

Microsoft Sidewinder Gamepad Pro PC

Produced By: Microsoft (<http://www.microsoft.com>)

Official Site: <http://www.microsoft.com/products/hardware/sidewinder/devices/GPpro/default.htm>

Review By: Tim Maxwell

Overview: USB is always nice, but there are much cheaper and more comfortable pads out there.

Good Press: Sleek metallic appearance, USB connection makes installation a snap...

Bad Press: ...but you need Windows 98 to use it, Stiff D-pad will have your thumb crying for relief, no force feedback or rapid-fire capabilities.

Profile: Control pad

System Requirements:

- Multimedia personal computer with Pentium 166 or higher processor and USB port
- Microsoft Windows 98 operating system
- 16 MB of memory (RAM)
- 10 MB of available hard-disk space
- Quad speed CD-ROM drive
- Super VGA, 256-color monitor
- Microsoft Mouse, or compatible pointing device

Our Ratings:

Ease of Use: 7/10

Compatibility: 8/10

Documentation/Tech Support: 5/10

Feel: 4/10

Value: 4/10

When Microsoft released its first Sidewinder gamepad back in 1996, it's comfortable design and solid feel finally gave controller-king Gravis something to sweat about. Despite cutthroat competition, the pad surprisingly remains a favorite among PC gamers even today. I've personally tried out dozens of control pads and although some of them have had an impressive array of bells and whistles, none of them could replace my trusty Sidewinder. Then I heard about the new Sidewinder Gamepad Pro -- a sleek new USB controller that I'd hoped would replace its younger brother as my main control pad. Unfortunately, to borrow a line from Coors, "nothing beats an original."

Out of the box, you'll notice that despite the swanky new chrome finish and USB connector, the Gamepad Pro is actually quite similar to its younger brother in terms of layout. The base is solid and should rest comfortably in any size hands. There are still six main action buttons on the face of the pad and two triggers on the rear. Instead of the "Start," and "Mode" buttons, you'll find a handy new "Shift" button on the Gamepad Pro. Much like the "Shift" key on a keyboard, this button allows you to set up different actions for each of the buttons. This is a cool feature to be sure, but holding down the shift key while

trying to control the action is quite a chore. It should also be noted that there is no way to daisy-chain multiple Sidewinders together as in years past. For those gamers hoping for a little multiplayer action, this problem is easily remedied with the addition of extra USB ports or an inexpensive USB hub.

Ah, but the most important part of any gamepad is the D-pad itself and in this area, the Gamepad Pro leaves much to be desired. One of the pad's biggest selling points is the ability to switch the D-pad from standard to analog to best suit your gaming preference. In layman's terms, if the controller was set to "digital," the character under your control would move at a constant speed regardless of how hard you pressed the D-pad. If you set it to "analog," your character might walk or move more slowly based on the amount of pressure you exert. This feature is easily adjusted in the control panel and is designed to do away with separate cross-shaped digital pads and analog wands like those used in the Gravis Xterminator and the InterAct HammerHead FX controllers. This space-saving design is a great idea in theory, but it comes at the great expense of comfort.

The first game I tested with the Gamepad Pro was EA Sports' *NHL 2000*. I set the pad to analog (ideal for sports games) and hit the ice. By the time the full 60 minutes had expired, my left thumb and wrist were really feeling the burn. The D-pad, despite its size, has a very limited range of motion -- the more pressure you have to exert, the more pain you'll feel. After I had given my hand sufficient time to regain its functionality, I switched over to digital and took *Need for Speed III* for a spin. I hate to admit it, but I almost *enjoyed* being busted by the cops because in the time it took to give me a ticket, I started to get some feeling back in my thumb. Now, you might think I'm exaggerating, but I've honestly never felt a more uncomfortable D-pad in my whole gaming life. To be fair, this pad actually worked pretty well for tamer games such as RPGs like *Final Fantasy VII* and *Silver*, but then again, so did the original Sidewinder.

More deficiencies that should leave plenty of Gamepad Pros collecting dust on store shelves this Christmas include a lack of force feedback and rapid-fire capabilities. Sure, there are a lot of great gamepads on the market today that don't have these features, but you can bet most of them carry a lot lower price tag than \$40. Come on guys! If I'm going to spend \$40 on a controller, not only should it be comfortable, but it should at least offer a few things to set it apart from the average run-of-the-mill pad.

When it comes right down to it, this might be the most disappointing Microsoft peripheral I have ever used. Sure, the buttons are responsive and it has a cool "space-age" appearance, but that is hardly enough to make up for the painful D-pad and missing features. If you ask Santa for a new control pad this Christmas, ask him for the InterAct HammerHead FX pad instead. For the same price, you'll get everything the Sidewinder has, plus comfortable design, true analog and digital pads, force feedback, and rapid-fire capabilities. That being said, there is no excuse to be stuck with a mediocre controller this Christmas.