

Battleground

— World War II Online

The online multiplayer aspect of most modern PC flight sims is a compelling reason for many to 'fly' these games, whether it is co-operating to fly an instrument approach with a human ATC controller, or going head to head in a dogfight, it seems the more humans in the sim — the better.

Take this idea even further and you get *Battleground Europe — World War II Online*, a massive multiplayer online game (MMOG) that, as well as being a flightsim, also can be described as a tank sim, ship sim and infantry game. The game is fought over a 350,000sq mile fi scale single map of Europe, with roads, rivers, towns and villages all in the correct position and with a vast arsenal of over 90 different tanks, ships and aircraft to wage virtual war. Both sides fight to take and control vital choke-points on the map over the length of a campaign with surprise attacks, feints and parachute assaults all being feasible.

A key discriminator between this and other flightsims is that, apart from a perfunctory offline training mode (in which you can fly or drive the sim's vehicles), is that all your allies and enemies are human (apart from some computer-controlled AI flak defences around factories and airfields) and thus, every time you take-off, almost anything can happen. Enemy fliers are extremely skilled and woe betide the novice who underestimates an 'easy kill'.

Graphics

On first inspection, one might be disappointed with the blandness of the sim's graphics. The cockpits, though accurate in instrument layout, have a mid-90s feel to them, far short of the almost photo realistic virtual cockpits seen in *IL-2*, *Lock-On* or *BoB II*. However, while functional they still do

the job and although the terrain, too, is seemingly uninspiring at first glance, it does grow on you after a while and the hedgerows, woods and villages become more appealing over time.

Aircraft

The timeframe of the game 1940-42, posits an alternative history where France did not fall straight away and was able to check the German Blitzkrieg. Both sides, therefore, start off with the usual aircraft, such as Hurricane Mk1s, Hawk 75s and Bf109Es which, through the production cycle, are gradually replaced by faster and more effective aircraft such as the Spitfire IX, Lockheed 322F (a French P-38) and FW190. These production cycles are, of course, massively speeded up for the sake of the game but the priorities are set by human high command players on each side who determine the next weapon to be researched and deployed — with both sides starting off a campaign in roughly in balance. Interestingly this means that the R&D and production rate can be slowed down through effective bombing — so the enemy's factories are a key strategic target.

BE scores in that some of its aircraft modelled have been rarely seen in flight sims until now — the Blenheim I for example, and the Dewoitine D520 as well as the Douglas Havoc/DB7. You can even drop parachutists if you become a C-47/Ju52 pilot. Unfortunately, the biggest bomber in the game is the He111, so there are no Hampdens, Wellingtons or Stirlings to carry out heavy raids, which is a shame. However, as this sim is an ongoing work in progress, with new content added regularly, new aircraft and equipment are sure to make appearances as time goes on.

Finally, if you tire of piloting the aircraft, you can even



switch to land or sea units and see the war from a different perspective. AA guns can be manned and you can try to down enemy aircraft that way and, if you are caught unawares by fighter-bombers, the games recreate the feeling of impotence that infantry in WW2 must have felt in the face of overwhelming air power when it seems that every aircraft is hostile.

FMs

For the flight modelling, the sim does not 'feel' as realistic as the current pinnacle of WW2 PC air combat, the *IL-2* series. In particular, the landing and collision detection sometimes produces odd results, especially if you clip trees, buildings or ground loop. However, torque is modelled, along with compressibility (especially important in a diving P-38) and all the aircraft feel correct when compared to their counterparts. They can be trimmed and the engine power output adjusted, so this is far from the simplified aircraft controls found in other online games. (Some of the design team were from the classic online flight sim *WarBirds*).

However, one thing that does make it slightly more difficult is that in busy areas (for example around major cities) there can be occasional stutters because of all the players and projectiles that are being tracked. *BE* has one of the most complex ballistic and

damage models in PC games and, whereas many flightsims will tax your video card, *BE* will also push your processor to the limit.

Gameplay

BE is engrossing as a flight sim as that upon entering the game you, too, have to make strategic decisions straight away. Where is the front most hard pressed — should you be a bomber, close air support or fighter pilot? If you persevere and work your way up the virtual ranks with your invisible headquarters staff it becomes really interesting and the decisions to win each campaign begin to mirror some of the choices faced by real commanders. Do you hit the enemy's heavy industry and slow his rate of production down? Or do you wrest air supremacy and defend your factories to the hilt? Do you respond to desperate calls for air support from a beleaguered town? Or do you interdict the replacement tanks and trucks heading to that town to disrupt and blunt the enemy's assault? It is these decisions and the immersive nature that have grown the loyal fanbase of the game that it now commands.

Teampay

With hundreds (if not thousands) of players online at once, players who attempt to go it alone will rarely be successful. As there are no out-

of-cockpit views (or enemy indicators apart from a faint coloured icon that gets a stronger hue the longer you look at it, representing your ability to pick-up bandits) a wingman is almost essential to provide a second pair of eyes to cover your six. In bombers, too, the slow speed and puny defensive armament of the Blenheim, Havoc and He111 mean that a second crewman is extremely desirable to man the defensive guns and operate the realistic bombsight (which needs above ground level and airspeed entering into it if you are to hit the target). The Blenheim IV, in particular, is dead meat without fighter escort (one Vickers K gun in the top turret for rear defence) and one can only wonder at the bravery of the men who had to do this for real in the early days of WW2.

Online players are on the whole extremely friendly to new players to help them negotiate the steep learning curve of this game and joining an established squadron or

team is recommended. Alternatively, you can also create or join squads 'in-game' to complete a specific mission, adding to the social aspect of the sim.

Conclusion

Battleground Europe is a fascinating and immersive simulation of 1940s combined arms warfare. Though the graphics are ugly in comparison to recent releases the sense of being a small cog in a big machine is perhaps only matched by *Falcon 4: Allied Force*, *Battle of Britain II* and their (offline) campaigns. Flying towards a town under attack, seeing tracer fire from ground forces engaged, calls for help and assistance on your 'radio' and seeing Stukas divebomb your troops really gets your adrenalin flowing as you race to their help. In *BE* there is a real urgent reason to hit that enemy factory and, after playing as infantry under air attack, you will appreciate the frantic calls for air support.

Unlike other games, as well

as the CD-ROM you will also need to buy a subscription to this online game. Currently this can range from as low as £4.50 a month (if you sign up for the longest subscription plan) to £8 per month (if you pay monthly). The key question then — is it worth it? Though strategic online wars can be had for free with the *IL-2* series, these usually require third party applications to manage sorties, track destroyed targets etc and have a clumsy interface, with no option to simply dip-in and dip-out of a persistent war. In *BE*, this is all integrated and, although the learning curve is steep, once familiar with the interface, the possibilities are almost endless. In summary, while not being the most realistic WW2 flightsim around, *Battleground Europe* is probably the most realistic combined arms PC simulation available and, as a result, gives the flightsim addict wanting more, a special reason to take to the virtual skies.

Tim Robinson



Cockpit screenshot from *Battleground Europe*.

System Requirements

Pentium 1.2Ghz PC
Windows 98, 2000, Me, XP
RAM 512Mb (1Gb recommended)
Hard Disk 1Gb
Graphics Card 128MB
Internet connection
(Broadband recommended)
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