

AVSIM Commercial Simulator Review

Aerostudios Inc - ATC Simulator 2





Rating Guide

Publisher: [Aerostudios Inc.](#)

Description: Tracon Simulator

Download Size:
N/A

Format:
CD

Simulation Type:
FS 2004 Add-on

Reviewed by: [Alexis Esguerra](#) AVSIM Staff Reviewer

The AVSIM Commercial Rating System: 1 Star to 5 Stars (with 5 stars being exceptional) *Please see details of our review rating policy [here](#).*

Introduction

Life without air traffic controllers? It's a possibility that I wouldn't want to explore. These talented men and women are crucial to the aviation industry, organizing the mess that several thousand planes crisscrossing the skies in every possible direction create. TRACON (Terminal Radar Air Control) controllers are arguably even more vital as they manage the traffic as it concentrates in and around the airports they're heading out of or in to.

If you've ever had the chance to listen in on the airwaves at some of the busier TRACON Centers during rush hour, you've gotten it firsthand just how much skill it takes to route those planes into a position to execute the approach or to get them out of the sector and on their way. It isn't for the faint-hearted, believe me.

Aerosoft gives you a chance to tackle this job head on. Publisher of the original ATC Simulator, they decided to follow up with the sequel, ATC Simulator 2. Grab your mic, get a cup of coffee, and take a deep breath as you sit down... it's about to get a little frenzied upstairs.

Installation and Documentation

ATC2 came to me on CD-ROM, popping it in my CD drive did nada, so I clicked on the so-called installer. I say so-called because it's more of an HTML shortcut that brings you to a well laid out instructional page on how to properly get ATC2 on your hard drive. Following it resulted in a rather pain-free session.

The sim requires installing multiple programs, which include the following:

- VB6 Runtime Files
- Direct X 8.1 (if needed)
- TTS (text-to-speech) Engine
- Speech API Library
- Speech Recognition Component
- ATC2

Test System

CPU: P4 (Intel) – 3.2 GHz
RAM: 1.0 GB

Video: ATI X300SE (128 MB)

Sound – SB Audigy

Flying Time:
25 hours

Not included in the initial install is Microsoft's Speech SDK 4.0, available for download at the Microsoft website. While not required for running ATC2, I highly recommend downloading it for the time being. Why is explained later in this review.

The HTML also provides you the opportunity to register the sim, and contains a few other little tidbits. None are required to get ATC2 up and running (although registration is, of course, highly recommended).

As for documentation, a Handy Pocket Reference (I kid you not, that's what it's called) card is included, outlining all the crucial keyboard commands you'll need on your

new endeavor. But it does not compare to the much more detailed 132 page ATC Simulator 2 Manual which you can access once the sim is installed. This PDF document is very thorough on how to get the most out of the sim, but only from a technical standpoint.

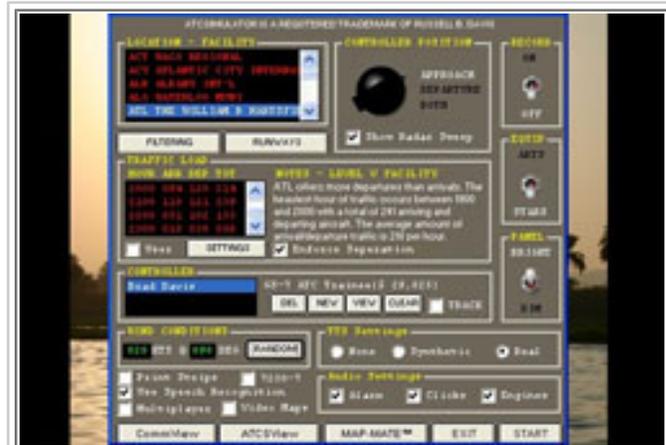
On the other side of the coin are the basics of air traffic control, especially in regards to regulations and protocols, which this sim follows rather well. This can make things rather difficult for the simmer, as you are graded on your adherence to the regs. The manual does outline several publications as recommended reading, some of which can be found at <http://www.faa.gov/atpubs/INDEX.HTM>.

Getting it down

There is a small but very important pit stop to make when you launch ATC2, and it's called the Launch Window. It is from here that you select your job role (departure or approach), scope type (the older ARTS or the newer hi-tech STARS), and other little items before jumping into the cab. But it would not be right if I didn't suggest/recommend/tell you to get to know it intimately. The interface will easily become your best friend for as long as you own the sim, as it allows you to customize the sim to not only your individual liking,

but skill level as well.

Want to control traffic out of KORD... and ONLY out of KORD? Go for it. Care to only deal with GA aircraft? It's your world, those planes are just living in it. It also allows you to record your session and play it back later for review.

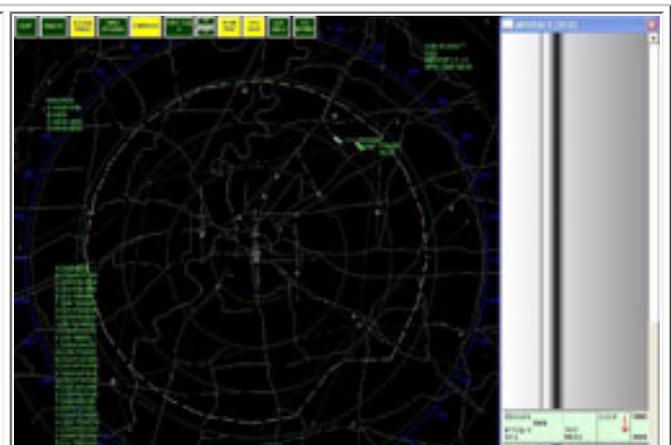


The Launch Window... death by choices.

Once in, you are provided with a very realistic rendition of your chosen scope. I have only looked at photos of the old-style ARTS radarscope, but I can wholly vouch for STARS, which I have personally seen up close and personal in action. The station really does its real world counterpart justice in every way that counts. Colors, graphics, controls, functionality, the whole caboodle. I have to admit that the latter quickly became my scope of choice for it's ease of use and the information it provides.



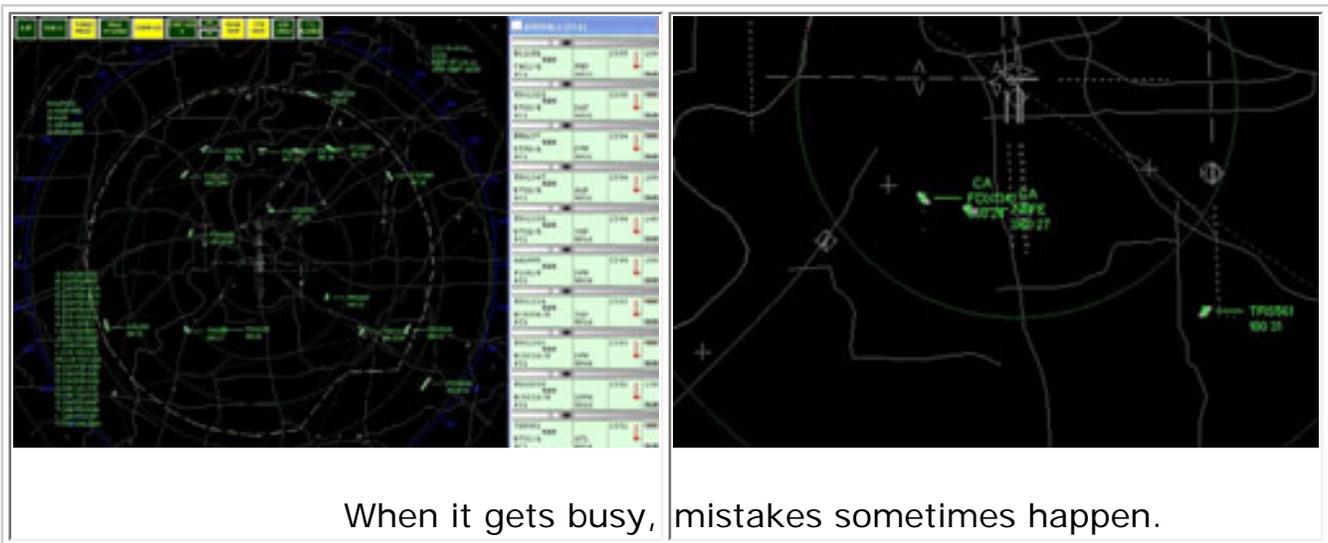
KMEM at 2300 on the older ARTS



KMEM at 2300 on STARS

Before long, the traffic starts coming (if you happen to venture into a major facility, it'll usually be within a minute). Now, the goal is to get them to where they're going, be it a departure fix of a final approach fix. This is accomplished by the combination of mouse clicks and simple predefined keyboard commands. If you happen to have the right hardware, you can also employ the most favored technique of a real life controller; by voice (more on this to follow). What could go wrong?

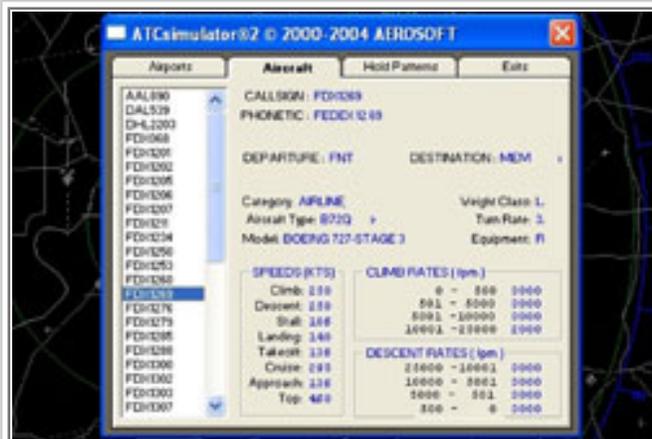
If you happened to jump in well out of your level of expertise, the answer is A LOT! For one, there is the very real potential of getting overloaded very quickly. Aerosoft went to great lengths to fill the skies with the appropriate population levels for each sector, using real world airline timetables to do so (sure enough, a check of the morning skies over KSFO revealed All Nippon Airways Flight 8 B777, an old friend of mine). This means that if you happen to stumble into the noon hour rush at KJFK, there are a total of 231 aircraft – 110 arrivals, 121 departures. Unless you happen to be a controller-virtuoso, that's a lot of aircraft, no matter how you look at it.



And even if you did settle at the scope of a much smaller facility at a more peaceful timeframe (for beginners, may I recommend KGPT at 0800 – 5 and 5 respectively), there's still that little nagging point of fidelity to the trade. As I mentioned before, Aerosoft factored in the rules that controllers play by (and they did quite well at it). Basic adherence to their bibles (the FAR/AIM and FAA7110.65K) is a must if you really wish to succeed at this job. Such niceties as aircraft-aircraft separation, aircraft-terrain separation, speed restrictions, FAF altitudes, and such really matter here; break one and you'll hear about it later.

Despite all this, you are not left in the lurch. Handy tools are included to assist you in handling all that traffic in a manner acceptable to the FAA. The Information Window is just that, providing info on the airfields, exit/holding points, and the characteristics of every aircraft that will soar into or out of your area. Plotting lines allow you to examine the intended flight paths of the aircraft so you can anticipate their movements and not be

caught off guard. Another beauty of a tool, is MSA/terrain mapping, which does wonders for helping you help the flights avoid unwanted, premature reunions with Terra Firma. Command macros, which you can create to your own liking, can be virtual gold, assisting in the quick issuance of common routing instructions should you decide to brave the likes of KORD or KLAX.



Information Window



Terrain Map

At any rate, it's a full 60 minutes of vectoring, clearing and turning of planes, at the end of which, your session is evaluated. Any and all mistakes you made will be recorded, and are deducted from an original score of 100%. Do well enough and you just might find yourself advancing in grade and pay (viewed at the Launch Window). Do poorly and the inverse is true.



I think I'd better stick to flying.

Special Note: I recognize that this review makes this sim sound extremely difficult, and it definitely has the potential to be. The key words here are 'has the potential'; while the larger facilities definitely are a chore, there are plenty of less hectic ones in ATC2's 128 sector database. The key here is to the neophyte controller, other than reading the manual, start off at one of them and hone your skills. Once proficient at these low level facilities, work your way up the ladder of difficulty to the majors. Practice eventually does make perfect (well, sort of), and the hours of working the stations of less busy facilities got me familiar with the key/voice commands and gave me a badly needed intro into air traffic control. With that experience, I found my visual scan improved with every session. With my newfound knowledge, I was able to tackle slightly more congested skies, taking on more flights. I have yet to score a perfect 100%, but my latest evaluations are far better than when I started.

Multiplayer

The multiplayer option of ATC2 was another delightful aspect of the sim. In essence, you can host a session and provide ATC services for any friend who owns MSFS from FS98 and up. All that is truly required for this option, is to provide to them your individual IP address to connect to and the desired sector's frequency for them to dial in.

In one session, I managed to get a couple of friends to join in for some ATC work over KSFO. Using the keyboard commands, I vectored them to and fro. Their respective aircraft marked as an F to stand out from any AI targets. Using the synthesized speech option, they got my typed instructions as audible commands.

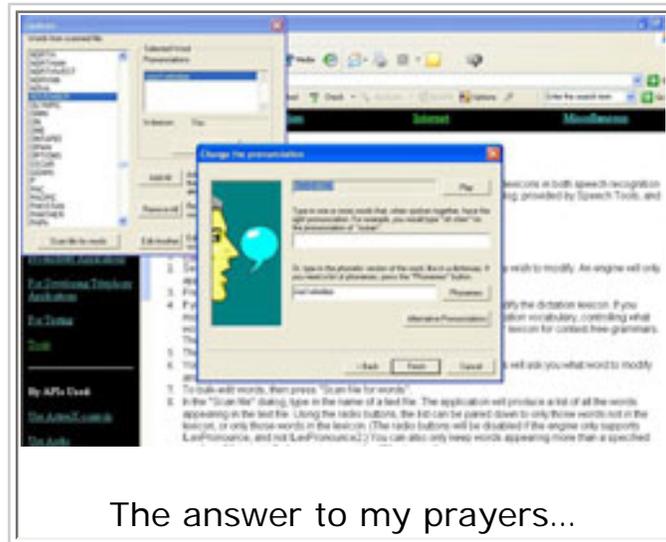
All in all, it was a hoot to control live traffic, and I got the distinct impression that this ability was a strong selling point for them (the inevitable "What program are you using?" came up). It probably would have been even more so if we had been able to explore the Roger Wilco option that Aerosoft recommends (which I do not own).

Say again?

The very core of ATC2 is its Speech Recognition capabilities, and its functionality is, for the most part, okay. I do not fault Aerosoft for the problems that follow. After all, the fantasy of any Speech Recognition program is that it goes by the premise that everyone speaks the same way in regards to enunciation, pitch, and intonation. As with almost anything that requires things to absolutely go 100%, this is never the case.

A great example, at least for me, was the GA traffic, all of which are addressed by a generic 'November' call sign (as opposed, I've been told, to the specific aircraft types in the original ATC). I guess my speech was not up to par with the original programming, because not once did I ever get a response from any simplane using this callsign! Another example was any 'United' aircraft, they were a pure hit and miss affair. I found that if I

enunciate the callsign as 'Eh-NIT-ted' instead of 'YOO-ni-ted' I might succeed in getting its attention about half the time. In all cases that I couldn't get 'Roger-Ramjet' to answer, I fell back to the keyboard commands.



Aerosoft's answer to this is Lexicon, a program contained within Microsoft's Speech SDK 4.0 (as previously mentioned, available for free download) which allows the user to modify the speech database to better match that individual's unique speech patterns. It's a complex little thing that took me considerable time to get the hang of, but it did smooth out the rough edges and my success rate improved dramatically. The trade off is that you lose the true voice of the pilots in the process (a shame too, since I liked the personal touch of hearing pilots say such things as, 'see ya!') and are forced to fall back on the synthesized version.

Be advised though, that no amount of Lexicon modification can offset the inevitable changes in voice that excitement and stress will bring on. You'll know when you've been affected by these states when planes suddenly either ignore you, ask for a repeat, or just flat out skitter off in a manner inconsistent with your instructions.

Many a time, I'd ask in an excited tone for a flight to reduce speed to "two-five-zero", and it would register as five-zero... DING! Below stall speed.

Other Issues

Other shortcomings do exist in ATC2, but they are relatively minor. As previously mentioned, the timetables for the commercial air traffic is a little old. I know this because Delta hasn't operated L1011s or B727s for quite some time, yet I caught both plying their way over the skies of KATL. Likewise, Trans World Airlines doesn't exist in our world anymore, but they continue to soldier on in ATC2. Nitpicking really, but shortcomings to be sure.

Other things I observed in my review were rare and in between. On a few occasions, a flight would appear and, when contacted, the reply would be devoid of any call sign, making control by voice all but impossible. Once or twice, I'd command a plane to turn left to a heading and it would go right instead. Again, I emphasize that these incidents were extremely remote, just a few glitches in the 25 or so hours of testing.

This last nitpick is completely unofficial. One thing I did find myself wishing for during my role as approach controller, was for the modeling of real world STAR (standard terminal arrival route) procedures. Those predefined routings planes take while inbound to their destinations. I would have to say that the lack of their inclusions made this role far harder than departure controller, as when the planes leave, they pretty much head out in their various directions for their exit fix, so it fails to making them climb. Inbound aircraft pretty much make a beeline for their destination, and when you have multiple planes converging for the same fix and altitude, the challenge curve really steepens. Then again... maybe that was the whole point.

Conclusion

If you have any desires to become an air traffic controller (or wish to understand that half-crazed guy in a certain movie regarding air traffic controllers), then I would definitely recommend ATC2. It is without a doubt the best rendition of this particular facet of aviation, and I enjoyed every single minute of the experience.

The combination of the big and little things that count in this job role, are unmatched in the PC-sim market, and its wide scope of challenge should make it appealing to the amateur crowd, the hardcore vets, and everyone in between.

What I Like About ATC2

- Extremely realistic rendition of air traffic control procedures in all aspects.
- Configurability for all skill levels and preferences.
- Multiplayer
- Has the potential to be extremely challenging.

What I Don't Like About ATC2

- Nothing major.

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