Plane models are exceptionally detailed and life-like.

Jump to any airport or point in the world to get started.

Using the power of Bing Maps, the whole world appears in the game.

Flight Simulator can be as in-depth and realistic as you want it to be.

REALISTIC FLIGHT SIMULATOR

Microsoft Flight Simulator

No snakes on these planes

ELEVEN GAMES into a series that began in 1982 (and has its roots in 1976), and Microsoft has struck absolute gold. More of a hobby in itself than a game, *Flight Simulator* scratches the dream of flight that's itched at the back of your skull since you first saw a huge passenger jet lumber into the air from the freeway near LAX.

All this comes with a price, however. Firstly there's the financial one—the game is available on Game Pass, but if you want the version with the most planes out of the box rather than as add-on DLC you're looking at over $100. Then there's hardware, with it shredding all currently available CPU/GPU combos at the time of writing, especially when over large cities or landing at international airports. It'll be interesting to see how it bears up with an RTX 3080 purring away under the hood, but this is definitely an experience built with future hardware in mind. Then there's the time cost—the initial 500MB client download goes by agreeably fast, but on running that you're treated to a static screen while it downloads 90GB of data. Load times are long too, with our SATA SSD installation taking several minutes to get from menu to cockpit.

But all the waiting is worth it. The incredible technology that pulls live weather data, air traffic control chatter, landscapes and towns generated from Bing Maps data, and then simulates over 1,000 surfaces on the aircraft that's plowing through the middle of it all is a lot for a PC and an internet connection, to handle, but what you get is a game with something for everyone. Everyone who wants to fly, anyway. If you want to manually carry out pre-flight checks then taxi your jumbo for 15 minutes just to get to the runway, you can do that. If you'd rather pop into existence in a twin-prop on a sunny day over the mountain range of your choice, you can do that too. Buzz your house in a red biplane? Yep—though don't expect your home to be there in perfect detail, as there are a lot of generic buildings in small towns, and even some famous city skylines aren't quite as we remember them, awaiting the hand of a modder to bring them to realistic life.

There's another type of hardware we need to address too, the sort that sits on your desk and takes some explaining when you bring a date home. While it's possible to play *Flight Simulator* with an Xbox pad and keyboard combo, the game is better experienced with something like Logitech's Pro Flight Yoke, as this matches the controls in the majority of small planes. There are various options, including Thrustmaster's HOTAS system that couples a fighter plane-style stick with a manual throttle and a lot of buttons.

Whatever control system you're comfortable with, however, *Flight Simulator* remains one of the very best ways to pass an afternoon with your PC. Whether listening to the soothing voice of the tutorial instructor, looking down from the clouds during a solo flight, or approaching a runway with 600 passengers in the rear, it's a game that, without conflict or stress beyond takeoff and landing, challenges both what it means to be a game, and our sense of timekeeping, as long afternoons melt into evenings spent just revelling in the thrill of flight. –IAN EVENDEN

VERDICT 9

Microsoft Flight Simulator

➕ **LEVEL FLIGHT** Gorgeous graphics; exhilarating simulation.

➖ **STALL WARNING** Heavy on the hardware specs and downloads.

🔄 **RECOMMENDED SPECS** CPU, Ryzen 7 Pro 2700X / i7-9800X. RAM, 32GB. GPU, RTX 2080 / Radeon VI.

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