

Review

Harpoon Classic 2002 Gold Edition

by Guest Writer **Didier Vanoverbeke**

Introduction

The original 'Poon is back with a vengeance. There have been many re-releases of the original Harpoon by Three-Sixty. In fact, its follow-ups have already been out for years, Harpoon III being the "newest" one. However, this has not stopped **Advanced Gaming Systems Inc.** (AGSI) and its team of volunteers.

Harpoon Classic 2002 Gold has seen a **public beta**, and was let loose in mid-October. New features include better AI, a platform editor, an enhanced sonar model, and lots of smaller additions. These would include new and updated platforms, and one official, common database.



So, after the promising-looking beta, how does this version of Harpoon Classic add up? I invite you to read on and find out.

Installation

Downloading and/or purchasing the CD, you will find the installation to be a speedy and easy affair. Once you've completed your installation, you will be left to register your copy of HC2002 Gold, which is done by starting a demo scenario and registering the game from the Help menu. Not the flashiest way of doing things, but it's functional.

If you don't have Microsoft Access, and want to use the Platform Editor, the CD provides the Access Runtime you'll need.

One gripe with the game is its rather sparse and outdated documentation. The game comes with the Harpoon Classic 97 manual, however the game has undergone some substantial changes since that release, so information included in this manual may not be as useful in-game. Of course, the main game mechanics have remained the same, so if you're willing to take some time toying around with the game, the lack of in-depth and updated documentation won't bother you too much.

The bigger problem with the documentation comes to light when you try using the Platform Editor. We'll get into the editor itself later, but it is important to point out that the game doesn't actually come with documentation for the editor, and what little documentation is available won't allow you to use this editor to its full potential. This is a shame really, however I am hopeful that a comprehensive document will be released later to aid in utilizing the Platform Editor, which after all is very important in this game's life span.

The game also comes with a Battleset Utility, which allows you to fetch your old EC2000 DBs to play scenarios you may have for this battleset, and recent patches have added the Scenario Converter (which was present in the beta), allowing you to convert EC2000 scenarios to the newer EC2003 standard. However, since I do not have the original Harpoon Classic 97 and its EC2000 battleset, I have not been able to test this. Whether the EC2000 files will be made available for people like me remains to be seen, however this is not a big problem, though perhaps it would've been easier for the team to include the files in the original HC2002 Gold installation.

Overall, getting HC2002 Gold and its sub programs are a cinch to install, run and update. Thumbs up in that area, however perhaps in the future it would be a good idea to release some more documentation for the game.

The Game Engine (GE)

This installment of Harpoon Classic was my first ever Harpoon experience. This is important, because for people who have been playing HC since its birth, there isn't a whole lot of new stuff when it comes to scenarios. Probably the biggest change when it comes to scenarios is the EC2000 to EC2003 conversion. The development team has been hard at work perfecting the EC2000 battleset and make it the basis for the Platform Editor, which will be discussed later. EC2003 therefore, provides the Official Database for Harpoon Classic 2002 Gold, with up-to-date platforms, weapons and sensors. This means that most people designing scenarios will want to do it using these battlesets, not any of the older ones. This also means that, while there aren't actually any new scenarios in the battlesets, they do play differently, as do all scenarios in this version of Harpoon Classic, because of the changes made to the engine.

And this is very important, for why else would people who are vets of the Harpoon saga want to play these scenarios in the first place?

I was part of the Open Beta for this game, and I have to say that the amount of changes to the way the game plays throughout the process has been astounding. The sonar model has been revamped considerably, and I have to say I really enjoy the submarine part of the game. The development team has also been fiddling with SAM firing rates and effectiveness of certain SAM systems against sea skimmers, having a further effect on the subsurface vs. surface and surface vs. surface combat in the game.

The way the AI handles air attacks and counter-air operations has also been significantly changed for the better, to the point where the AI is now a force to reckon with in the air, they will not make some of the silly mistakes I discovered and exploited in the early days of the beta. It's not perfect, but very enjoyable indeed.

With all these improvements, I'm afraid to say that this doesn't change one problem I have with EC2003, and that is the scenarios themselves. As much as I love the platforms, weapons, sensors, installations, and whatnot, the battleset scenarios are not the most playable of the game, for me at least. You see, with my visual impairment, these scenarios become a whole lot tougher. The reason for this is quite simply the design of the scenarios, and the fault does not lie with the development team. Back when the EC2000 scenarios were created, those who did it made a choice to make the "player-only" side start without preset speeds and courses, nor any air patrols for that matter. This problem pops up in just about every scenario. Now, I cannot set my own air patrols because of the way one has to do it (having to click on the map, a map I can't see, I should note), same goes for laying in a course for surface forces. Unfortunately I can't set destinations for my surface fleet because I don't have the ability to see the map, let alone click it.

This means that, if I want to have a crack at the scenarios, I have to play with the opposite side, and the scenario wasn't supposed to be played that way. This makes most scenarios very easy, since the other side has no idea where to go, has no air patrols to speak of, and is generally not aware of what his objectives are, so I just get to pummel the enemy bases and squash any surface forces I come across.

This trend doesn't repeat itself in the user scenarios that have been released for EC2003 so far, thank God. This is also why I hope that at some stage the older EC2000 battlesets will become available, since that would allow me to convert more scenarios straight to EC2003. This would make this battleset far more enjoyable for me. As it is, I have had quite a bit of fun with it nonetheless, especially when it comes to air battles. I think the team really deserves a thumbs-up for working hard on the database, making it what it is today. The air battles are, by and large, realistic, thanks in large part to the tweaking of missile accuracy and aircraft performance, as well as sensors. Aircraft with stealth abilities are also in the game, namely the F/A-22 and F-117A. They're modeled quite accurately from what I can tell, and they're not invincible either (especially if you start taking risks).

As for the older battlesets, they're the ones I play most of the time. They've got their faults, but if you don't mind the inaccuracies that have crept in, then you'll quite enjoy them. I personally think the scenarios provided in these battlesets, especially the Harpoon Designer Sets, are of a higher standard than those coming with the EC2003 battleset, but I'm a

bit biased in that regard, so you don't have to take my word for it.

Overall, the Game Engine part of HC2002 Gold is solid, spawns very few crashes, and is a blast to play. Loads of user scenarios for different battlesets will keep you playing for a long while, and there's always the prospect of more user scenarios to come, and who knows what else.

The Scenario Editor

Ah, the Scenario Editor, it's back with a vengeance. This powerful little tool allows you to create scenarios for any battleset in Harpoon Classic 2002 Gold without much trouble, from very simple, small engagement, to huge battles (as long as your computer can keep up). I, unfortunately, cannot use it very effectively. The most I can do is create sizeable air campaigns, but that's about it. Whether that will ever change is questionable, but it's not something I'm really striving for. The ability to edit existing scenarios is satisfying enough. Interesting to note is that you can edit both official (Battleset) scenarios, and user-created ones. I even managed to fix a broken scenario once using the scenario editor, it appeared to have a group in it that did not contain any actual units, and was thus crashing the game.

Once you're through with designing your Ultimate Scenario(TM), you can always take a look at the analysis made by the program. Always interesting, that way you can see some stats concerning the scenario, and how's it played out.

My limited experience with the SE has been satisfactory. You can set timed events such as incoming air strikes and such, as well as specify specific loadouts aircraft should have at the start of a scenario. It's all crisp and clear, and because it closely resembles the game engine when it comes to functionality, it's really easy to get into, but hard to master, I should think.

The Platform Editor

Ah, the grand Platform Editor. If the tremendous amount of scenarios, and your very own scenario editor can't keep you playing forever, then the Platform Editor can, and will. This nifty little tool (for which you require the Access runtime), you can edit and create platforms, weapons, loadouts, sensors, the lot. Want to add in your country's navy? See a platform the development team hasn't included that is in your navy/air force? Well, why not add it yourself? But how do you do this?

And that's precisely the problem with the Platform Editor. For someone who's brand new to this kind of thing, it appears a bit daunting at first, I should know. If you understand all the terms used in-game, you'll get going pretty quickly, but even so, there is no manual. Yes, that's right, you're left pretty much in the dark on what all the fields you fill in are actually meant for. Yes, there is a small document available going over the basics of working with databases and editing, but it's not nearly enough. This is something I think the development team should look into it. But I've gone over this problem already, so what the hell.

Other than that, this is the icing on the cake, it supplements an already astounding product, and breathes new life into the game, and its community. I'm going to try and see if I can't mess around with it enough that Harpoon will become more like a WWII sim than a contemporary wargame. Wish me luck.

One other gripe I do have with the Platform Editor, is that it's a bit confusing to know what you can actually do with the database once you've exported it and are happy with your new platforms. I mean, what about official patches and database updates, for example, how does that fit in? Sounds to me like you're going to have a field day trying to keep all your files sorted right.

Conclusion

Harpoon Classic 2002 Gold is without a doubt the most complete version of Harpoon Classic available, with over 200 scenarios coming with the full product, and many more user-created scenarios available online. It features a scenario editor, and more importantly, a platform editor, which allows you to extend the game's life span even further. It has its

flaws, obviously, but the team has worked hard to make this game what it is, and is continuing to improve the game as I write this article. They have already released several patches, updating both the game engine itself, and the database. There are some ambitious new plans on the horizon, take for example the world maps, coming with the CD version of the game. You can't actually use them yet, but God help you when you can, or your machine, that is.

In short, fans of the Harpoon Classic line of games probably won't regret buying this product, as I expect many have done so already. For interested new players, this is the game that brought me into Harpoon, and who knows, it might do the same to you, however before you even think about buying, you should decide whether you're interested in a contemporary naval warfare simulation. If you are, chances are you'll fall in love with this one in minutes. If you're not sure, there's always demo version available, so you can see for yourself.

I bid you farewell, and hope that you have found this review even a bit informative. This concludes my review, until next time.