AVSIM Commercial Scenery Review

Flight1 – Ground Environment Professional
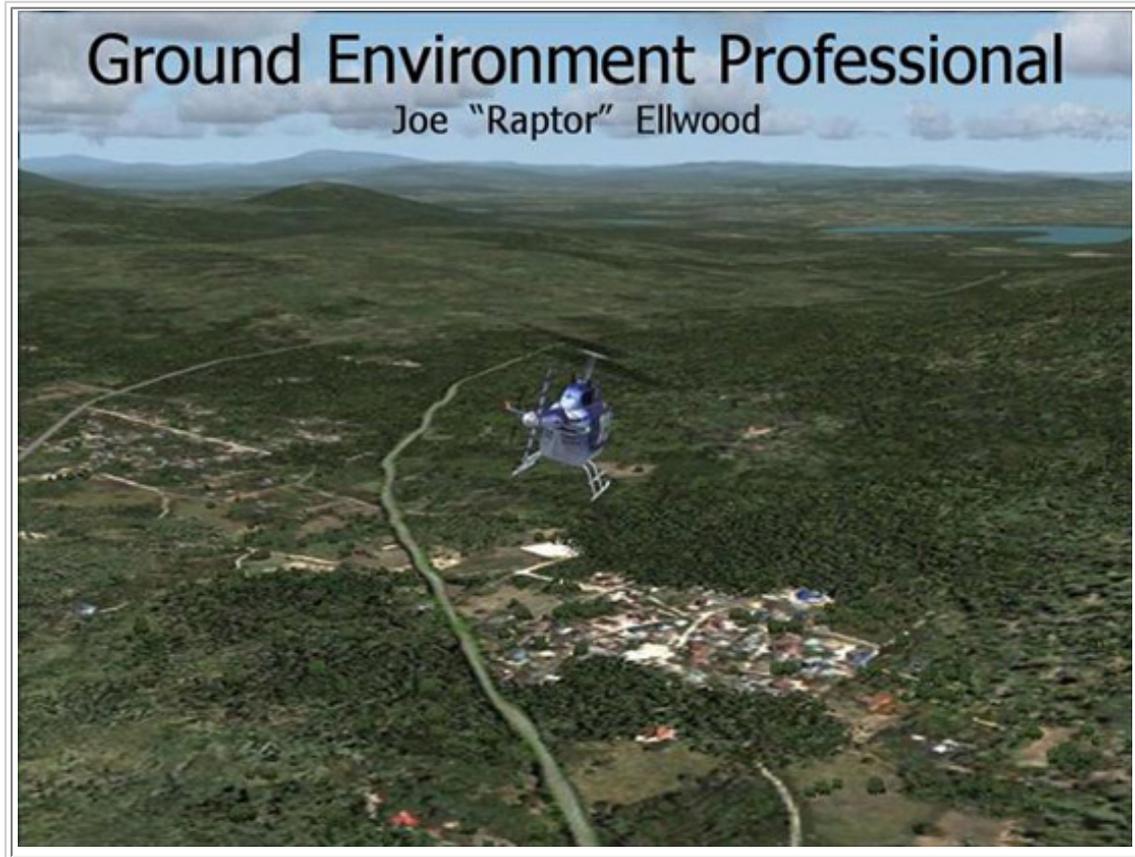
Product Information		
Publisher: Flight 1		
Description: Global ground texture utility .		
Download Size: 360 MB	**Format:** Self installing (based on Flight1 wrapper)	**Simulation Type:** FS 2004
Reviewed by: Joe Ellwood AVSIM Staff Reviewer - Aug 2, 2006		

Introduction

When Peter Wilding and Anthony Vos released Ground Environment 2006 a few months ago, it took the simming community by storm. Screenshots and discussions were appearing everywhere from excited and satisfied customers all over the web. And the release of Ground Environment Professional was exactly the same, this time even more hyped.

As an original purchaser of Ground Environment 2006, I saw no room for improvement after its installation. The autogen was perfectly aligned with the textures and the detail of the ground textures itself were lovely. But the crew at Flight1 proved me wrong altogether. As we know, there are limits in the simulator on how realistic we can actually make the atmosphere, how we can make the colours match, how to make the entire sim as beautiful and realistic as we want it and so on.

The development team found a smart way to work around these limits, and that's why this product is so special. The addition to GE Pro also brings Carl Hackman to the team, and the new features of this product far surpass a new product title.

Installation and Documentation

Installation is completed after purchasing via the popular Flight1 Wrapper system. Very simple and effective to use. The download for this product is quite large, and can take a few hours depending on your download speeds. Right now there is no boxed format for this product; hopefully it is on the horizon for those who wish to buy a hard copy.

Test System
Intel Pent 4 2.66GHz 512MB RAM PC2700DDR ASUS A9550 40 GB HD 5400RPM **Flying Time:** 15+ hours

The manual is based on the HTML style, similar to that of Microsoft's Outlook Express. The advantages of using this over the popular .PDF files, is these help files don't require as much loading time when Acrobat files can take up to 10 seconds (depending on your system and file size). But the biggest advantage over .PDF files is the ability to perform searches and instantly see and read the results. This new implication is very welcome in my opinion, as it is more flexible and generally easier to use.

The manual covers all necessary steps for a new user to get set up and accustomed to the program. Screenshots and step by step instructions are included on how to install the program, and how to effectively utilize it to get the most out of your money. Reading the manual is not required, though I highly recommend it. The reason it's not needed is because the program includes instructions when you hover your mouse over a button explaining what the feature does. Though this is a good idea, however, I did not see much of a need for this due to the detailed documentation. Though I do believe in the original release such extensive instructions were not included, as they came in a later update.

What Does GE Pro Do?

Clearly GE Pro replaces all ground textures, but it does much more than this. Obviously in the real world, the colours and shading of the ground are always different depending on the amount of cloud cover, and if the clouds are blocking the sun. I said earlier that flight sim doesn't have these sort of features built into the sim engine, so that's where innovation comes into play.

Basically, before you go for a flight, you open up GE Pro. You then enter your departure and arrival airports (ICAO codes); then the program automatically retrieves the METARS (weather reports) for your selected locations. It will then install the most appropriate ground textures according to the weather in the area. For example, you want to fly out of London. Once GE Pro displays the weather report for London, it will tell you the current weather status at that area. If it is cloudy with fog (typical!) it will install darker textures. If you tell the program you're flying from London to Dublin, it will also retrieve the METAR for the major airport in Dublin. If it's partly cloudy there, obviously the area will require brighter textures – so GE Pro finds the best set which suits your flight and installs them. Simple, huh?

Of course, you don't have to mess around with the program before each flight. If you're like me, and you don't want to spend time mucking about before each flight (which is why I've never been interested in Active Sky) then you have been catered for as well. You can simply install a base set, which is not overly bright, or not moodily dark. Either way, the sim looks amazing – though I am now used to opening GE Pro before each flight, it happens automatically now!

Setting It Up

The initial installer will set you back over half a gig on your hard drive, and more depending on how many texture sets you wish to install. GE Pro will back up your original textures upon booting up the program for the first time should you wish to revert to your original set. Not that you'd want to!

After you've installed the base set, (which is the minimum requirement) you'll want to install additional coloured textures to match each weather scenario. Here are the different texture sets:

- Clear Skies
- Mostly Clear
- Partly Cloudy
- Mostly Cloudy
- Fully Overcast Cloud Cover

The default install puts in partly cloudy, but when flying in bad weather you'll notice the ground is too bright. That's where GE Pro shines. You can choose how many sets you wish to install for each scenario, and later you can go in manually and colour them to suit your personal tastes and desires. Bear in mind that creating the additional 5 sets takes well over an hour. So, it's best to close everything else and occupy yourself elsewhere while this occurs because watching a progress bar is just as exciting as watching paint dry!

Of course, it will take even longer if you choose to create multiple sets for a particular scenario. I created one set each, checked them out, and later customized each set to suit my personal preference. The time it takes to create the textures is a small price to pay for what you'll experience in future flights, take my word for it.
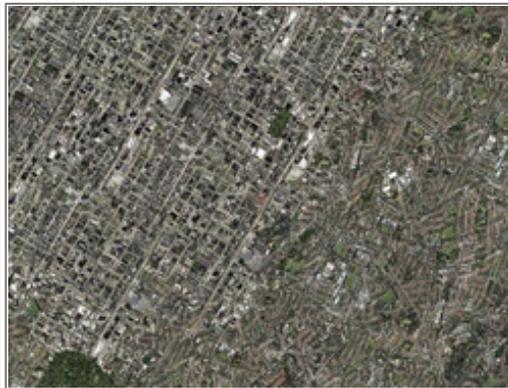
Once all the texture sets have been created, you'll want to fly! Now tell GE Pro where you're flying (you can also select just the local area) and install the best suited textures.
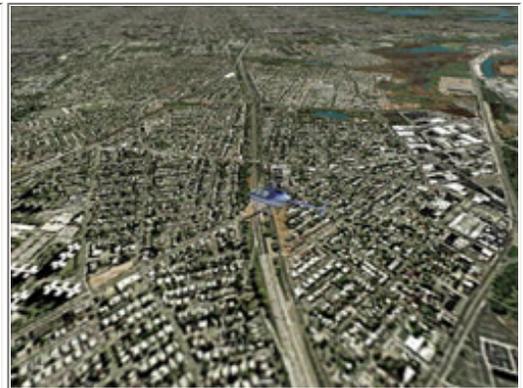
The Difference In The Sim

Now, at this point you're probably wondering how the textures actually look, and if all that time was worth it. I'll let my screenshots do most of the talking, as any words I say simply cannot do this product justice. Not only does your new environment look beautiful, it looks realistic and is not overdone. All autogen buildings are aligned with the texture, which means no annoying buildings in the middle of the road.

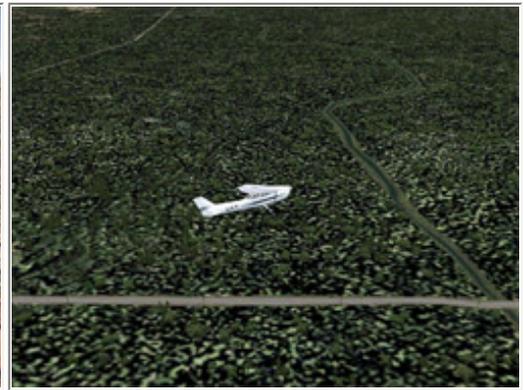| The custom autogen is amazingly realistic | The two different suburban textures collide, but blend together nicely | New York - Day |

The textures, in all honesty, look photorealistic. The detail when viewing the ground is amazing, and looks 3D. For example, some of the forest textures have the markings of trees, and although this may not sound great, it helps bring the ground to life and compliments the autogen.
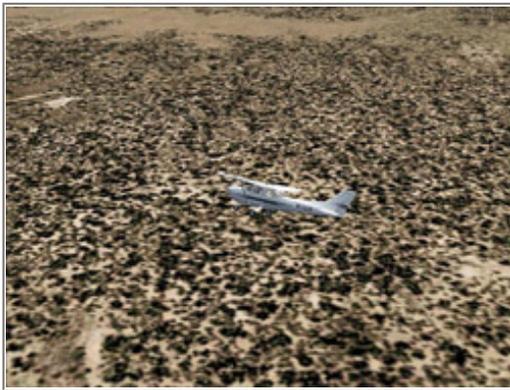
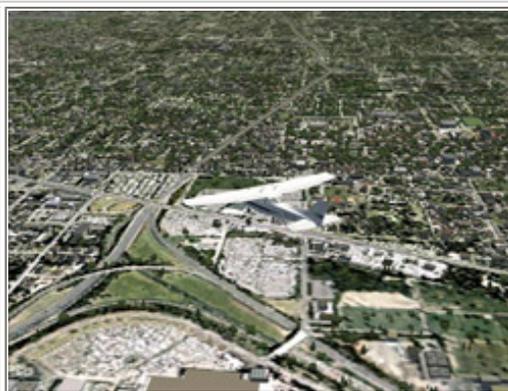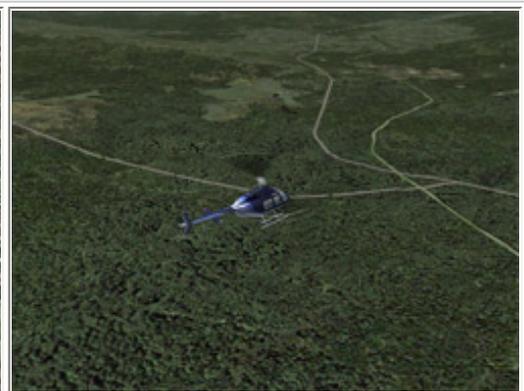| The dry area of the Californian desert | The Grand Canyon | Exploring Canada |

There is an incredible amount of detail in the textures themselves. Roads join together and are not just random lines all connecting to a highway or a similar road. Parks and small bushy areas are also clearly evident and there are few signs of repetitive textures what so ever. This add-on rivals photorealistic scenery, and I say this because there is a tremendous variation in the colour of the textures, such as different shading of grass which creates the illusion that the length is uneven etc.
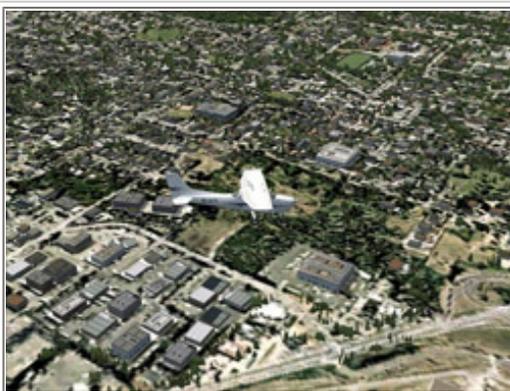
| Note the trees are appropriately aligned with the road | The detail of the roads makes the textures appear to be photo-realistic | The green side of China |

Blurries

Ahh yes, the infamous "blurries" as we simmers call them. For those who don't know, this is what we call the effect when the textures are not fully loaded, therefore having a blurred appearance. Things like blurries and frame rates are two things we are all crazy about when it comes to tweaking and optimizing. So, do we suffer from blurries like users did with the original release of GE?

Before I installed GE 2006, I had never experienced blurries in the sim before. All of a sudden, I did. It's quite annoying, especially when taking screenshots of some low VFR flying. There are various tweaks that you can apply to your FS9.cfg (configuration) file, but none of these made much of a difference.

| Overhead of Seattle | Custom airport textures |

After installing GE Pro, I immediately noticed there were less blurries. In fact, they were very minimal altogether. I don't know if the crew have improved the formatting and design of the textures, but they certainly appear better. A member on a forum suggested they reworked the colours so that it wasn't visible. Either way, I'm happy!

I recommend checking out the Vista Australis (VOZ) forum and have a look at lead developer John Venema's tweaks; they seemed to make the biggest difference on my system.

Upgrading From Ground Environment 2006

Previous purchasers of the original version have the option to upgrade to Professional, with a massive $30USD discount which can be obtained using Flight1's coupon system. To original buyers: this is a must have. An update is a complete understatement. This is a completely new product, and is miles beyond the original version – believe it or not. Paying just under $20USD for an upgrade is a fantastic deal, and you will not regret it.

| New York - Night | Overlooking Kennedy Intl |

Performance

I found there was no difference at all in loading times or frame rates when compared to other commercial or freeware add-ons.

Conclusion

Every now and then, a quality and innovative product will hit the market that is unique and grabs people's attention. Some examples of this are: Flight Environment, Active Sky and the PMDG 747 etc. GE Pro is definitely in the same league as these products, and quite possibly better. This is another "essential" product that you simply cannot go without, and the satisfaction never seems to wear off.

Because of this, I'm awarding the developers the prestigious AVSIM Gold Star award, which is only given to products that bring something new and never seen before to the market, and does a damn good job at what it's supposed to do – this is certainly the case with GE Pro.

GE enhances your simulator in ways that you thought weren't possible; in fact, I could find nothing to critique about the product. The price for new owners is a bit hefty, but considering the complexity and enjoyment you'll get out of the product, the price is only a small factor.

Well done to the Flight1 crew! The possibilities are endless.

What I Like About Ground Environment Pro

- Easy to use program
- Thorough and detailed documentation
- Textures look photo-realistic
- Aligning autogen with roads and building textures
- Lighting on the ground
- Realistic night lighting
- Innovation at it's highest level

What I Don't Like About Ground Environment Pro

- Nothing

Printing

If you wish to print this review or read it offline at your leisure, right click on the link below, and select "save as"

Ground Environment Pro

(adobe acrobat required)

Comments?

Standard Disclaimer

The review above is a subjective assessment of the product by the author. There is no connection between the producer and the reviewer, and we feel this review is unbiased and truly reflects the performance of the product in the simming environment. This disclaimer is posted here in order to provide you with background information on the reviewer and any connections that may exist between him/her and the contributing party.

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