

FSX 10th Anniversary - A Decade of Fun!

By Michael Hayward

10th Anniversary of FSX

The 10th October 2016 marked ten whole years since Microsoft Games Studio and the ACES team released FSX to the world. In this article we'll take a look back at the history of the development of the simulator, the fall of the ACES team, and the split which resulted in the eventual creation of Dovetail Games Flight School, their future flight simulator, and Lockheed Martin's Prepar3D.

A Brand New Flight Simulator

After the major success of Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004: A Century of Flight (FS2004), Microsoft was quick to push a new simulator into the market. This simulator also showcased a brand new API they had developed - DirectX 10 (within FSX, you can turn on DX10 Preview Mode in the settings). This new release also included a revamped multiplayer element which added features such as cockpit sharing and allowed users to be air traffic controllers. Many new graphical enhancements were also added to this tenth release, making FSX the best looking version to date. Apart from the numerous scenery and environmental enhancements, other visual effects included animated jet bridges and wing flex on aircraft.



Hal Bryan in front of the Microsoft Flight Simulator awards cabinet. Bryan was a Flight Simulator Community Evangelist who would respond to comments about Microsoft Flight Simulators on the Microsoft Blog and Forums. He would also attend different Flight Simulator events.

(Photo Credit: Owen Hewitt)

A new API called SimConnect was also added to the simulator, which gave third party software FSUIPC-like access to the flight simulator's numerous functions and variables. Other additions included an improved 'Learning Center' with real-life flight instructor Ron Machado. To cater to a younger audience, new missions complete with awards (in the form of virtual medals) were included, adding a new element to the simulator.

Two versions of FSX were released to the public. Alongside the Standard version there was the Deluxe edition which included the Grumman G-21A Goose, Maule Orion M-7-260-C Super Rocket as well as furnished polished versions of the Beechcraft Baron 58, Cessna 172S Skyhawk, and the Mooney M-20-M Bravo.

The Deluxe Edition also included an on-disk Software Development Kit (SDK) including Kiosk Mode (allowing the user to replay a mission repeatedly, and initially intended for museums and displays purposes), and improvements to graphical features such as light bloom.

An additional add-on, which added even more features, was the Acceleration pack. This included the Augusta Westland, Boeing F-18 and P-51D Mustang. It also included new scenery enhancements such as Berlin, Istanbul, Cape Canaveral and Edwards Air Force Base (adding 60 cm/pixel textures and new 3D buildings).

After its initial launch two service packs were released. Service Pack 1 improved the game's stability and performance whilst Service Pack 2 allowed multiplayer compatibility with FSX: Acceleration and the option to use DirectX 10 in 'Preview Mode'. The Gold Edition (released later) combined both editions of the game into one. It also included all previous service packs pre-installed.

Note: At the time, visiting the Microsoft Flight Simulator X web site enabled you to download an additional bonus mission if you had purchased the Acceleration Pack.

After releasing the Gold Edition, the ACES team started to cut back on FSX development and began working on a different project: Microsoft Train Simulator 2. This, however, never saw the light of day as the ACES team were disbanded soon after making the Train Simulator 2 announcement.

Speaking to Jeff Shyluk, a former subcontracted artist of FSX, he explained how, originally, there were plans to merge PC and Xbox hardware and that the game (FSX) would then become cross-platform, but this never materialised and the ACES team were dropped before any plan could be acted upon.



Default Heathrow (before Terminal 5 and crosswind runway closure) with default Airbus A321. Landclass is used to determine the ground scenery within FSX.



UK2000 Heathrow Extreme with VFR Scenery and Wilco Airbus Evolution A321.

Downfall And Demise Of ACES Team

On January 26th, 2009, Microsoft announced (via the FSInsider web site) that the ACES team had been axed. The Microsoft Flight Simulator web site was then updated to include an open letter from Microsoft explaining the reasons behind their decision.

Former ACES Employee, Phil Taylor, revealed that the reason the team were laid off was due to delays in product delivery and an increased demand for staff. There were also issues internally, within Microsoft. Shyluk explained how different departments were fighting over the limited development resources that were available and that Steve Ballmer saw fast internet activity and hardware easy software as the future. The launch of Windows Vista and its negative reception only added to Microsoft's woes. Ballmer decided that it was just easier to drop the entire ACES Team.

Lockheed Martin announced later that year that it had negotiated with Microsoft to buy the source code for the simulator and that it would continue its development for educational and training purposes.

On November 1st, 2010, Prepar3D was released, available in three different licenses: Professional, Developer and Academic. P3D revamped the GUI of the original FSX interface and also worked on optimising the simulator so that it took advantage of modern hardware (something FSX couldn't achieve).

On July 9th, 2014, Dovetail Games (who were known for Train Simulator 2015 at the time) announced that they had bought the full rights from Microsoft, which granted them the rights to develop the next flight simulator. Later that year in December, FSX: Steam Edition was released at the Steam store. This was a slightly modified version of FSX: Gold Edition, Deluxe, Acceleration and both service packs pre-installed. It also replaced the GameSpy multiplayer system (which had since shut down) with the Steam multiplayer system.



Default FS2004 Boeing 737-400



Default FSX Boeing 737-800



Freeware TDS Boeing 737-800 (notice the new scimitar winglets and slightly different body shape)

Dovetail Games

On May 24th, 2016, Dovetail Games released Flight School, their first new simulator based on the FSX engine. Heavily based on the original game, Flight School offers a new, modern GUI, 64-bit compatibility and new scenery thanks to cooperation with Orbx FTX.

However, the game received a mixed response due to it being too similar to FSX and with limited aircraft and modding support. Many people also commented on optimisation issues, crashes and lag spikes. If this wasn't bad enough, DirectX 9 compatibility was removed, which meant that many people with older hardware could not even run the simulator!

Microsoft Flight?

A few of the ACES team that had stayed within Microsoft (but who had changed divisions) joined up to create one more flight simulator: Microsoft Flight. This was more of an arcade-style game with only the Hawaiian Islands to explore and with only a limited selection of aircraft. The game was released on February 29th, 2012, but was poorly received due to many hard-core simmers disliking the new point-styled arcade missions.

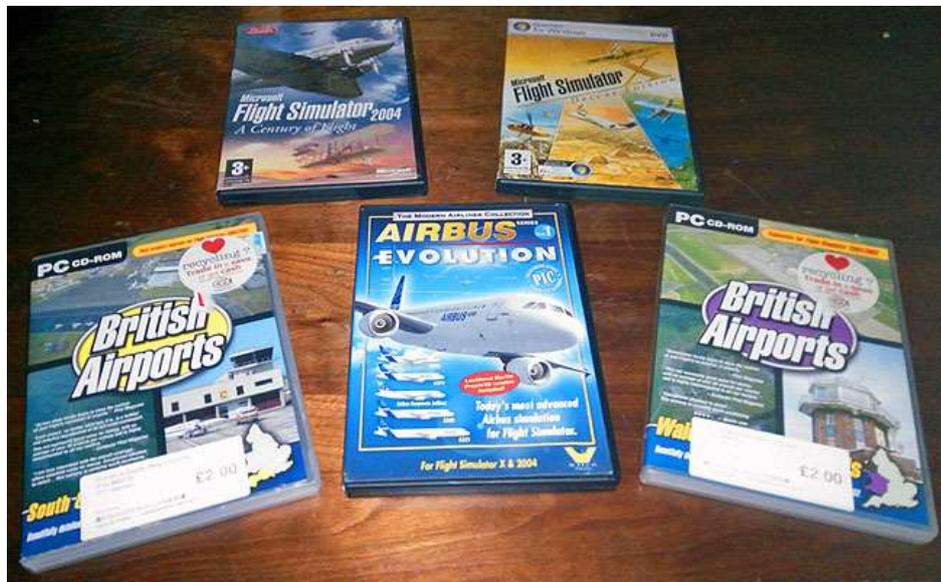
Microsoft abandoned the project in June that same year, ending the run of Microsoft-made Flight Simulator games since the series began way back in November 1982.

Personal Thoughts & Closing Remarks

So, how does the future of flight simulation look for the next ten years? Next month we have X-Plane 11 coming out and so far it looks absolutely fantastic! In terms of FSX development, it's up to the developers to see how far they can push the FSX engine. P3D and Dovetail's FSX SE both play nicely on 64-bit architecture, which means that their longevity is guaranteed for the foreseeable future.

While both being built on the FSX platform, Lockheed Martin and Dovetail Games both have very different audiences. Lockheed Martin (still) very much cater towards the more serious flyer and student, whilst Dovetail provide for the more casual user. Because of the different stances taken, future content for each sim may differ considerably.

At the end of the day, it all depends on what you want your world to look like and how the aircraft looks and feels. For me personally, I like to stick to a strict budget and look for cheap and even free alternatives, while still maintaining a high level of realism within it.



My entire Flight Simulator Disk Collection - I generally look into freeware add-ons as some are as good, or even better than what people pay for!

This includes making my own VFR Scenery with FSEarthTiles and then spending £7.99 for the autogen on the top.

FSX can and does give me that high level of customisation, and although it may run poorly and lag spikes are rampant, it hasn't stopped me from enjoying myself these last 10 years. Like I said, it really depends on what you want to get out of the simulator.

So that's my thoughts on ten years of FSX, but what about yours? How do you feel about the future of flight simulation?

Michael Hayward

17-10-2016