

AVSIM Commercial Utility Review

Electronic Flight Bag & GMap Plug-in for FSX



Product Information

Publisher: FSWidgets		
Description: Electronic Flight Bag aide for FSX.		
Download Size: EFB - 32.9 MB GMap Plug-in - 2.5 MB	Format: Download	Simulation Type: FSX
Reviewed by: Peter Clemenko AVSIM Staff Reviewer - August 5, 2008		

Introduction

Electronic Flight Bag (from here on called EFB) is an add-on that aims to add various handy applications to use in FSX. It includes a weather radar, internet functionality, flight plan details, charts, maps, checklists including audio, and manual reading in flight.

Installation and Documentation

The installation and documentation is really top notch. I did not have to do anything special with Vista 64bit, even with UAC on. The only things I had to turn off were the anti virus and the firewall for installation, and I could turn those back on after the install was done. For the purposes of this review, I installed the non-networked copy. This is because I lack the equipment to test the networked version.

The Program

FSWidgets really did a good job with this program, and while it isn't perfect, it does include many handy features. So many in fact, it seems to have everything but the kitchen sink. While there are some things that could be improved, it is also very nice to have in many situations, especially when trying to learn a complex aircraft. It is also very well documented and very easy to expand the content of the program. It also has the ability to be extended with a free Google maps plug-in.

Internet Component

The net component was well done; overall it worked very well, except for a few hitches. The main hitch I encountered was that some of the links were out of date and would give "page not found" if you tried to load them.

You can get around this by downloading a link manager from their site for free, and using that to validate and update the links. All you have to do is Google what you want for the link, then update the link with the new found link to fix it and then save the new info.

The one minor beef I had with this though, was that there was no way to actually just browse the internet using it. That would have been a nice little feature to have in being able to search something on the internet or have an actual web browser in it where I could enter an address in the address bar and go to that address.

Charts Component

The charts component is a gem. There were a few problems I had with it, but that was mainly just a lack of default content and a single technical thing. The main content problem was that there were very few charts included in the default install. While it is easy to add more, I really would have liked to have been able to see more charts in the default install.

Test System

Processor: Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600 @ 2.4ghz per core (4 64bit cores)
 Video Card: Nvidia Geforce 8500GT 512 megs
 Motherboard: XFX nForce 680i It SLI
 Sound: Onboard Realtek integrated sound card
 RAM: 4 gigabytes of corsair 800mhz RAM on four sticks
 OS: Windows Vista Ultimate 64bit Service Pack 1
 Joystick: Microsoft Sidewinder Precision Pro
 Head Tracking: TrackIR 4 Pro

Flying Time:
6 hours

FSWidgets sells on their websites two separate CDs, one containing US Sectional Charts, and one containing US Terminal Area Charts. But to be honest, I would personally just use the map utility you can get for free off their website, and make ones of my own using more up-to-date charts. One thing to note though is that buying their CDs is probably cheaper than getting the newest charts, so keep that in mind.

The one technical issue I encountered wasn't a bug, but rather a lack of the ability to create sub folders in the chart folders. This would have allowed me to save charts with one main folder for the airport, and then separate sub folders for the various types of charts. After loading all the charts for an airport into a single folder, it gets kind of confusing to try to determine which charts are which just by name alone without renaming all of the charts.

I should note they have two or three extra charts on their site for free download, but that's only a drop in the bucket. Adding your own is really easy, as all you have to do is put the chart in a folder and put that folder in the charts section of the EFB install directory. This is detailed pretty well in the EFB manual.



LAX Airport Overview Chart



This is why there should be sub folders allowed in the charts and manuals sections!



Reading METARs using the Net component

Checklists Component

The checklists utility is a handy little tool in its own sense. It really comes in useful while trying to learn and fly complex aircraft. The one problem is that it lacks enough checklists. I should note that the auto check feature only means it will check when you highlight the part to check, it doesn't automatically check the box when you do what the object's action is.

Sure you can add your own checklist and sure you can install about 10-15 more from their site, but to be honest, I would really like to have seen more default checklists. The adding of your own is simple enough, but it requires a little more work than other parts of the program because you have to learn how to code the checklist. That is all explained in the manual and not that hard to grasp.

Finally, one more feature of the checklist program is that it allows audio in the checklists that sounds when the checklist item is checked. The only thing I could wish for in this checklist portion is a utility to actually make your own checklists with audio without all the coding.



Checklists feature: Check

Map Component

For this portion I will only talk about the Vector map, as the GMap is a plug-in and I will talk about that further down in this review as it is an add-on to this program.

The vector map is nice to have because it shows you what direction to go to get to your next waypoint. It also allows you to overlay a sectional chart over the areas and have that overlay the base map. That allows for better navigation. It also has various checkboxes to show various terrain features. Overall it is very simple to use.



The Vectors map with a sectional chart overlay

Configuration

The configuration is very simple and effective. From the configuration menu you can add and remove links in the weather radar mode and the net mode. Sadly though, it doesn't let you edit the existing links or verify them. The

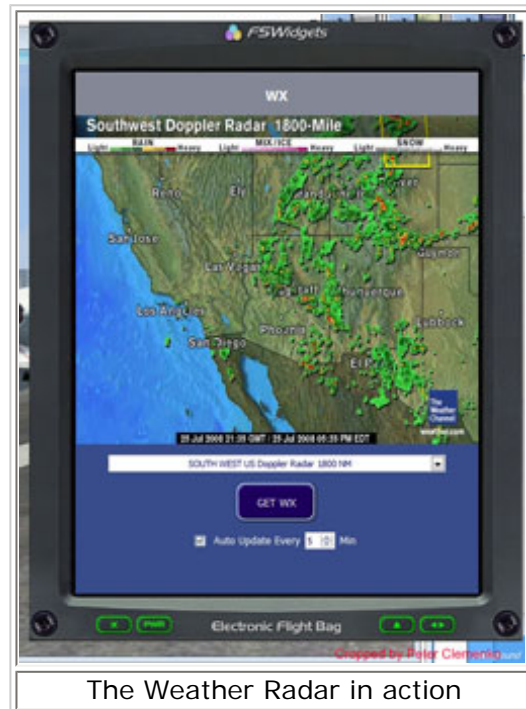
configuration is also covered in the manual.

Weather Radar Component

The weather radar component is another gem. It allows you to pull up weather radar from the NOAA and other sources and uses that with real weather to determine the weather in your flight.

It also allows you to update the links and add new ones to add new radar stations and update the current ones should you need to. It can be set to update in any number of minutes either automatically or manually.

This is very effective when using real weather that is automatically downloaded every fifteen minutes in FSX. The only downside is the limited number of weather stations you can check from, but that's understandable since I doubt they could cover the whole world. You can update these stations though with the link utility, or you can use the settings menu in the EFB application.



The Weather Radar in action

Manuels Section

The manuals section could come in very handy, but you need to put in your own manuals for it to be worth anything. It includes the EFB and an excerpt from the Aeroworx B200 by default, but you have to add your own manual for it to really be worth using.

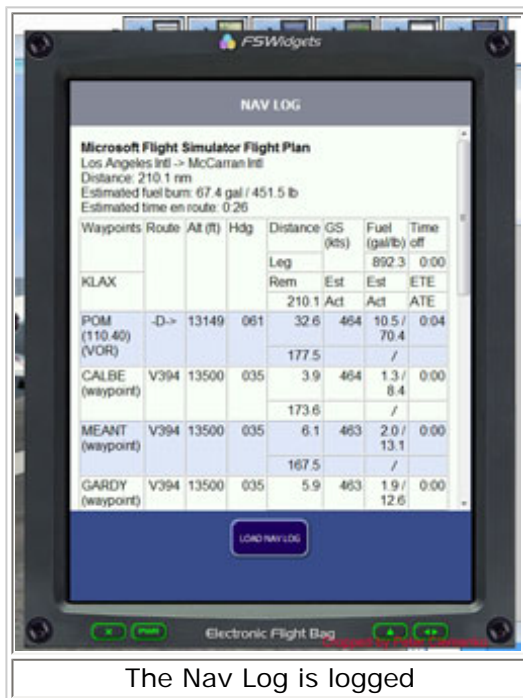
Adding your own is really easy, as all you have to do is put the manual PDF in a folder and put that folder in the manuals section of the EFB install directory. This is detailed pretty well in the EFB manual.



The manual section, just in case you need to RTFM (Read The Freaking Manual)

Nav Log

The Nav Log is a really handy feature. It allows you to pull up the route of your flight and shows all sorts of important information like the distance from the start and the end of the flight via the waypoints. It also shows things such as bearing, distance, and altitude of the waypoint, and other things such as the ground speed and fuel used. It pulls this info right from the FS Flight Plan that is in use.



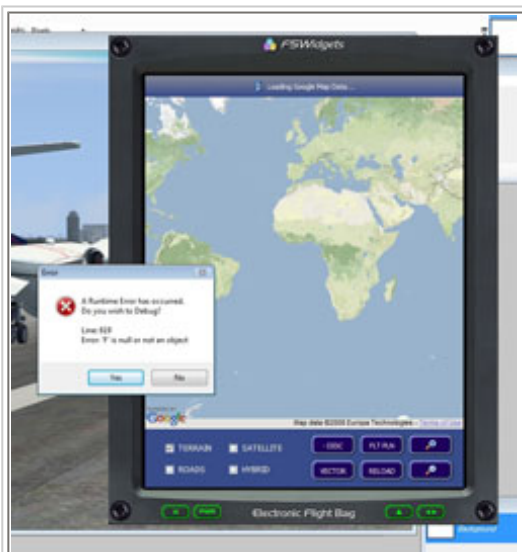
The Nav Log is logged

The GMap Plug-in

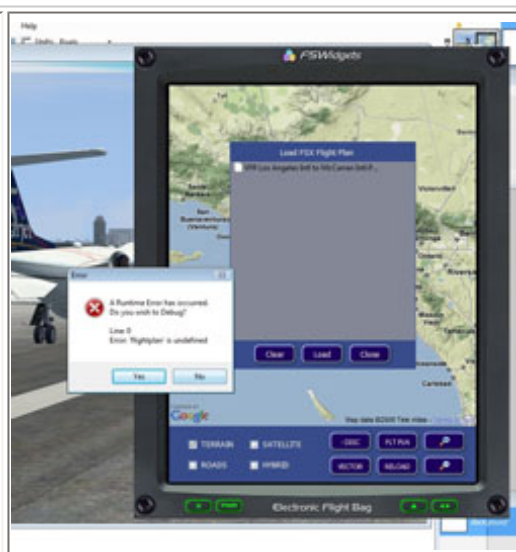
The GMap plug-in is something that I tested out as a free add-on to the EFB. It is simple enough to install, just drag and drop the EXE in to the same directory as the EFB EXE or run it as a standalone. However, if you don't have it in the same folder though, it will come up with an error message if you try to launch it from EFB and it won't launch.

I did notice a few glitches though, specifically regarding the zooming in and out, and what appears to be some sloppy coding. The zooming in and out works unless you reload the map, then you can click those buttons all you want, but it won't work without restarting EFB fully (closing the program and then re-opening it).

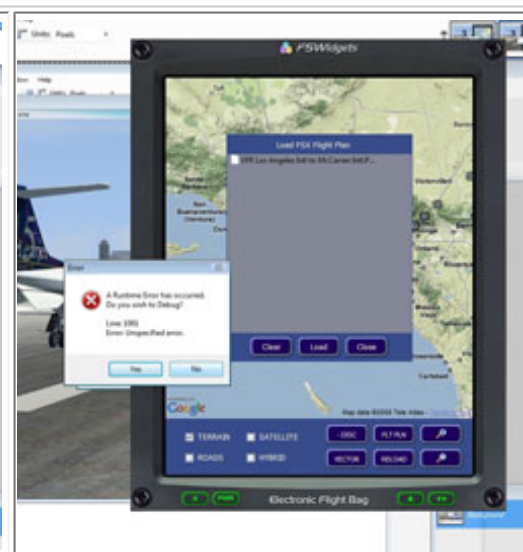
Also, I noticed that because I have Microsoft Visual Studio 2008 installed, it was giving me errors when I opened the GMap plug-in and the flight plan menu, showing coding errors in the runtime debugger. While as far as I can tell, it doesn't affect the actual operation, it is annoying to have to close those out to do it, those shouldn't even come up. I'm pretty sure that part won't affect people without visual studio installed, but if you do use this program, you may want to know about it.



First Error while loading the Plug-in



First Error while loading the Flight Plan



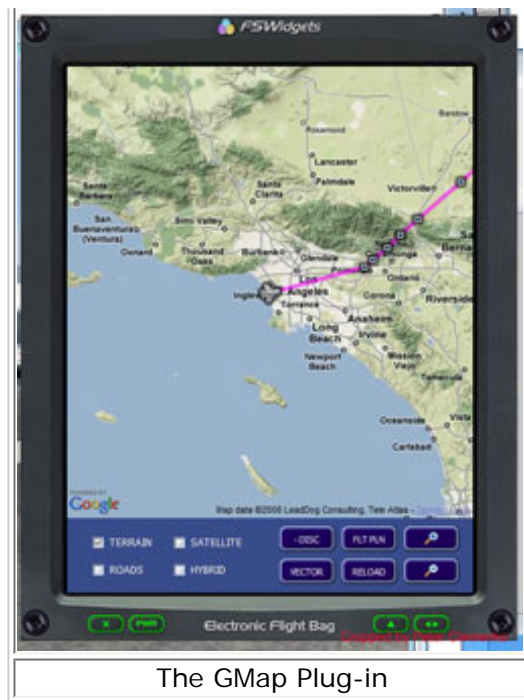
Second error while loading the Flight Plan

Other than that, it's a pretty solid piece of kit, and a very nice add-on. If you get EFB, there is absolutely NO reason not to get this, because it is FREE. Some really nice things were that it allowed you to use the roads, terrain, satellite, and hybrid maps from Google maps.

Another cool thing about this plug-in is that it centers on your aircraft and allows you to load in the flight plan. Then you can use this like a GPS for navigation. It automatically and frequently updates your position on the map and stays centered on your aircraft.

One thing I would have liked though was to be able to scroll along the map and be off center, and have a button to press to re-center the view on my aircraft. As it is right now, you can scroll along the map, but when you let go of the mouse button, it instantly snaps back to your aircraft. That is something I would like to have as an option, rather than the only way.





The GMap Plug-in

Summary / Closing Remarks

All in all, this is probably one of the handiest applications I could think of off the top of my head for FSX. It adds plenty of functionality that should not be left out if you value realism at all or even basic procedures. It has many things in it that are worth the price of admission, and only a few things that could be better. Most of the problems come from the limited default content, but that can easily be fixed by adding your own, which isn't all that hard.

All in all, I would personally declare this a Must-Have add-on. The GMap plug-in is the only buggy piece of this review, and that's optional. The key thing is that the plug-in doesn't have showstopper bugs, only annoying ones. The only real other issue I found was the resource usage of the program. The EFB program uses about 50 megabytes of ram, which may or may not be a little much, but it really didn't affect my system. I can say though, if you have enough ram, you should be fine.

The performance is second to none, as it loads pretty fast. It takes about 10 seconds for the window to open, and another 10 seconds to load the menu after pressing the power button on it.

What I Like About The Electronic Flight Bag

- Very easy to install.
- The documentation is really well done and easy to understand.
- Most things work flawlessly, and the rest can be easily fixed with a little effort.
- The checklist is nice to have when trying to operate complex aircraft.
- The map lets you load in your flight plan and use that for navigation.
- The program is easy to extend with more charts, checklists, and manuals.
- It includes the feature to pull up airport charts in flight.
- The weather radar allows the pilot to see what he/she is flying in to and can be set to regularly update.
- Support for audio in checklists.
- The Nav Log is very well detailed in the things it shows.

What I Don't Like About The Electronic Flight Bag

- FSX has to run in windowed mode for it to work.
- Limited out of the box content.
- Some default web links don't work.
- No sub-folder support for manuals and charts.
- No way to automatically download manuals, checklists, and charts.
- The free GMap Plug-in is not integrated right out of the box.

What I Like About The GMap Plug-in

- Shows various types of maps from Google maps.
- You can load your flight plan on to the map.
- It automatically updates your position on the map frequently and centers the map on your position.

What I Like About The GMap Plug-in

- It is not integrated with EFB out of the box.
- No option to scroll on the map so your map view is off center, it automatically snaps back to re-center the map on your aircraft, and I would like that as an option, but not as the only way.
- It is a bit buggy with the zoom buttons not working after reloading the map.
- Sloppy coding causes annoying pop-ups from the Microsoft Visual Studio Runtime Debugger.

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