

Microsoft Flight Simulator X

I have been a fan of Microsoft Flight Simulator since version 4. I received the 2002 version via the Mindshare program and wrote a review of it six years ago. At that time, I commented on how the graphic quality of the program had improved with each version. The progression continues with the current version.

The terrain and ground graphics are also considerably better than any version of Flight Simulator I've ever seen. In early simulators ground graphics were simply geometric shapes shown in a solid color. With successive versions the ground graphics have become increasingly more detailed and, more importantly, far more extensive. Clouds have also evolved dramatically. I would imagine they are much more difficult to portray than ground terrain but the latest version has truly become lifelike. In the current version of Flight Simulator the clouds have wispy edges, just as a pilot would see flying into them. The transition from the clear sky to the cloud is accomplished in several steps, making it very realistic.

I tested the current version of the flight simulator on a laptop computer. I noticed an unstable pointer when making selections on the menu. I assume this is because of the screen capacity of the laptop rather than the program. And I assume that the program would run much smoother on an LCD or CRT with a desktop.

I used the program for several hours, running Microsoft Vista home premium version, using a 2.0 GHz core two dual CPU and 2 GB of RAM. I did not experience any program lockups or crashes in my testing. It always ran very smoothly. Because of the intensity of the graphics, initiating a flight is slow once you've made your selection of terrain and geographic area. The selection is also altered by the season, and time of day; each requiring is a separate load of screen graphics. It takes more than a minute to get the geographic setting up ready to fly. I was not able to use the full intensity of the graphics without slowing the computer to the point where there would be a stepping action during the flight. However, setting the graphics intensity back just a little bit produced a very smooth flight on this machine and all seasons and terrain graphics. My laptop does not have a gaming quality graphics accelerator.

Another way to assess the improvements in the ground terrain graphics is noticing how many trees there are in the landscape. In the Microsoft version the trees are endless and very realistic. Flying low gives the user an extensive view of the ground graphics, and the dodging of the trees makes for interesting flying.

The command structure and menus of the simulator are the same as earlier versions so there is not much of a learning curve for the user who has flown simulators before. The aircraft functions are managed mostly by the joystick and its button and a top hat featured to scroll through the cockpit views. There are two cockpit views that can be selected from the menu. The virtual cockpit is new to me and seems to be the default setting for the simulator. This allows the user to use a top hat to scroll sideways or up and down through the cockpit and see all the features. The price of that, however, is that gauges are not as clear as they are in a traditional hard shell cockpit, which is quite clear and crisp. My preference has always been to use the traditional cockpit as I liked the choices of turning off the instrument panel for the clear view out the window with just the basic gauges display at the bottom of the screen. The third choice allows the user to turn off all the gauges and this option is the only one that allows a clear view out the rear of the aircraft. However, having multiple choices enhances users' experience.

There are extensive training sessions on the hard disk that can be used to explore and learn features about flight and aircraft control. I've always been fascinated by learning the concepts of radio navigation and must confess

that I've never mastered the skills on the simulator. One of my favorite flights is in the Caribbean, where there are not always clear navigational signals to a destination. I like to use the VOR technology and fly between two distant towers and then turn to fly to the destination using the onboard instruments. As long as one selects aircraft fast enough to make the trips between the islands, it is an interesting flight. FS X, of course, has GPS; but for a long time user, this feels like cheating.

Flight Simulator provides the gamer with a series of predesigned missions that both test skills and teach flying in a variety of demanding circumstances. I tried a "beginner" mission which is a flight into Telluride, Colorado in a Learjet. During this mission your co-pilot handles the radio communications and repeats the instructions coming from the tower. The pilot is responsible for all the aircraft functions. The method guides the pilot to a successful landing, assuming instructions are followed. This, however, does not make it easy. You are guided through the process of approach and landing, but as pilot; you must put the aircraft in the correct state and position to make a correct landing.

Use of the Air Traffic Controller adds a realism for pilots trying to find their way from the terminal to the taxiway and then to the runway. Seeing runway and taxiway markers on the computer screen leaves the user wanting. To make up for the lack of airport visibility the ATC places arrows on the taxiways to assist taxiing to directed destinations. The program provides a substantial learning experience that any true pilot has to learn before ever flying.

I was very thrilled by this version of Flight Simulator. Earlier versions had a tendency to lock up in mid-flight and this version never gave me any issues in several hours of use. The graphic view of the terrain is the best I've yet seen and the virtual cockpit adds a lot for those who like scrolling the views. I have some limited vision and I prefer the traditional cockpit to better see the gauges.

The online and included help is very good and allows a quick search for the topic you need to research. Directions seem very clear.

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