

CREATING THE FSX IMMERSION FACTOR

- bazzam



When I promised Gary this article I had no idea of the trouble I would have starting it. Not that it really is a difficult review to write – probably my tardiness has more to do with the fact that I would rather be using this addon instead of writing about it. Of course, I am talking about the latest version of Active Sky from HiFi Systems, as well as its partner in crime X Graphics. So what is it all about and why would I rather be flying; now there's a leading question – let me take you back to the beginning...

I have always been one that prefers high levels of detail in a sim in order to immerse myself in its richness. If the graphics are cartoonish, crude or out of place then I get distracted and find the flying hum-drum. For a long time I had trouble getting involved with FS2004. It wasn't until the release of VOZ that I got fired up enough to fly around my local area. Even then there were many disappointments exposed by the sim, cotton ball clouds, funny water reflections, strange horizons; I'm sure you have all been there and experienced what I am talking about. Well apart from VOZ, the two main products that added to the immersion factor of FS9 for me were Flight Environment and Active Sky. With these two products I was able to manipulate an incredible amount of FS

textures to provide me with an accurate and good looking simming environment.

Since the release of FSX, I have dabbled with the dark side. I was lucky enough to have a computer that could run the sim reasonably with some of the suggested tweaks that were floating around on the net. However it never really did anything for me, and the primary reason for that was not the performance overheads of the sim itself, but the crude and crass textures that I was supposed to call home. Brisbane looked like a sandy desert surrounded by a vivid sea of electric blue. It was just wrong. At this early stage I could still see exciting improvements in the sim itself; the horizon blending was very good, the terrain mesh was well articulated through to the distant horizon and the aircraft felt a lot more "fluid". However there was a lot missing from

this picture, of course it goes without saying that FSX was screaming for the VOZ treatment; and that is coming as fast as Orb-X can manage. In the meantime though there are still some products that can help us bring back the immersion factor to this new simulator.

First on anybody's list should be Cloud 9's Australian Landclass. This is a very small file that achieves huge results. It basically increases the accuracy of the default Microsoft landclass which doesn't sound like much but makes for far superior visual navigation. Small towns are where they should be, with lakes, dams, rivers, roads, crop areas, bush areas, urban areas and industrial areas all being far more accurate than the default. Unfortunately this addon does not provide any new texture sets, for that we need to wait for Orb-X to provide us with our Australianised terrain tiles; but for new clouds, water, skies, sunrises/sunsets the wait is over - you can get all of that from HiFi Systems X Graphics.

CLOUD 9
AUSTRALIAN LANDCLASS



Xclass Australia

To explain what X Graphics does I am best served with quoting directly from HiFi's web site.

"X Graphics provides a powerful graphical user interface which makes viewing and configuring



specify preset weather conditions to apply in your local area, or use the new weather configuration system to configure every possible parameter to achieve any kind of weather situation you could wish for. Active Sky X also has the ability to recreate the weather on a particular day from historical weather data (although this is limited to dates from the 1 January 2007).

This new version of Active Sky looks nothing like previous incarnations. HiFi Systems has taken the opportunity to entirely rethink the user interface and rewrite the entire program from the ground up. To understand the companies design mantra it would be best to again quote them from their website.

“Elegance, simplicity, realism, flexibility and intuitiveness. All were equally-important critical design requirements as we began development over two years ago. We wanted a system that had the power and technical fidelity of our previous products, but we wanted to make sure all that power was going to be easy to use for all types of users.”

Active Sky X achieves these design criteria by implementing a user interface wrapped around a graphical map display. All weather data is presented over the associated areas of the map in an easy to understand visual format.

enhancements an easy and fun process. Some of the main features of X Graphics are ultra-realistic clouds, sky colour environments, modified sun and moon, sound environment enhancements, aerodrome textures, lighting systems enhancements and water environment choices including wave turbulence/frequency, environment variants and colouring.”

So there you have it in a nutshell. I know the real question you are asking though is does it work. Well I believe so. The product provides a large number of textures for various aspects of the sim. As mentioned in the quote above these are clouds (*cirrus, stratus, cumulus and “wispiness”*), sky (*dawn, day, dusk and night*), sun, moon, lighting, flare, water (*waves/motion, reflections, inland waters, ocean colours*), road and rail colouration, airport asphalt, concrete, runway markings, taxiway textures and signage, airport and aircraft lighting effects and various weather sound sets. X Graphics allows you to load pre-selected “themes” or you can easily create and load your own themes. To get an appreciation of what this can do for your installation of FSX you really need to check out the full size screenshots from the “Sunset over the East Coast” thread -

<http://vistaoz.org/smf/index.php?topic=5474.0>

The second product from HiFi Systems is the update of the venerable Active Sky. You could call Active Sky X a weather simulator addon for FSX, but it is the breadth and depth of detail and ease of use designed into this product that really makes it stand out and shine. In its simplest incarnation you would just run Active Sky X and it will provide FSX with an accurate (as possible) rendition of the weather at your current location. However if you have created a flight plan Active Sky X will examine the weather at your departure point, destination and enroute stations. If there are no enroute stations, Active Sky X will synthesize appropriate weather. You can also





Active Sky X provides a new gauge for display of data within the cockpit environment. Called, appropriately enough, X Gauge, this new system displays weather imagery and flight plan information to the pilot allowing avoidance of hazardous weather systems whilst enroute. Active Sky X also synthesizes wake turbulence, sampling and simulating wake trails within local range of your aircraft and modelling the sink, drift and weakening of these trails over time until they dissipate. The intensity of the wake turbulence encountered will be a factor of the preceding aircrafts weight and lift configuration and works for all AI and multiplayer aircraft. There are

pre-flight weather briefing screens and voice weather report playback is integrated into your cockpits audio panel.

Whilst Active Sky X and X Graphics can be purchased as separate stand alone products performing very different roles in your FSX setup, they can also be tightly integrated. To use this functionality, you simply need to have ASX and X Graphics installed. When you specify your flight plan in Active Sky X you can choose to have the average route weather conditions sent to X Graphics which will select textures based on the data received. Once this is complete X

Graphics will install the selected textures into FSX as a custom theme.

All in all these are very powerful programs that contribute a great deal to the immersion factor of FSX. I suppose when VOZ 2 is released there may come a time when my wife will never see me again. One day she will open the door to my study and find an aircraft fuselage with a gaping hole, a howling slipstream tearing through broken strato-cu, reduced visibility attempting to cover a glorious golden sunset and the faded remnants of an all consuming smile.