rounds at varying rates of fire (single, 100rpm, or 200rpm). The gunner selects the ammunition type (unlike in the tanks, when the gunner only responds to the tank commander's choice of ammunition), and the cannon is automatically set to a low rate of fire. Another press, and rapid fire is selected. The cannon, particularly the sabot rounds, allow for vehicle kills out to a great distance, and even main battle tanks are vulnerable to flank or rear shots. The cannon also comes in handy for attacking helicopter and infantry targets. A coaxial 7.62mm machine gun is offered as well, although I haven't found that I use it often.

Complementing the guns is the wire-guided TOW anti-tank missile, which can reach out and touch someone at ranges of about 3,700m.

Gunnery in the Bradley takes some getting used to. While there is a laser rangefinder, there's no automatic lead calculation, so hitting a moving target requires a good deal of luck and practice. Unlike in the M1's gunner position, switching between sabot and HE-I rounds in the Bradley physically moves the sight picture to compensate for the flatter trajectory of the sabot and the more arcing HE-I flight path. Similar to the tanks in Steel Beasts, once a round is in the cannon's chamber, the only way to remove it is by firing, so the first round out the barrel will likely miss, as it will be the previous ammunition type loaded, not what's currently selected (or sighted for). Selecting the TOW brings up a simple crosshairs scope picture, and while the missile is in flight, "all" the gunner has to do is keep the target in the center of the crosshairs to score a hit. I write "all" because trying to do so on a moving tank 3,000+ meters away is no simple feat! There's a great desire to try to 'fly' the missile to the target, but it's important to ignore the weaving flight path of the TOW…simply focus on keeping the target in the crosshairs and you'll score a hit. Considering that the flight time of a TOW is upwards of 20-25 seconds at maximum range, you'll find time

slows considerably when a missile is in the air and the enemy is firing back! The Bradley's TOW launcher only carries two missiles, but there are more rounds carried onboard that may be loaded when the launcher is empty….while that process is underway for nearly a minute, the turret is automatically turned, the cannon elevated, and the Bradley is essentially toothless.



One other factor that I hadn't planned on was the Bradley's thermal imaging system. Unlike the green-and-black colors players have grown used to in Steel Beasts, the Bradley's viewer uses red and black. I find it far less useful, and since there's no contrast settings built into the game (other than reversing red-hot and black-hot), I've physically had to adjust the contrast of my monitor to spot targets out at long range. I understand that this red-and-black system is what is actually installed on Bradleys in service, and if so, kudos to eSim for nailing this feature correctly. But I also understand that the older red-and-black units are being replaced by green-and-black models, and would love to see that incorporated into PE, or, for that matter, contrast knobs.



Lastly, the Bradley vehicle itself is really just one part of what completes the picture…you also get troops to go along with it. A press of the 'U' key and the Bradley's dismounted infantry leave or enter the vehicle, and when dismounted become a separate controllable unit. The M2 carries a squad of six soldiers; the M3, a pair of scouts. Although at this time, the Bradley infantry unit can't have its loadout adjusted by the mission designer or player, infantry units in general may be armed with a mix of small arms and anti-tank weapons like the RPG family or AT-4. They also can carry ATGMs, which, depending on the type, can destroy armor out to ranges of 2,500 meters. Working in concert with its infantry, the Bradley can offer a wide range of offensive and defensive tools for the player. I think it will be a very popular vehicle in missions.

Mi-24 Hind-E

The December 2004 unveiling of the Hind helicopter in a set of screenshots from eSim took many, including myself, by surprise. There has been a somewhat firm policy in the past from the company that given the scope of the game, adding air units had a strong likelihood of throwing the game balance out of synch. However, since PE is based on the model of software made for military contracts, it seemed inevitable that one day a military client would seek to add helicopters to the mix.



The Hind is a refreshing addition to Steel Beasts, and quite useful in the right settings. Like most of the vehicles in the game, you can't directly fly the Hind, but may place its waypoints, fire control, and other constraints on the map screen just like any other unit; the sole feature added for the Hind seems to be a new selection for altitude (Nap of the Earth, Treetop, and Normal). It is a superb scouting platform, and armed with unguided rockets, four ATGMs, and a nose-mounted machine gun, it is a well-equipped killer also.



The Hind is not omnipotent by any stretch of the imagination. While there aren't dedicated AAA units in PE (or an equivalent Western attack helicopter), once sighted, it can be easily downed by either autocannon or main battle tank cannons. The trick is to spot them first, a task easier said than done. In most scenarios when I've added a helicopter threat, there's a call of "Choppers!" just seconds before I start taking losses. Unless the Hind immediately moves for cover after that first kill, though, it is often downed while in the hover, guiding its second missile. I've even seen infantry units take down a Hind that was hovering nearby, unaware apparently of the threat. However, I've also seen entire tank platoons reduced to wreckage in under a minute by a pair of Hinds…. this is not a unit you want to gamble against.

Of course, since each mission in Steel Beasts is only as good as the mission designer makes it to be, it is entirely

possible to add a disproportionate number of Hinds into the mix and make the gameplay unbalanced in a particular mission. Let's hope sanity prevails when user missions begin showing up for PE.



## Other Vehicles and Infantry

Not including infantry, there are 53 controllable units included with PE, many of which can be virtually crewed by the player in some form or another. These range from the standard to the obscure…. if you haven't seen a Biber bridgelayer in action in any previous sim, for instance, here's your chance.

My version of the software includes:

## Tanks

(Each also comes with a version with a mine plow or a mine roller)

- M1A1(HA) - Crewable as gunner or commander
- Leopard 2A5 *(New)* - Crewable as gunner or commander
- Leopard 2A4 - Crewable as gunner or commander
- Leopard 1A5 *(New)* - Crewable as gunner or commander
- T-72
- T-80

## Personnel Carriers

- M2A2 - Crewable as gunner or commander
- M3A2 *(New)* - Crewable as gunner or commander
- M113 - Crewable as commander, with .50 caliber machine gun
- Marder
- Piranha *(New)*
- LAV-25 *(New)*
- BMP1
- BMP2

- BMD2
- BTR80
- MTLB
- YPR-765 *(New)*

## Trucks

- HMMWV - Crewable as commander, with .50 caliber machine gun
- Ural 4320 *(New)*
- HEMTT Cargo *(New)*
- HEMTT Fuel *(New)*
- Mercedes GD240 *(New)*
- Mercedes GD240 XO / CO *(New)*

## Other

- M113 MICLIC *(New)* - Crewable as commander, with .50 caliber machine gun
- M113 Engineering Vehicle *(New)* - Crewable as commander, with .50 caliber machine gun
- M113 Medic
- M113 TOW *(New)*
- M113 OPMV Command Vehicle *(New)*
- M113 / FO
- FIST V - Crewable as commander, with sighting scope
- HMMWV TOW *(New)*
- M901
- Jaguar
- BRDM2
- BRDM2-AT
- YPR-765 PRAT *(New)*
- YPR-765 CO *(New)*
- MT-55 Bridgelayer *(New)*
- Biber Bridgelayer *(New)*
- Mi-24 Hind-E *(New)*

## Obstacles, Emplacements, and How To Handle Them

eSim has included a number of new tactical tools in the mission editor of PE as well, and their presence in missions will make life trickier for virtual tankers.

Unlike the one-type-fits-all minefields in the original Steel Beasts, PE features five types of mine…. conventional (surface laid, or buried), advanced shaped charge anti-tank (surface laid, or buried), and scattered mines, replicating the result of a FASCAM or similar minefield deployment.

Along with the new types of mines, several other obstacles appear as well. Dragon's Teeth are small concrete poles sticking out from the ground, rendering the area impassable to anything but infantry. Steel beams serve a similar purpose, but can be cleared by tanks with plows (more on that later). The abatis (an obstacle created by cutting trees so they fall over a road in an interlocking pattern) included in PE is perfect for clogging up those roads through the woods, and when coupled with mines can really pose a challenge to bypass. Lastly, eSim included a capability to add the now-infamous Improvised Explosive Device (IED) into the game, tying the detonation into any number of factors that may be selected by the user.

To provide defensive advantage, infantry bunkers and dug-in positions for a number of the game's vehicles have been added as well. The former allows an infantry squad to fight from a protected position, and the latter give each of the game's armored vehicles a custom-dug hull-down fighting position to use.

Clearing obstacles, mines, and emplacements takes some doing, and some new vehicles and tools have been added to assist. For minefields, detection is key, and the manual states that units given an order of "Scout" will look for minefields ahead. Not too well, in my experience, especially for buried mines (surface-laid ones are easily spotted), but that's also what I would expect. After finding a minefield, the second half of the battle is then clearing it, and this is accomplished by using a tank with a mine plow / mine rollers, or a MICLIC explosive charge launched from a trailer towed by the M113 APC.

Once a minefield is detected, it is shown on the game map. Giving a plow, roller, or MICLIC unit a waypoint of "Breach" on the other side of the minefield will send them to work. The MICLIC is particularly impressive,

launching its rocket and detonating a trailing ropes of explosives. Even this, however, isn't foolproof…. it's a very good idea to use a plow or roller vehicle to then clear the blasted lane. eSim's attention to detail shines through again; while you can't manually drop the plow on the tanks with a key command, you can either click on your tank's icon and issue a Breach waypoint, or give the Breach waypoint on the map. Either action makes the plow dig in, the turret turn to the side (to avoid damaging the cannon), and the tank slow to plowing speed as it moves to the waypoint selected.



There doesn't seem to be much performance impact from the mine plow, but the mine roller greatly restricts a tank's speed and maneuverability. The plus to the roller is that as a user's tank, it's always working, unlike the blade, which can only be lowered in the map with a Breach waypoint.

Once a lane is cleared, engineer units in their M113 can be used to mark the safe lane with flags and signs, allowing other units to pass through. All in all, it's a time-intensive project, and hairy under fire. It's also, though, one of those little features that sim players typically love, showing the attention to detail.

Narrow rivers and streams may be crossed with either the MT-55 or Biber bridgelayer vehicles, and detailed animations show those units at work.

## Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV)

A unique new tool in the mission editor is the addition of a UAV. Mission creators may add a UAV flight path into their mission, and the user will see a new UAV interface at the mission's briefing screen. Using standard Play / Rewind / Forward controls, the UAV offers the option of watching the landscape below via a TV (color) or FLIR (green-white IR) image. An icon on the briefing map indicates the approximate location of the UAV at the time. To simulate early UAV models, neither the camera nor the flight path can be altered by the player, and its capabilities are only offered at the briefing, so make a note of what is spotted, and where! While it's not the most functional or useful tool in PE, it's a nice touch that may add to a well-done mission…. think of it as something the tank battalion's S-2 would show prior to a mission to give you a feel for what's ahead.

The images below show the UAV in action. The image on the left shows troops in a small town using the FLIR on the UAV, and the one on right shows a pair of tanks with mine rollers using the TV on the UAV.

## Enhanced Editors

It was true in 2000 for the original Steel Beasts and it's still true today…. the map and mission editors in Steel Beasts Professional PE are the best ever released for a tank sim. They are easy to understand, powerful, and capable of creating just about any scenario you can dream of. The ability to create randomness to the enemy's course of action, and even tie in random elements to each other, truly make this a title that isn't going to grow old soon.



Functionally, there isn't much difference between PE's terrain editor and the one from the original SB. If you can use a paint program, you can edit your own terrain (or use some of the excellent provided ones…. the National Training Center is a great included map). More types of terrain are offered than in the original, and there are several new objects included as well, such as new buildings, trees, bushes, and more. Many different types of roads are offered, and an automatic bridging tool creates road bridge crossings in a snap.
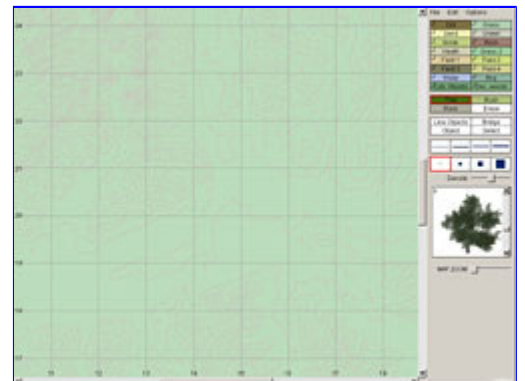
The mission editor is also similar to the first SB, but offers some new goodies such as picking from eight national camouflage patterns of the infantry uniforms for both sides, the aforementioned Breach waypoint commands, a "new" (which was available by patch for the first SB) ammunition selection screen, fuel level selection for vehicles, and more. It's not greatly different from the original SB, and that's not a bad thing, as it was so powerful even then.

## Artillery

The king of battle is enhanced in PE over the previous title. Calling up artillery, or setting it up in the mission builder, now brings with it several new options. In the mission editor, designers can choose — independently for each side — the number of artillery tubes available, what type of rounds are offered ("Illumination" remains tantalizingly grayed-out), specifications for artillery-delivered minefields, priority of fire, who may call for fire, and more.



In game, players can choose the type of fire (Immediate Suppression, Fire for Effect, or Adjust Fire), how much fire is requested, when (At My Command, Fire When Ready, or timed on delay), the type of round, what the splash pattern should be, and what the target is.

## Summary

Who's going to be most interested in PE? Well, certainly the intended market…. those professionals looking for a home version of the work simulator. Real tank sim fanatics may gulp a little at paying $125 for a 'game,' but I suspect some will end up doing so, especially since SB2 is still some time away and SB was so popular among that crowd.

Whoever buys it will very likely walk away impressed with Steel Beasts Professional PE. You can see the successful lineage of the original Steel Beasts, and can also see all the work that's gone into it so far.

It still may not be the most pretty, most game-like tank sim on the market, but it knows what it is and isn't, and it does what it does very well.

## Previewer's System Specs

- AMD Athlon XP 2500+ 1.83GHz 333FSB processor
- Asus A7N8X Deluxe nForce2 motherboard with on-board audio
- 1 GB Corsair DDR400 PC3200 CAS3 RAM
- NVIDIA GeForce 4 Ti4400 128MB (v61.77 drivers)
- Sony CRX220E1 / CRX225E 52x24x52 E-IDE / ATAPI iInternal CD-RW
- Western Digital Caviar 120GB hard drive (WD1200JB) with 8MB buffer
- Saitek X36 USB
- Windows XP with SP2
- DirectX 9.0a