

Hardware Review: Microsoft's SideWinder Force Feedback 2 Joystick

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Overview Microsoft's Sidewinder Force Feedback 2 USB Joystick is Microsoft's latest addition or should I say tradition in the evolution of the most prolific line of gaming controllers the free world has ever seen. Surely, many of you are already familiar with the "SideWinder" product name that encompasses a myriad of game pads, joysticks, steering wheels, voice controls, and more. Microsoft's Sidewinder Force Feedback 2 Joystick (FF2) is designed to enhance the user gaming experience by adding a precision instrument to "control" certain games. The built in Force Feedback is the main dish the FF2 will be known for. Its predecessor, the Force Feedback Pro (the second force-feedback stick Microsoft released) had some problems with compatibility and odd feedback forces. The saying is the third revision for Microsoft is always a charm, and although its compatibility problems and feedback forces are corrected, the ergonomics still are in need of improvement. My main complaint with the stick is buttons 2, 3, and 4 right behind the main trigger switch (button #1). This placement configuration is flat out uncomfortable and impossible to leverage ample dexterity with any precision that is necessary in many games. Don't get me wrong; this is still an awesome quality constructed Force Feedback joystick. Let me explain some other major improvements in the design that I really like. First, the power supply is self-contained in the base housing so you don't need to deal with an extra brick on the floor. I also love the fact the numbers are readily marked by each button and switch (and there are 8 of them so they are easy to custom configure). The forces as I said earlier are really neat and feel solid! I also loved the "twist" handle effect that acts as a rudder in flight sims, and the new 8-way hat switch. The SideWinder Gaming Controller software (called SideWinder Central 4.0) is simple to install and a breeze to configure. You can even download and share specific "game profiles" for certain games from the web site.

Minimum Requirements Here are the minimal requirements for the FF2 as recommended by Microsoft. Remember this is a USB device so Win 95 and NT are not supported.

- Win 98/ME/2000
- 4X CD-ROM
- 16 MB RAM
- DirectX 7.0a (included on CD)

Conclusion Microsoft's SideWinder Force Feedback 2 is a solid fantastically constructed joystick with some ergonomic design flaws that I hope will be addressed for succeeding models. It is my sincere yearning that Microsoft look at the Mad Catz Panther XL (www.madcatz.com/pc.html) and glean some of the functionality and ergonomic style from this controller for ideas. The FF2 is a blast to use and will give you years of enjoyment. As a serious gamer, I am more critical of gaming devices because I wish to see them evolve into indispensable tools, similar to how a keyboard is used for typing with a word processor application.

Resources Microsoft SideWinder Site www.microsoft.com/products/hardware/sidewinder


Score On Big Bruce's Scale 1-10
What's Good

- A solid quality constructed stick with awesome force feedback effects
- Great improvement over predecessor
- You can print out your custom configurations

What's Not So Good

- Ergonomics of buttons on main handle are cumbersome