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Fanatec Forza Motorsport CSR Elite Wheel Review with Forza Motorsport 4

by

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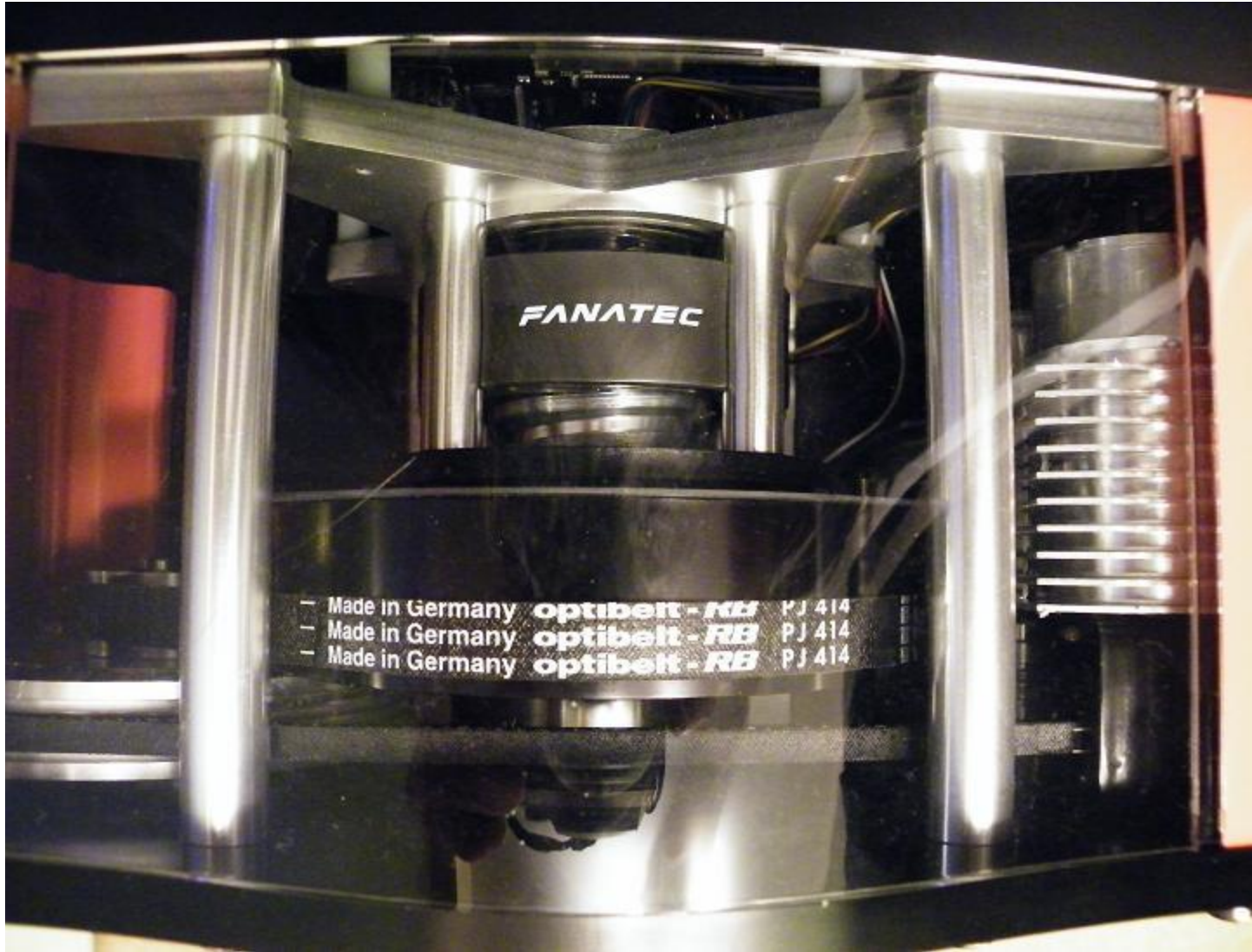
On Tuesday 29th November the UPS van pulled up and I caught a glimpse of a brown Fanatec shipping box being extracted and carried up my path... my Elite was finally here!

I had been invited by Thomas Jackermeier, the CEO of Fanatec, to host a community test poll at Forzamotorsport.net where three forum members would be chosen by their peers to receive wheels to test and review for the benefit of the sim community at large. Thomas had generously offered me a wheel to test as well, something I was only too happy to accept!

So, the unboxing began. My other two Fanatec wheels had messages printed on each four layers of the box lids, the Turbo S proclaiming that victory would soon be mine - the GT2 encouraging me to show controller users that wheel racers are faster. I was surprised to see no story unfold on the Elite box.. perhaps this wheel will speak for itself and needs no introduction?

First thing you see when the layers of packaging are removed is that the wheel is presented in a black, Fanatec logo bag, a nice addition and useful for keeping the Elite free from dust when not in use. On removing the wheel you instantly notice just how heavy it is, this is a serious bit of hardware. When freed from it's confines the first thing that catches your eye are the wonderful internal mechanics, all on display through a clear perspex 'engine' cover to replicate the unashamed opulence of owning one of Italy's finest supercars. This sight is so impressive that my poor wife, sick to death of all things related to wheels and Forza, even managed to raise an eyebrow and express a small 'Hmmm'... incredible stuff. I had finally set eyes upon the answer to Fanatec's mission objective - to create the best multi-platform wheel on planet Earth.





The wheel comes with an attached bracket to match any previous Fanatec wheel's bolt pattern to facilitate easy mounting without any new drilling and is angled for anyone without the luxury of a tiltable wheel platform as the steering column no longer exits the base at an ergonomic driving angle, it comes straight out at 90°. On removing the bracket there is a new bolt pattern on the underside - a triangular centred configuration unlike the previous asymmetrical four bolt pattern of the Porsche 911 range. Luckily, I have a Fanatec RennSport V2 Wheel Stand which is pre-drilled for the new hard mounts, so it was fitted in seconds. The wheel has a longer steering column than other Fanatec versions, so some adjustment was needed to get my driving position just right, but with a Playseat chair, RennSport stand and homemade pedal platform this was very easy. Less adjustable rigs may take a bit longer to perfect as the wheel rim is closer to you than with any previous Fanatec wheels.

With everything mounted and my ClubSport pedals attached it was time to get familiar with the wheel. The buttons have a new layout with a new five way D-pad 'joystick' on the left side. The rim feels very nice in your hands, the majority covered in nice matte black rubber with strategically placed Alcantara inserts for the palms and thumbs. The carbon fibre fascia is stunning... a very nice, racy touch.

Time to boot up and finally breath life into this engineering masterpiece. First press of the front mounted power button yielded instant results, the wheel spun very quickly right then left and the blue LED display was lit... success. The large fan came to life and a reassuring 'whoosh' of air could be heard and felt exiting the right hand vent/heat-sink. I immediately decided to test whether this wheel is equipped with a 'Fan Mode' in the firmware... it is... fan switched to 'Temperature Control'... silence... big grin. Time to turn on the Xbox and establish the wireless connection, again success... so, time for Forza Motorsport 4 and my first chance to feel the wheel in action.

With the new unfamiliar button/pad layout I was all at sea navigating the game menus at first, but within minutes it became second nature. Time to select a car and track I'm very familiar with to compare the wheel to my trusty GT2 - R3 Class #77 Subaru Impreza (tuned by VVV Worm)... check, Maple Valley Full... check. Time to set the wheel options - all the familiar settings are there for Sensitivity, FFB, Shock Vibration, Drift Mode, ABS Vibration, Linearity, Dead Zone, Spring and Damper. I set the wheel to my usual 270° sensitivity and ABS to 63% but decide to leave FFB at 100 and Drift Mode 'Off'. Time to drive!



Oh dear, there is no FFB/resistance for about 20-30° either side of the centre point and when cornering the full force of the feedback motors kick in and make the car virtually undriveable! How can this be? Surely this wheel is better than than my GT2/Turbo S! But no, the wheel is unusable like this - time to e-mail Thomas in case I have a defective wheel. I quickly receive the news I was hoping for, it is a beta firmware issue and a new version will be with me very soon... phew! A day or two later the latest beta revision is delivered to my inbox and installed on the wheel... nervously, I start Forza again to feel the results for myself. The FFB/resistance issue is fixed and a new feature

has appeared, I will disclose that option soon enough!

Right, lets attack Maple Full... first thing I notice is that the FFB is very strong, too strong for my liking, so I turn it down to 60%... perfect. Instantly, you notice that driving with this wheel is smooth and precise, the old, slightly damped, feeling of the previous Fanatec belt-driven wheels is gone... as is the urge to ever drive with my beloved GT2 again! Immediately I felt at home with the Elite, lap times were unaffected as the familiarity of previous Fanatec wheels was there but with much, much more.. a bit like an old, comfy pair of slippers.. but now with go-faster stripes! The FFB is simply wonderful - sharp, crisp and very informative, every little detail of car behaviour and environmental effects can be felt and it has utterly transformed Forza into a lively, exciting roller-coaster ride... where, before, it was slightly understated. Tiny details of grip and suspension movement come through, rumble strips are now quite vicious and try to snatch the wheel from your fevered grasp... quite simply an absolute revelation.

The more I drive, the more I like this wheel and soon find that once my hands and brain have adjusted to the new information being sent through the twin Mabuchi FFB motors that I can actually press even closer to the limits of tyre adhesion and my lap times have started to improve slightly as a result.

I have now had the wheel for over a week and have fallen in love with it, I had never experienced a wheel of this quality before and it really will transform games you know and love into a far more visceral, gritty virtual motorsport experience. It may be expensive, but the quality shines through in droves with the best FFB effects and smoothness I have ever felt... and that's with Forza 4!

As for the new feature included with the latest firmware... it is an option to use 'Autoclutch'. When enabled it will automatically engage any button mapped to the clutch when you change gear with the paddles, something I'm sure will divide opinion quite dramatically. Personally, I love it!

Time for a quick overview.

1 : Build Quality, Looks and Feel

This wheel is built to last, all metal construction and Allen bolts holding every

conceivable part together - a serious piece of sim racing hardware.

I really appreciate the aesthetics of high quality engineering and this wheel definitely has a certain 'industrial beauty' to it, certainly not as 'cute' as the Porsche 911 models but rugged in design and very striking to look at. It looks exactly like the high performance equipment that it is, nothing is hidden away and Fanatec are obviously very proud of this wheel as it even has a window for the owner to marvel at it's inner workings.

The wheel rim is very comfortable to use (like the other Fanatec wheels) and the button/D Pad placements are well situated with a good solid feel. Perhaps the D Pad 'joystick' feels a little easy to move, with virtually no resistance, but I have grown to like it as well with in game scrolling feeling easy and effortless.

The fact that the rims can be very easily exchanged by just removing two bolts on the steering column and unclipping the wiring harnesses to the main body is a superb feature and I can't wait to see the rim options that will be available for the wheel in the future.





2 : Force Feedback and Firmware Features

The FFB can be set as strong as anybody could hope for and more, the effects of the previous wheels were strong enough with one motor... the CSR Elite has two, enough said! The effects themselves are beautifully detailed, you can feel everything and I mean everything. It feels as though there are subtle effects hidden within Forza's game engine that are discovered by this wheel... incredibly subtle grip and weight changes can be felt and even tiny tyre vibrations and adhesion loss come through to your hands, it has transformed Forza's feel with the full effects of jarring FFB all the way to a more subtle, nuanced underworld of finesse. The full spectrum of effects is still a thing of wonderment to me... I notice new things with every car, every set up, every track... simply amazing.

All the tunability of Fanatec wheels is still here on the Elite with the added Autoclutch as well. Considering the dedication shown by Fanatec to constantly improve the features and functionality on their wheels I have no doubt that this wheel can become even better.

3 : Final Thoughts

The CSR Elite is certainly not cheap at double the price of Fanatec's other multi-platform wheels but the build quality and materials used are second to none, you get what you pay for and in this instance you get a lot. You will definitely need a sturdy rig to use this wheel as it's weight and powerful FFB are quite a step up from any other I have tried, but the Elite is aimed at only the most dedicated sim racers, most of whom will already have such a set up in place.

Over all I'm very impressed with this wheel, everything about it screams high quality, from the aluminium internals to the Alcantara trim - the strong, beautifully detailed FFB to the extensive tunability and future rim swaps.. everything just feels and looks right, a new benchmark for multi-platform wheels. I loved my GT2 and still do really, but I absolutely adore the CSR Elite.

Well done Fanatec... mission accomplished!

