

AVSIM Commercial Utility Review

Radar Contact Version 4.01



Product Information

Publisher: [JDT LLC](#)

Description: Realistic Air Traffic Control Services for Microsoft Flight Simulator

Download Size:
N/A

Format:
CD ROM

Simulation Type:
FS98, FS2000, FS2002, FS2004

Reviewed by: [Michael "Mike T" Toussaint](#) AVSIM Staff Reviewer

Introduction

Air Traffic Control (ATC) in relation to Microsoft Flight Simulator really presented itself in earnest with the release of the add-on title Proflight. First released for MSFS 98, Proflight became the standard by which all available ATC titles were judged. Proflight was immersive, accurate and a relatively credible representation of ATC. Essentially, Proflight opened up a whole new world for Flight Simulator fans. Even with a lack of "real" traffic within the simulator, Proflight provided chatter and distinct accented voices to guide one's aircraft around the Flight Sim world. Despite any perceived limitations, it was quite an advance to the immersion factor of flying the virtual skies and flying within MSFS without ATC was no longer an option.

As we fast forward to MSFS 2002 and FS 2004, Microsoft included a built in ATC engine that made Proflight obsolete. There was no longer a need to generate a static adventure to enjoy ATC services because the ATC within MSFS 2002 was dynamic and gave the virtual pilot some capability of changing a currently engaged flight plan on the fly. Additionally, MSFS introduced something else that would change the flight simulator world, Artificial Intelligence (AI) traffic. Not only did the virtual pilot have the ability to contact ATC at will, but ATC interacted with the AI aircraft thereby putting forth a fluid and realistic environment in which to interact.

Despite the leap forward in the interactivity of ATC and AI within Flight Simulator, there were some significant drawbacks. For instance, the ATC included in FS 2002 / FS 2004 is very simplistic. Sure it can direct one's aircraft from point A to point B, but many in depth ATC procedures, such as SIDs, STARs, Holding, Diversions, Emergencies, etc were obviously missing. Additionally, a major sore point of the default ATC is and always has been, its inability to effectively corral the AI traffic once within the terminal airspace. It is very common for sim pilots to be assaulted by AI aircraft while on final approach. Similarly, the AI aircraft have a nasty tendency to arrive in clusters, thereby causing unrealistic numbers of go-arounds, especially at large airports. But, at the end of the day, I would surmise that 99% of us use or have used the default ATC in one form or another and I would go even further to guess that 90% of us still use the default ATC today despite its glaring drawbacks. The fact is that it really does a credible job, it is convenient, and it is tightly integrated into FS 2002 / 2004.

In parallel with the default ATC, there have been two other much more realistic choices for ATC. The first, on-line ATC. Free services provided by VATSIM and IVAO (and others) have existed in one form or another since before FS 98. I can remember my first "on-line" Fly-in where the ATC was provided via telephone. Once I arrived at my designated waypoint, I actually called someone who gave me ATC instructions, by phone, all the way to landing!

Today's on-line ATC is highly sophisticated and realistic. Voice Over IP (VoIP) is used for

real-time voice communications with pilots which are guided, as in real life, by a controller looking at a radar panel and viewing aircraft in his/her sector in real-time. The ATC staff is trained and presents the most realistic interface for the flight simmer to date. All other virtual aircraft are manned by live pilots and the immersion factor can be uncannily as hectic as real flying. This is especially true on "Fly-In" days, where literally hundreds of pilots converge at one airport from all over the world.

Of course, there is a downside to on-line ATC and the downside in this case is very large. One will find that to have a totally realistic flight from point A to point B, one has to confine oneself to the areas where ATC is currently online. I doubt if there ever was a time where there has been global ATC online at the same time. This means that it is not uncommon for one to contact Center, for clearance delivery, ground and departure. Once out of range, you can easily find yourself out of contact with ATC for the duration of your flight or for hours between areas of live ATC. Additionally, online ATC means you have no AI traffic because you cannot fly on-line and have AI traffic at the same time. This fact means that flying online can be very lonely and it is absolutely not uncommon, especially for long haul pilots, to fly for hours without seeing or hearing from another airplane or controller and landing with no ATC at a desolate major airport totally devoid of traffic.

While the premise of online ATC is extremely attractive, I have yet to see it implemented in such a way that offers consistent global service. I definitely liken online ATC to the "little girl with the little curl right in the middle of her forehead". "When she was good she was very, very, good but when she was bad, she was horrid!"

The second choice for the virtual pilot is Radar Contact (RC). Developed by JDT LLC, Radar Contact became an alternative to Proflight. Radar Contact Version 3.x was released as an alternative to fill the realism gaps presented in the default MSFS ATC engine and did an excellent job. Developed by individuals with intimate knowledge of ATC procedures and a burning desire to thrust the avid virtual pilot into a much more realistic ATC environment, RC 3.x provided point-to-point procedural accuracy which was unsurpassed without being online. RC 3.x presented the hyper-accurate ATC jargon presented in live online ATC environments without the large gaps in coverage. Additionally, usage of RC 3 meant that one had the crowded AI skies that the majority of virtual pilots demand.

Of course, nothing is perfect. RC 3.x did not control the AI traffic and that task was left to the default ATC engine. Secondly, since RC 3.x did not interact with any AI aircraft, nor did it have the ability to generate dynamic chatter that was relevant to the flight environment. Instead, RC 3.x utilized the old "canned" chatter circa Proflight.

It has never been a secret that the crew at JDT was working on the next generation RC product, RC 4. Promised in RC 4 were many enhancements not available in its predecessor or the default ATC, and, not least of these new features, is the management of AI traffic.

The prospect of RC 4 excited me but since I'm always the cynical skeptic, I took a wait-and-see attitude. While the thought of having the best of online flying with the immersion surpassing that of the default ATC is extremely attractive, I was still reluctant to give up the ease of use of my old friend. So, excitedly and without further ado, I present to you,

JDT LLC's latest release: Radar Contact 4.01.

Purchasing and Installation

The Flight Simulator add-on market has decidedly become a "pay now, download now" market, and as such we are all accustomed to flashing our credit card and minutes later playing with our new toy. This instant gratification has undoubtedly spoiled us all.

Before I go any further, I will divulge that RC 4 is available by DISK ONLY. Yes, you pay now and days later a CD arrives at your door. I have seen many pleadings on the RC forum (exclusively here at Avsim) begging the developers to make the title available by download. The size of the program is not out of the realm of "downloadability" because files in excess of 1 Gigabyte have been made available for download by other developers. The fact that RC 4 comes on only one CD ensures that the files total no more than 700Mb. In my opinion, this file size well within the realm of being made available for download.

Test System

AMD FX-57
1GB Hyper-X PC3200 DDR
X850XT PE Video
Audigy2 5.1 Surround
Insignia 26" 16:9 Monitor
Logitech 5.1 THX Speakers
NGO ATI 1.5.13 Drivers
Reserator Liquid Cooling

Flying Time:

45+ hours

However, I will not dispute the wisdom of the developer's choice to make the title available via CD only. I am sure they have their reasons from a business standpoint and those reasons will not be debated here.

The good news is that the choice to release via CD by mail does teach us decidedly impatient simmers a little patience and builds the "I can't wait for the mail" anticipation. The question being, is RC 4 worth the wait? Read on!

Documentation is included on the installation CD in .PDF (Adobe Acrobat) format, and what documentation it is! The crew at JDT illustrates the use of RC 4 in great detail and left nothing to chance. Everything one would ever

want to know about the effective use of RC 4 is pointed out en masse. Additionally, the developer understood that not everyone who will purchase the product comes with a standing knowledge of ATC procedures and lingo, therefore they have included a tutorial of everything from controlled airspace to the phonetic alphabet.

I suggest that you read the 294 page manual. It will make the use of RC much more enjoyable especially if one is new to the world of realistic ATC.

Installation of RC 4 is straight forward and offers some installation options: You can install the full RC 4 package complete with "canned chatter" files, or you can dispense with the "canned chatter" and rely on the AI traffic to generate real time chatter. I chose to save the hard drive space and install all but the chatter files. With AI interoperability, I knew that I would never use the canned chatter anyway.

Interestingly enough RC 4 is totally backward compatible all the way back to FS 98! During

the installation you can chose your version of MSFS and the installation is automatic from that point. RC4, by default, installs the latest version of FSUIPC and ADVDISP and this cannot be changed.

The installation went smoothly and soon I was ready to familiarize myself with RC4. Once installed, it is necessary to activate RC by emailing the code which is generated upon installation to the support team and wait for a return email before you can use RC. In my case it took approximately 48 hours to receive my code because I believe that my spam blocker intercepted my registration email. Luckily RC is supported by a crack staff of dedicated individuals on its forum and my problem was resolved almost instantly. Still, the prospect of email registration for a major release such as RC is archaic. With tools such as the Flight 1 wrapper available for instant online registration I would like to see JDT move to a more up-to-date method of getting their customers up and running. Granted, my experience is probably not typical, but with the prevalence of email filters and the longer turn-around time already exacerbated by the need to wait for the CD to arrive, I suspect more then one frustrated customer may complain at the lag between paying for and using the product.

Finally, with the product received, registered and installed, those of you who have read my previous reviews know by now that I don't let any title off with the gratuitous test flight around the pattern. Any title that is presented to me for review must stand up to grueling real flights in MSFS 2004. The fact that I exclusively fly heavy iron on long haul flights also means that the title is coming along for at least an eight hour one way flight (I always fly round trip). In this case, wanderlust got a hold of me and I felt the need to fly from Chicago O'Hare to Tokyo Narita, and back. After that, I decided upon a leisurely jaunt to Paris Charles De Gaulle and back from Chicago O'Hare. With flight plans totaling over 30 hours in real time (no acceleration) I planned to learn everything there is to know about RC 4 and uncover all of its weaknesses as well as its strong points.

Radar Contact 4 vs 4.01

This review is based on Radar Contact 4.01. JD was kind enough to submit the patch to me prior to the completion of the review. Since 4.01 will be available to the general public within a matter of days (by the time you read this review you should be using v4.01) I thought it only fair that the review be based on the most current available version.

Some of the fixes in RC 4.01 are:

- New method of "weaving" the WAVS together. The Old method was to play the files individually. The new method concatenates all files to be played into one file, and playing the new file.
- Japanese, Korean, Chinese versions of Windows will now run Rcv4.
- "Airport" removed from the non-FAA clearances.
- "Will give him a call" removed.

- Other "Doug-isms" removed.
- If rcv4 is not able to write the .rcd file to the \my documents\flight simulator files path after a save (either user initiated or autosave initiated), if rcv4 doesn't have the necessary permissions (eliminate run time error 75's hopefully).
- New voices screen, which puts each type of voice on a "tab". Each voice now has a slider associated with it, to slow it down if it is too fast. also a flag will appear when a voice is selected, for easier identification.
- Able to read flight plans which have a degree symbol instead of an asterisk in the lat/long field.
- Fixed the runtime error 9 with RC closing down when you hit a number key not in the adv display menu.
- Correct entry3, entry2, entry1, downwind, base and final after returning to departure airport, when the arrival airport has a high MSA.
- If the AI does not have the correct aircraft type, or I don't have the aircraft type defined, I will not say "follow the" or "give way to the".
- Restore the correct international settings for comma and period, when you click the "Quit RC" button.

The most obvious and monumental fix is the smoothness of the voices in 4.01 vs. 4. Many have complained that the voices are too slow. I confirmed that on my first flight without the 4.01 upgrade. Post upgrade, the voices are extremely fluid and truly mimic what is heard in the real world. In short, it makes a world of difference to RC experience as a whole.

One last point before I dig deeper into Radar Contact 4. RC 4 does NOT have the ability to handle VFR traffic. I think that this is a pretty substantial hole since there is a large portion of the Flight Simulator community that enjoys flying low and slow and by landmark rather than by Very high frequency Omidirectional Beacons (VOR) or Non-Directional Beacons (NDB). Alas, those in the community that fly strictly VFR are relegated to using the default or online ATC services...for now.

Prepare For Departure

Radar Contact is a program that runs in the background while you fly within MSFS. There is a set procedure for setting up RC prior to starting Flight Simulator and it should be adhered to or there could be anomalies between MSFS and RC.



The first thing one must do, is create a flight plan because RC does not include a flight planner and will not work without one. While there are a multitude of 3rd party flight planners out there, I have used FSBuild since it was first released. FSBuild allows you to create a flight plan in many 3rd party add-on formats and, of course, in the default FS 200x format which RC 4 will need to provide ATC services. I imported my flight plan from O'Hare to Narita and it was quickly displayed in the adjacent window in a format reminiscent of the way a pilot would see a flight plan in the real world.



Next, I clicked on the Controller Info button. The General tab allows the pilot to choose various options regarding the flight. For instance, one can choose the type of departure, i. e. departure with or without altitude restrictions. If there is a SID (Standard Instrument Departure) in the flight plan, this option is a must. You can also ask ATC for no speed restrictions below 10,000 feet, adjust the cruise altitude and enter up to two alternate arrival airports. There is also a listing of frequencies pertaining to the flight and when you enter the name of the alternate airports, those fields are populated. NOTAMs (Notice To Airmen) check boxes are provided in case one is departing from or arriving at an airport

that has large obstructions such as mountains in the vicinity. Checking the NOTAM box gives the pilot flexibility on departure and arrival. Therefore, ATC will never ask the pilot to descend or level off at an altitude that will cause a collision with the terrain. Finally, one can specify the departure AND arrival gates so that you can match real world flight operations.



Once these variables are locked in place, you should click on the General tab to input the airline and flight number. You can also define if the chance of holding for weather or traffic is applicable. You are also able to input or check various other options to customize how RC 4 reacts within MSFS.

Finally, you are able to customize keyboard combinations as necessary, as well as customize the controller, pilot and copilot voices. RC 4 comes with around 20 voices that contain different accents; mostly from North America and Europe. There are also new voices becoming available for download on the RC website.

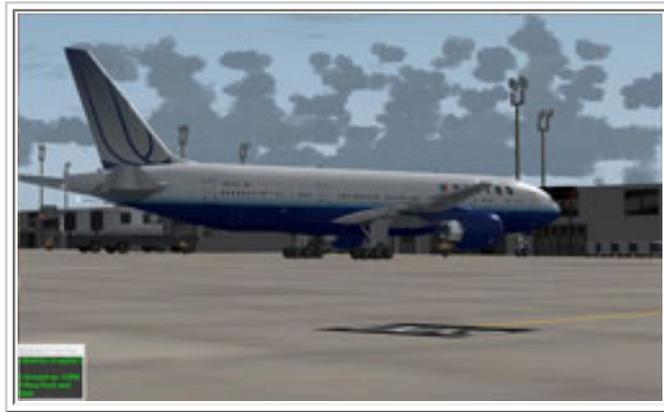
Once one has set RC up for the first time, it quickly becomes "old hat". There is nothing unnecessarily complicated about preparing RC for flight and there are also mouse-over pop-ups that explain what each checkbox and variable does. I give JDT high marks for enclosing powerful software innards in an easy to use wrapper. In the same token, the interface is very simple without any whiz-bang graphics or slick interfaces. In this case, it may not be pretty but it IS functional.

With RC setup, I loaded FS 2004 and placed myself at gate C-19 at KORD, which I previously specified within RC. Once FS is up and running, there are a few steps one must follow to allow RC to display properly within the sim. I clicked ADVDISP from the MODULES menu bar and spawned the ADVDISP window. Once it is displayed, it should be sized to about a 2 inch square, so that information from RC is displayed properly. Upon completion, I minimized MSFS and clicked the START RC button on the main RC interface and ATC services were now available via the ADVDISP interface.

The ADVDISP is the interface from which the virtual pilot interacts with Radar Contact, and I will say that it is the weak point of RC. Now, please understand that when I say weak, I do not mean in terms of functionality or usability. I mean in terms of looks. The ADVDISP has been around since RC 2.x and while it is functional as a way of interacting with RC, it looks like a DOS command line box. If one is using a 2D cockpit, then it is possible to "dock" it somewhere on the screen in such a way that it does not stick out like a sore thumb. However, those of us who only utilize the 3D cockpit, there is no place for the ADVDISP box to be docked. While it can be opened and closed like the default ATC onscreen menu, (registered version of FSUIPC required) it is nowhere as pleasing to the eye as the default onscreen menu. Again, the fact that it is not beautiful but it is functional does apply.

The last thing to remember on initial setup, is to turn off the default ATC as well as turn down the ATC volume. If this is not done, then one will get the default ATC as well as RC coming over the radio.

It's Time To Fly



Sitting in the captain's seat of United 881 non-stop service to Narita, I went through my usual aircraft delivery flows and connected power to the 747-400. Assured that my checklist was over, it was time to get ATIS (Automated Terminal Information Service). Much as in the default MSFS ATC, Radar Contact uses easy key presses to initiate communications as needed and in this case I pressed "1" to hear the automated weather. The voice was decidedly smooth and sharp. I checked the reported weather against what was displayed within Active Sky and it was spot on. I had information India.

Next, it was time to contact Clearance Delivery; "United 881 with India ready to copy IFR to Narita." I was pleasantly surprised not to hear the destination airport spelled out phonetically by its ICAO call letters. With that said, RC includes the name of many major airports into which pilots flying jets will fly. However, I would surmise that the majority of smaller airports and major airports serving minor cities will be spelled phonetically. This is a little disappointing because after receiving my clearance, I had about 30 minutes before departure and all commuter aircraft flying into smaller airports such as KBDL (Hartford,

Bradley Field), KHPN (White Plains, New York), KTTN (Trenton, New Jersey) had their airports spelled out via their ICAO. Understandably, recording airport names on the scale of Microsoft, which includes the vast majority of airports, is a daunting task. But the limited number of named airports in RC will undoubtedly be a point of contention for some. Also, be aware that RC does NOT tune the transponder automatically as the default ATC does, so it must be done manually or ATC will advise you that it does not have you identified once you are airborne.

In subsequent flights, I found out that Clearance Delivery may not be ready to give you clearance exactly when you ask for it, as in the real world. Be prepared to stand-by for a few minutes until CD gets back to you with your clearance.

The time came to push back from the gate and I was ecstatic to see a menu item which allowed me to contact ground for push and start. This is the point where RC truly begins to deviate from the default MSFS ATC. We said good-bye to gate C-19 and were pushed away from the ramp. Once our 747-400 was fired up, I contacted ground for taxi clearance. Ground responded with the appropriate runway and, to my surprise, it gave me instructions to follow the 737 that just taxied out ahead of me. A VERY nice touch indeed. It is also possible to be instructed to give way to other ground traffic. Of course, the virtual pilot has a full choice of runways in case the active does not suit his/her needs at departure time. RC will do its best to accommodate.

On the downside, RC does not give detailed taxi instructions by taxiway. To me this is a very large omission because at all large airports traffic flow is extremely critical to prevent runway incursions and collisions. It is not realistic to have the aircraft taxi to the runway on its own accord and is not something that one would ever hear in the real world. It was surprising to me that the folks at JDT left this part out of the equation. I am not sure how technically difficult it would be to implement proper ground control but it is something that even the default Microsoft ATC includes and should be a part of RC.

Traffic was heavy this cold Chicago morning, and the line of aircraft waiting for takeoff was realistically lined up with miserable passengers onboard. As I got about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way towards the runway, Ground Control instructed me to begin monitoring Tower on the assigned frequency. This is realistic and another departure from the default ATC. Which leaves one to contact tower whenever one feels like it. Similarly, ATC may ask the aircraft to actually contact the tower in case the controllers are simply too far away, obstructed in fog or simply have left their binoculars at home.

Eventually, we were number two for the runway. I sat the flight attendants down for departure and completed my before takeoff checklist. As we taxied to the line, I noticed that there was no way to contact tower to let them know that I was ready to go. This is because Tower is actually watching me and knows that I am ready to go. After a few seconds at the line, and with no intervention by me, Tower cleared me to taxi into position. Once lined up, Tower gave me the winds and cleared me for takeoff. Pilots should be aware that RC may not clear you immediately even though the runway is clear and this is by choice. The time variance can be anywhere from immediately to a few seconds. As in the real world, you will have to wait until instructions are received and not anticipate the

instruction by encroaching on the runway or there will be hell to pay.

Once in the air, I was handed over to departure as I began to fly the SID. It was refreshing not to unrealistically fly the runway heading until instructions from departure began vectors to the first fix. While this is an option, most major airports from which I fly have a plethora of noise abatement, restricted airspace and traffic flow restrictions that necessitate a SID and the climb out to my first plan waypoint went extremely smooth.

My initial climbout altitude was 6000 feet, but as I climbed though 3000 departure cleared me to 12000. Those of us who have formally been limited to the MSFS ATC are used to getting the next step climb at about 300 feet before reaching the instructed altitude. This is very unrealistic, since real world ATC almost never waits until the aircraft is leveling off to instruct it to climb again. Additionally, while flying in VNAV or VS mode, the pilot has plenty of time to dial in the next altitude and it makes for a much smoother and seamless climb out. This is how it is done in the real world and RC reflects that flawlessly. RC gave perfect instructions up to my initial cruise of FL 310.

Eventually, it was time to begin my next step climb up to final cruise at FL 350. I contacted ATC for higher, and fully expecting to get the usual MSFS ATC-type response which always grants my request. I prepared to climb. I was caught by surprise when Minneapolis Center advised me that he had my request but did not grant it at this time! It was clear to me that the team at JDT build in realistic of unpredictability similar to that found in the real world and NOT found in the default MSFS ATC. After about five minutes I contacted Center again and repeated my request, this time I was cleared to climb to FL 350. Very nice!

Another touch of unpredictability is built into the AI chatter. Every now and then an aircraft will call center and, as in the real world, the controller will miss the call sign and ask the pilot to repeat. "Aircraft calling center, say again?" If you have ever listened to a busy ATC sector it will be clear that this happens more than most controllers would like to admit and it is replicated nicely in RC.

With You At FL350



As we settled in for the long flight, it was a great time to wade through the many real-

world RC options that Radar Contact offered. Flipping through the various choices on the ADVDISP menu I found the following:

- Leave frequency for weather: Allows the pilot to request a frequency change from Center for a quick check of the local weather. Center will request that you report back on within three minutes.

- Deviate for Wx or Deviate for Turbulence: Once of the major things missing in the default ATC is the ability so stray from the flight plan to avoid towering cumulous clouds or tooth chattering turbulence. The ability to deviate is an absolute necessity and a welcome addition in RC.

- Declare Minimum Fuel – With fuel prices so high now-a-days, there is a good chance that your virtual airline may short change you on your fuel necessitating the need to let ATC know that you have just enough fuel to get you on the ground before your 747 becomes the worlds largest glider.

- Change Destination – Self explanatory. As in the default ATC the pilot has the option to divert to another suitable destination as necessary. If necessary to divert, RC allows the pilot to pick any airport by their ICAO call letters and RC will give vectors direct to that destination.

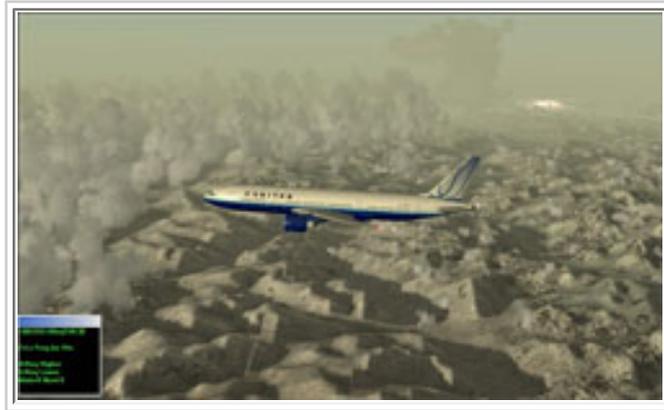
- EMERGENCY! – RC includes quite an extensive emergency scenario engine. Once trouble is accessed onboard the aircraft (from air rage to smoke in the cockpit) the pilot has options available. The pilot can choose to vectors to the closest airport, direct to the destination airport or return to the origination airport. Additionally, the pilot will need to provide information on fuel remaining and emergency services needed to meet the aircraft.

- Altitude Changes – Of course the pilot may ask to change altitude as necessary for any reason. Be aware however that ATC may or may NOT approve the request immediately or at all. Additionally it is possible to get an altitude that is different from the one requested.

Another astonishing fact in regard to Radar Contact, is that as you fly over different continents, the ATC vernacular and procedures change. For instance, in the USA a frequency will be given as 128 POINT 25 whereas in Europe that same frequency will be given as 128 DECIMAL 25. Another example, is that of flight levels in the USA vs. Europe. In Europe flight levels are expressed much lower than 18,000. There are many other intricate differences and Radar Contact 4 has them all. The changes happen as you enter various airspaces so the pilot should be familiar with the different ATC procedures as they apply on a global scale. This should really please users around the globe because it makes MSFS as a whole less “Americentric”.

For those of you “long-haulers” used to either sitting in front of the computer to acknowledge ATC or acknowledging ATC and then not speaking to ATC for hours to prevent the dreaded “your flight plan has been canceled...” those days are over! RC 4 allows the pilot to hand communications over to “OTTO” and he will handle ATC for the

rest of your flight. Of course, you may always intervene for ATC requests but the days of losing ATC contact are now over.



It is also possible for "OTTO" to fly the aircraft for you. I have not tried this because it is stated that the panel should use the default MSFS autopilot or stick strictly to the MSFS specs for the autopilot. Most aircraft I fly are highly customized and are far removed from anything default, so handing over the airplane to "OTTO" is not something I am planning on doing. However, for those of you who fly long haul and tend to oversleep (or need to wait for the wife to leave before sneaking back to the computer) there is a function to pause the flight at a preset distance from the destination. I use 200 miles to ensure ATC has not required a descent.

The only thing missing here, in my opinion, is the ability to assign accents by location to that ATC chatter. If this were implemented, then ATC chatter in Spain, for instance, would not include a southern US accent unless it was a pilot flying an American based aircraft. I hope that JD and crew will look at this as a future enhancement if possible because the diverse accents of the pilots and controllers are already in place.

Preparing For The Approach And Landing

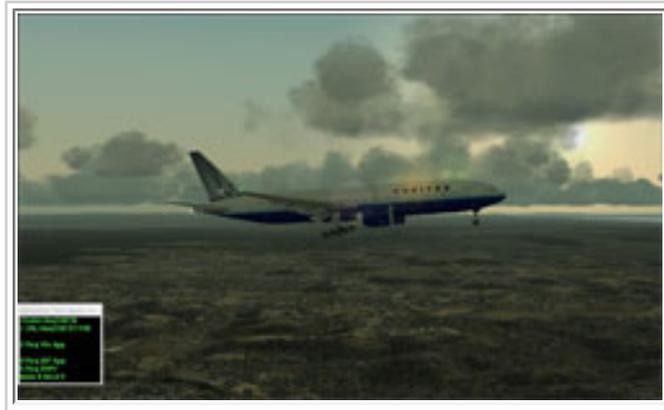


As we neared the Japanese coastline, ATC started us down with intermediate altitudes. RC has random logic to its requests for altitude changes and the pilot should be prepared to

spend some time at any of the intermediate altitudes during the decent. RC will also give pilot discretion descents as well as descent restrictions in relation to a waypoint.

Descending though FL 180 "OTTO" the co-pilot called for an altimeter check and I tuned the altimeter to the current pressure. ATC then asked us to descend to 13,000 AND told us to be at that altitude within 30 miles and to reduce speed to 250 knots. Since we did not plan on a STAR into Narita, ATC let us fly to the last waypoint and vectored us around in the standard right hand pattern into Narita. With no mountains to speak of within the airport vicinity, no NOTAMS were necessary.

Of course, if one wanted to designate a STAR, then RC will allow the pilot to fly it until the aircraft has arrived at the Final Approach Fix (FAF). At last, we can finally make use of our fancy Flight Management Computers in the most realistic fashion by flying the way it was intended.



ATC gave us perfect vectors though the pattern and sequenced our aircraft about 7 miles behind the number one for the runway. We were soon handed off to tower and "OTTO" called the tower with a 5 mile final. We were cleared to land.

Spacing was perfect, so when we came across the threshold, the aircraft ahead of us was already off on the high speed turnoff. A picture perfect landing capped off the 14 hour flight and we followed the Japan Air 747 on the turn-off. We were cleared to contact ground who immediately cleared us to our predefined gate.



Again, I think that the ground portion is the weakest part of RC because without a predefined gate, one will only get "roger, taxi to the ramp" and the pilot is left to his or her own devices. This has been expressed in the forums and taken note by the crew at JDT. Judging by the otherwise complete nature of RC 4, I have no doubt that the suggestions have been internalized by JDT. However, creating detailed ground control would be a rather large task, so I doubt that it would be forthcoming in the near term, if at all.

At the gate and engines shut down, I realized that it was now time for the most grueling portion of the flight: The Flight Critique. I didn't do too badly during the flight and the critique was quite kind. With a smile on my face and dried out contact lenses after 14 hours of real time flight, I headed out of the virtual terminal building for much needed rest at the virtual hotel.

Some Quality Time With JD

After such a satisfying experience with RC 4, I felt it fitting that I should take time out to interview JD on behalf of the entire staff at JDT LLP. With a product of this size and scale I could not help but to try to get into the head of the developers and find out what makes them tick.

Mike T: "Who came up with the original idea for RC? Why and when?"

JD: "Doug and I met over the Internet in 1996, through a common acquaintance. The three of us were using Winplanner, and trying to improve on the ATC adventures it generated. With Doug's ATC background, and my programming abilities, we started trying to make it better. Within a few months we decided to start over from scratch, and Radar Contact Version 1 was developed and released. Version 2 took ATC to the next level. There were so many features we wanted to add to the next version, but the APLC programming language was so primitive, I started a complete rewrite in Visual Basic in 2000. Version 3 was released in November of 2002."

Mike T: "How long did development take for RC 4? When did you start?"

JD: "Version 4 started as soon as we released version 3, about 3 years of development effort."

Mike T: "What are the major challenges the team faced during the development of RC 4?"

JD: "Having the time to thoroughly test was one challenge. We live by the motto "Q not C", an abbreviation for "Quality not Calendar". There were so many features in V4, that created a test matrix from hell. With the help of the best team of beta testers, and Doug's attention to detail, we have achieved the level of Q that we wanted. A second challenge was controlling and interacting with the AI aircraft. This makes V4 so believable, since you hear the appropriate communications to the actual planes around you, not fabricated chatter to fictitious aircraft."

Mike T: "Now that RC4 has been released, what further enhancements would you like to see implemented?"

JD: "We have a list of about 40 items, which we are in the process of prioritizing and determining the amount of work each will require. Over 20 of those items are ideas that our users have asked us to do. Some of those enhancements include:

- Further 'internationalization'
- A new and improved Approach code, making it even more realistic
- Begin integrating VFR operations into RC (something we call VFR - lite)
- Better methods for producing the voice sets, including proper accents for the countries in your flight plan
- Speed restrictions in additional phases of flight
- User initiated holding"

Mike T: "What features would you have liked to include in RC4 that just wasn't possible under the constraints of FS9?"

JD: "Better control of AI"

Mike T: "FS X is on the not-too-distant horizon, how would you like to see RC4 fit into that big picture?"

JD: "We're sure MS will make improvements in their ATC. Radar Contact will continue to be the add-on for those who want their ATC experience to match what real world pilots experience."

Mike T: "Is there anything you would like to add in closing?"

JD: "We'd like to thank the flight sim community for embracing Radar Contact, and challenging us to make it better. We'd like to thank AVSIM for providing the resources to host our forum. Many thanks to our partners Emetrix and SwiftCD which handle our order processing and fulfillment. Finally, a huge thank you to each and every beta tester - they help make Radar Contact the Quality product, it is."

Conclusion

The allure of online flying has always been due to the professionalism of the controllers, the realism of the ATC jargon, realistic interaction with other traffic, the randomness of having a live controller and the need to strictly follow instructions. I dare say that for the FIRST TIME in the history of FS 2004 all of the aspects of online flying have been distilled, burned onto CD and presented as Radar Contact 4.01. The only thing missing is live pilots, which are usually a big improvement over the antics of the AI traffic.

I will say that Radar Contact 4 is a must have. For any pilot utilizing FS 2004 and using IFR ATC services, RC is one of the few necessary add-ons that should not be left out of one's MSFS add-on arsenal. RC has effectively transformed the simulator experience for me and is the crowning glory to my hyper-realistic virtual cockpits, weather, land class, mesh and sceneries. For the first time since I've owned FS 2004, the simulator feels complete.

Radar Contact is infinitely more than just an ATC replacement for MSFS. RC effectively fills the need for ultimate realism for ATC services and then surpasses expectations. I know that after just one flight that there is absolutely no way that I would ever use FS 2004 without Radar Contact guiding my flight. YES, it is THAT GOOD.

The intelligence, randomness, options, professionalism, realism and attention to detail built into the Radar Contact engine are awe inspiring. There are only a handful of truly monumental milestones in the history of Microsoft Flight Simulator add-ons that really changed the experience of the sim for me. Among them are the release of FS 2002/4 vs. FS 2000, my first flight in the 767 PIC, the first time experiencing the spectacular skylines presented in Active Sky and seeing every road and town in Ultimate Terrain to name a few. Now I am obligated to add Radar Contact 4 to that list in no uncertain terms.

From the stand point of its readiness for release, I can honestly say that in more than 40 hours of flying with RC I did not encounter one error or crash. The engine is rock solid on my machine (your mileage may vary of course) without so much as an anomaly. For an add-on of this enormous scale, complexity and integration into MSFS, I am astonished. This too speaks to the laser sharp attention-to-detail of the crew at JDT.

To be sure, I would like to see some tweaks to RC and I have pointed them out in this review. However, Radar Contact is an addition to MSFS that takes the entire simulator to another level and I have only scratched the surface regarding the true capabilities of RC in this review. It seems that every time flew with RC, I found something new because the ATC experience was never the same, just like it is in the real world. I soon became aware that I had to end this review sometime after writing and testing RC for almost a month. At the end of the day, I think it best to leave the rest to you, the reader, to discover. Trust me, many smiles and goose bumps await you.

With all that in mind, I am recommending Radar Contact for the highest praise that I can give it as an Avsim Reviewer and that is the Avsim "Gold Star Award". I am of firm belief that it meets, and even exceeds, the lofty criteria set forth for our coveted Award. Radar Contact's ability to elevate the entire simulation experience to another level while adding

features that apply on a global scale is what the "Gold Star Award" is all about. Radar Contact does all that with deft and succinct acuity. Congratulations to the crew at JDT, you have lifted the entire Microsoft Flight Simulator franchise to another level with Radar Contact 4, and that is no small feat.

What I Like About Radar Contact 4

- Extremely realistic ATC procedures and vernacular
- Differing global ATC procedures recognized
- Predefined departure and arrival gates
- Request Pushback / Start
- Ability to Fly SIDs and STARs
- Extensive emergency Options
- Speed Restrictions
- Holds for weather and traffic
- Recognizes NOTAMS to being vectored into terrain
- Realistic climb and descent steps
- Random experience element to ATC engine mimicking real life
- ATC experience seldom the same twice
- Exhaustive Documentation
- AI Control
- ATC commands to "follow" or "hold for" specific aircraft on ground
- Ability to give Communications and aircraft control (with default autopilot) to copilot
- Copilot switches to destination ATIS for runway information
- Very customizable
- No perceptible performance hit
- Flight Critique

What I Don't Like About Radar Contact 4

- ADVDISP needs to be refined
- No VFR Procedures
- No detailed ground control
- Large number of airports referred to phonetically
- Very long waypoint distances may cause RC to think aircraft is off course
- Email activation process

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