

French firm thrusts Microsoft Flight Simulator to new take-off

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Microsoft has an Xbox version of Flight Simulator, a game dating to the earliest days of PC gaming

Many aircraft are still grounded due to the coronavirus pandemic. But would-be and real pilots will soon be able to travel anywhere in the world—virtually—thanks to the first update in years of Microsoft's Flight Simulator game.

With access to Microsoft's Bing satellite mapping and cloud-powered processing, French developers Asobo Studio have sought to render the piloting experience as lifelike as possible.

Two co-founders of Asobo have even been taking flying lessons for the past four years after the studio was tasked by Microsoft with giving the venerable [game](#)—which dates to the earliest days of gaming in 1982—its first update since 2006.

"The lessons were essential (to introduce) something sensory to the game," one of them, Marcel Bossard, told AFP.

"What sensations does a pilot feel? What can he hear? How does his head move? How does the plane react under a cloud and above the sea? In past simulations, it was a bit rigid," Bossard said, who is lead software engineer for the game.

The new title goes on sale on Tuesday, initially for PCs, with an Xbox version to come. It is something of a take-off for the French company, founded by 12 gaming friends in 2002 in an apartment in the southwestern city of Bordeaux.

Asobo has become known for video game adaptations of several Pixar films, including "Ratatouille", "Wall-E", "Up" and "Toy Story 3".

An important milestone was the release in May 2019 of "A Plague Game: Innocence", which won multiple industry awards and resonates in a world beset by a virulent disease.

The difference between 18 years ago and now "is like learning to fly on a small plane and at the end being the pilot of an Airbus", Bossard said.

Microsoft's game has indeed offered generations of pilots, as well as enthusiastic amateurs, the opportunity to train on a fleet of aircraft.

Cockpits, clouds and Kilimanjaro

The 2020 version gives them control of everything from a Pitts Special S2S biplane to an Airbus A320 Neo or widebody Boeing Dreamliner, and the option to fly from an array of airports around the world past detailed cityscapes and cloud formations.

For the first time, thanks to Microsoft's globe-spanning technology, the planet has been reproduced in enough detail to allow visual flight rules from the cockpit—where collision is avoided through the pilot's vision and actions—rather than by following tracked-out routes.

Software advances since 2006, and the onset of artificial intelligence, have given the game designers the ability to map out the world with startling clarity, from the azure seas of the Caribbean to the graceful peak of Mount Kilimanjaro.

The realism is heightened by real-time weather data derived from Microsoft's Bing servers, which will give virtual pilots the actual conditions in their area of flight, rather than generic clouds.

The anticipation would have been great among gamers at any time, but all the more so now at a time of coronavirus lockdowns that have grounded entire airlines.

"Flight Simulator is a title that's been played by tens of millions of gamers, there is a community which has been waiting for several years.

Microsoft doesn't have room for error," games expert Laurent Michaud said.

The stakes are even higher for Asobo. A successful launch will offer a springboard towards "bigger games, budgets and teams", he said.

"When there are such high expectations, you can't disappoint. Asobo's reputation is at stake."

The French company is well aware of the turbulence ahead if its efforts fail to meet approval with the worldwide community of armchair aviators.

Flight Simulator is a "monument in the history of video games", co-founder David Dedeine said.

"We have had so many messages (from fans) everywhere, of all ages, even in the aviation world where many people wanted to help us," he said. "We're touching upon something that goes far beyond the product."

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