



Starry Night Enthusiast

by Ron Boe [click to email author](#)

This is the second review in a planned series, the first being SkyMap Pro. Today we're taking a look at Starry Night Enthusiast V4.5 purchased in the summer of 2004. Starry Night is published by Space Software and comes in eight versions that run on either the Windows platform or the Macintosh.

The versions are listed below, from most expensive and capable to the less expensive:

Pro Plus	Pro
Enthusiast	Astronomy Plus
Astronomy	Night Sky Explorer
Deep Space Explorer	Galaxy Explorer

What you get in the box:

When you purchase Starry Night Enthusiast you get two CD's, a DVD containing movies, a printed manual and a printed companion manual that serves as a small primer on astronomy (both are provided in software format on your computer in case you leave them at home). Finally, a little flyer with a listing of all the versions available and what features they have or do not have. It's quite terse so visit their website for more details for each version.

Where to start. This program in many ways is nothing like other planetarium program I have used. For starters, it runs on Windows and Apple Macintosh. I wanted to load Starry Night on both the Mac and Windows machines I have to compare the two at the same time but an email to the publisher asking permission to run two concurrent licenses was never answered. I took that as a *no* and a black mark for their support team.

I ran this software on a 867MHz G4 Powerbook with 640MB of ram under OS X Panther; the latest OS from Apple. Under Windows 2000, I have the latest service packs installed running on an AMD Athlon 1.4GHz with 1GB of ram. Neither system seemed to want for resources but the Apple did give pause from time to time. I blamed that on slower subsystems – laptops in general, not having the fastest subsystems installed to save on battery life. Due to the way I observe I did the majority of work with the laptop so my primary experience is with the Apple version. I saw little difference between the two and all were cosmetic in nature.

They recommend a 500MHz with 64MB of ram and 32MB of video ram. No minimums listed for a Macintosh but a G3 with the above minimum specs should work fine.

One final word on the hardware used for the test. On my Apple the background star field showed a beautiful Milky Way while my desktop showed nothing but stars. My CRT 19" Futura monitor was found lacking compared to the nice LCD of the laptop. Swapping out the 19" for my older 17" ViewSonic GS-17 gave me the views I was seeing in the laptop. I now am in the market for a replacement monitor.

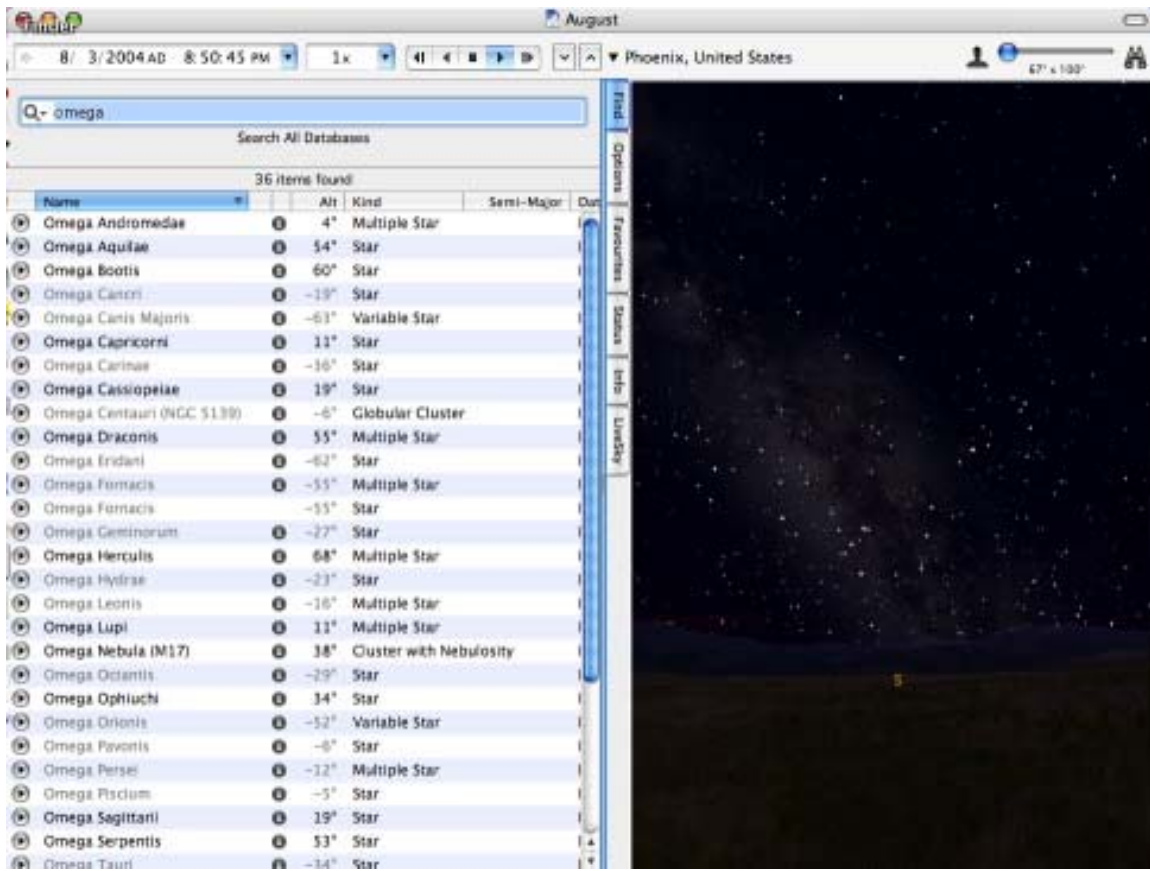
Installation went very fast; in short order I was checking out the program. First impressions are very important and Starry Night was impressive. Unlike previous astronomy emulation programs I've tried (SkyMap Pro, Cartes du Ciel, Xephim etc.) Starry Night gives you a realistic photo of the sky, not a drawing or computer simulation.



You can see comet Linear in the center of the shot above (averted vision not needed); which also displays the default landscape and compass headings. I really like the look.

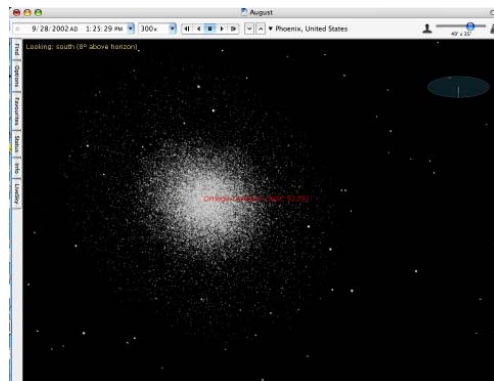
The user is offered several different kinds of country side and horizons to choose from. I kept the default grassy meadow with distant mountains. It matched my Arizona surroundings the closest. Starry Night is highly configurable so there should be a flavor to suit just about anybody. With a hard copy manual you can play with the software and see what you like without a help screen hiding everything. This is very important on a laptop with a 12" diagonal screen. Which brings up a nit pic.

On the left hand side of the screen you have several tabs: Find, Options, Favorites, Status, Info and LiveSky. If you use these tabs they expand out and take up a good third to half of your screen real estate. This proved a bit irksome at times, recall the small screen mentioned above; as you can see in the screen shot below.



On the other hand, it did prove to be a useful feature as the planets were a short click away and if I wanted to find, oh say Omega Centauri I could. In fact this is just what I did during my stay at Skywatcher's Inn. They offered a unobstructed view of the south so with my trusty laptop and Starry Night I had NGC-5139 in the 6" binoculars in a couple minutes.

The screenshot below shows Omega Centauri magnified in Starry Night. Notice the little blue sider button in the upper right hand corner. I could have zoomed in even further.



This is a good time to bring up another feature Starry Night has: animation. When the Venus transit was coming up I was able to plug in the transit and watch from the best location to see the transit: some remote place in Africa. Changing my location to Phoenix, Arizona (a remote place in North America) I was able to tell in seconds there was no need to call in sick; the transit would be off limits to me.

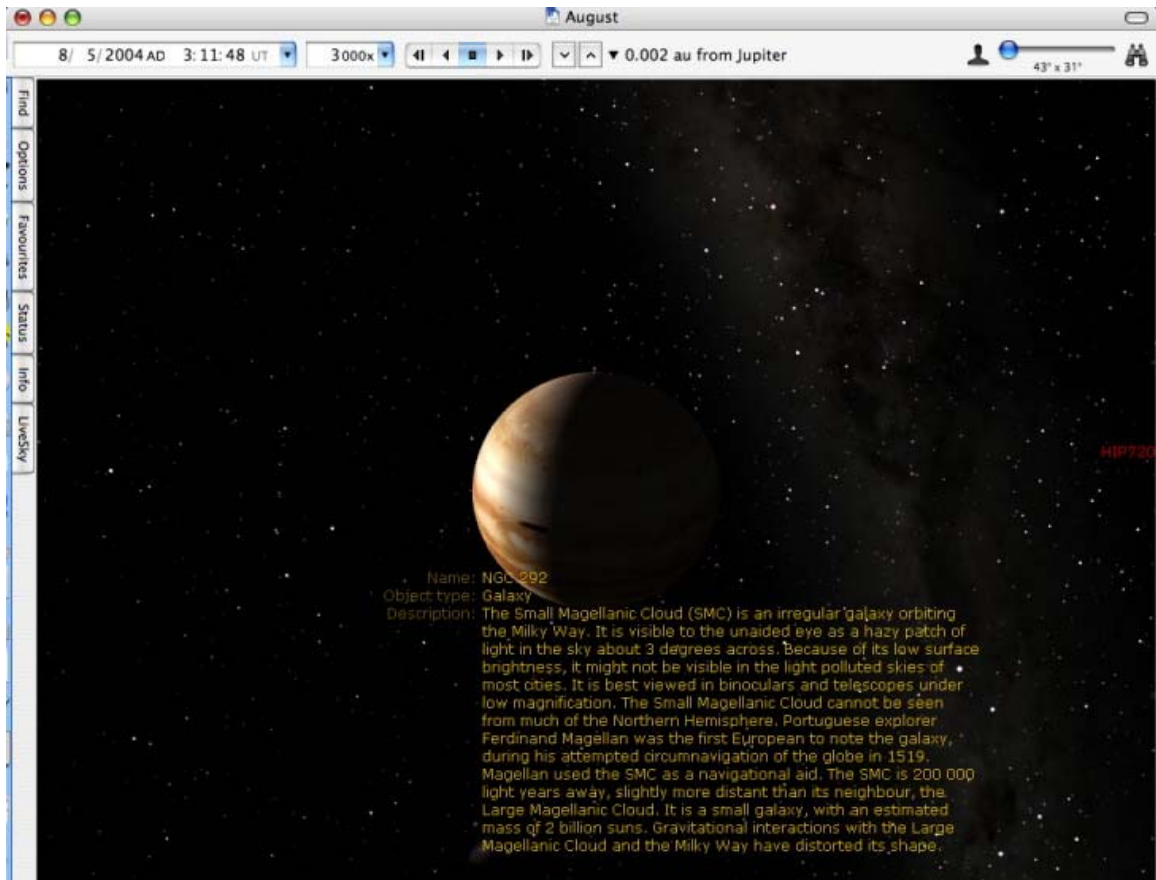
One of the first times I tried this animation with hurried up or compressed time was the first night with the program installed. I was messing around and tracking an object as it went across the sky, below the horizon and beneath my feet. According to Starry Night I wear red sneakers. This proved very entertaining!

You can also tell from this shot that you can draw in the constellation boundaries and their labels. Cute shoes.

While preparing for some company I wanted to see what the night sky would offer our visitor so I was using Starry Night under accelerated time and noticed this streak across the sky. Backing up and clicking on the object Starry Night informed me it was Hubble. That night I impressed the visitors with my knowledge of the sky by suggesting they look for Hubble coming across our view a little after eight pm. Gotta love software that makes you look good.

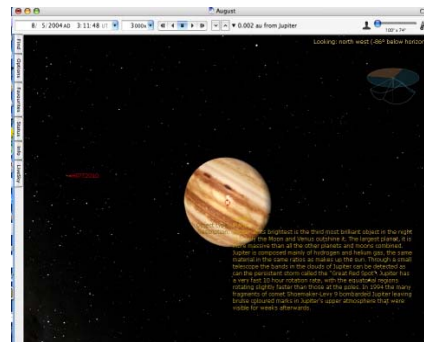
Want to know if the red spot is visible on Jupiter? Find Jupiter, right click on the planet (or ctrl click in OS X) and choose Zoom from the menu. Starry Night takes you there. Still not visible? Use the hurry up time feature and see when it will come into view.





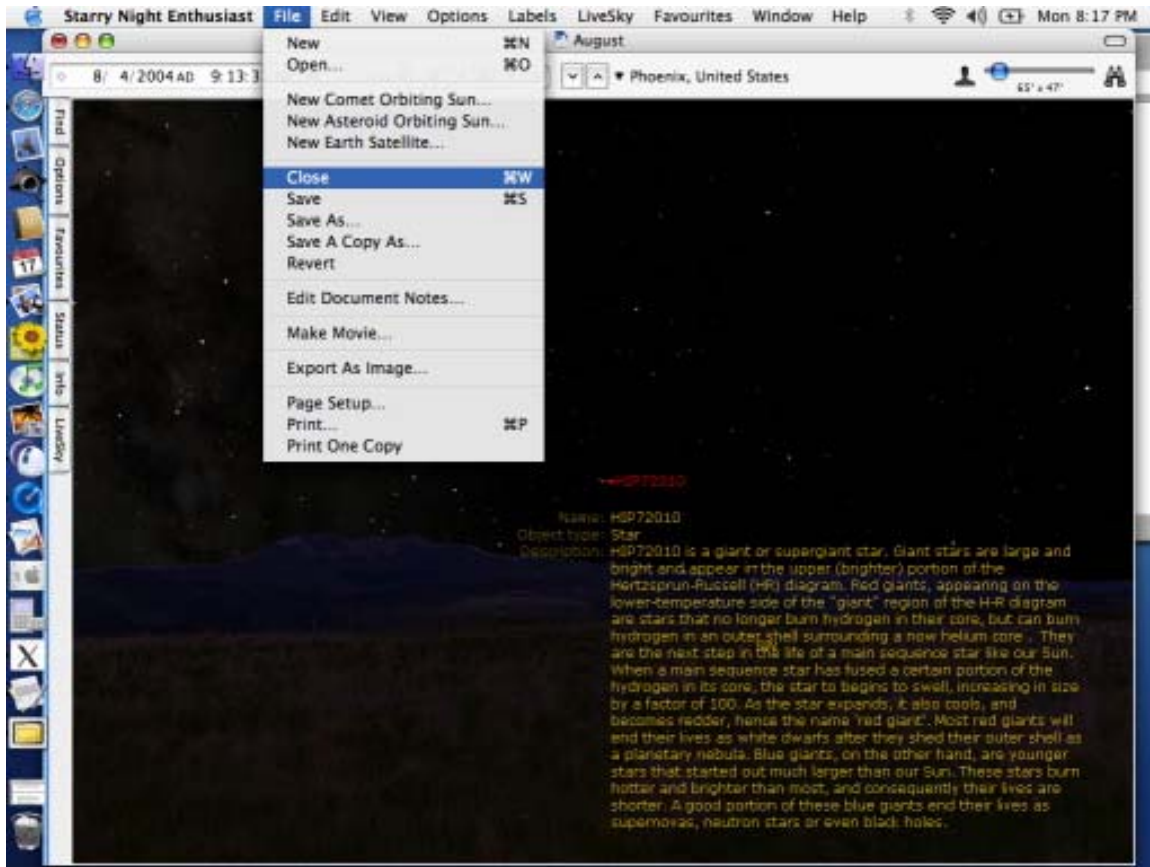
This shot shows Jupiter after you have Go There. With the mouse you can navigate all around Jupiter to see him from any angle.

The background sky is drawn like you would see it from that point in space near Jupiter. Useful if you have your telescope along when you visit Titan. I thought it was a pretty neat feature anyway.



Displaying satellites or not is just one of the many features you can turn on or off. I did have some issues with displaying comets though. Sometimes they would show up and

sometimes they did not and this would be during the same evening. I never did find out what the glitch was.



The shot above shows a typical menu. You can also see some information on a star. The first sentence is useful but the rest of the paragraph is the same for all stars which got a bit boring very fast.

If your computer is connected to the Internet you can update your files for comets, satellites and software patches. Several times the program asked if it should check for updates when I launched it – not unlike Adobe Photoshop and other programs.

Unlike SkyMap Pro, Starry Night Enthusiast does not offer a mapping function per se but you can print out screen shots. Something you can't do in SkyMap Pro but in Starry Night is make a movie. This may be very useful for teaching classes, a presentation or a way to step through a viewing session. I never made one. Cecile B. DeMille sleeps peacefully in his grave.

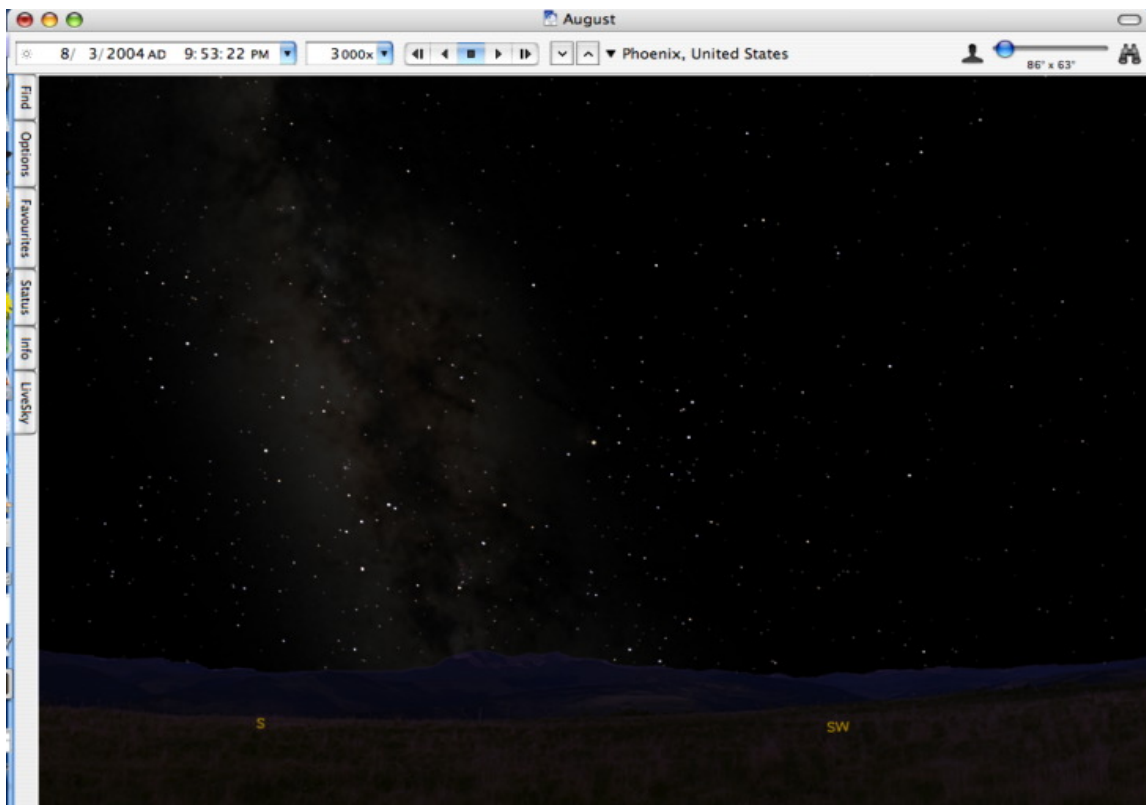
Do you need help with the constellations? I do. Have Starry Night draw them in for you. In the screen shot below you can see they will even toss in a cool graphic for you if you wish.



Please note the orientation object in the upper right hand corner. When you grab the sky with the mouse and move around this will appear to keep you orientated. Also note the man and binoculars with slider button on the upper right hand side of the menu bar. As you slide the button to the right you zoom into the center of the screen. The man and binoculars are replaced with odd little symbols in the Windows version. Which was about the only thing really different between the Macintosh and Windows version.

All in all, a very nice program; comes with a high recommendation; especially for folks with little to no sky experience and love eye candy. If you are looking for a package to compare eye pieces and you want some deep sky maps with magnitudes listed look elsewhere. However; this program has features to keep you busy for years to come and should delight most users.

While capturing screen shots for this report I kept finding really nice pictures that would normally be culled during the editing process as they would not fit the text. So I'll take a cue from National Geographic and insert a couple here just because they look nice and will give you a very good idea of what this program can produce. Enjoy.



I did suffer some glitches with displaying comets. To really wring the most out of the graphics you will need an OpenGL video card. I thought they could have added more information about individual objects instead of displaying the same paragraph for every one. Maybe if you had the option to display just the first sentence where all the unique information is would make me happy. No response from tech support did give me a warm fuzzy either.

Minor nits (except for the tech support ball drop) for a well polished product. This will be a keeper for me.

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