

# *The Trailing Edge*

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## **Using Home Flight Simulators for Flight Training and Proficiency**

*(The following was a response to a question about using home computer flight simulators for maintaining proficiency)*

To answer your question, I have used MS FlightSim (MSFS) and X-Plane for unofficial training. **You can't log any of it - it's a video game.** However, one could argue there is some transfer of training. There was a time when I set up MSFS to make use of limited time. I had a book of paper approach plates that I kept near the PC. I had saved a flight that put me at a known position from which I could give myself "radar vectors to final" and intercept the localizer for the ILS into Oakland. It saved the time it would take to fly the whole route from takeoff out to where I could fly an approach. It also helped that I could set the weather to be a hard ceiling just above DH on the ILS. That was decades ago, and simulators have improved. However, it seems most of the improvements have been to the quality of graphics of stuff on the ground. In X-Plane, I recently watched a car signal its left turn on a country road near the airport. I don't see how that helps the flight experience, but they took the time and processing power to put it in.

I first used X-Plane (in a very limited capacity) in my job as an aero performance guy in the System Program Office (SPO) for the A-10, T-37, T-38, and F-4 aircraft. I admit it was fun to be one of only a handful of engineers who had a joystick on my desk in my cubicle at Hill AFB. X-Plane allows you to build a plane if what you want to fly isn't in their included inventory. I built an RV-8A in X-Plane Version 4. It was a tedious process that required defining fuselage formers from drawings, entering parameters for absolutely everything, and putting together the instrument panel from the list of available gadgets. I discovered a neat feature which is the ability to build the 'ideal panel' and go fly it on an instrument approach to minimums and see what doesn't work as well as I'd hoped. From there, it is easy to revise the panel and go fly it again. I discovered two wrinkles in that plan. First, the guy who created X-Plane doesn't know that the aircraft industry uses inches, not feet. Yeah, I know...divide by twelve. That is what he told me when I talked to him at KOSH many years ago. Second, the models are not forward compatible. When the SPO upgraded X-Plane to Version 5, my model became unusable. All that was twenty years ago. (Wow! I am older than dirt!) It is also possible to purchase an aircraft model from a third party. A few years ago, I bought a Mooney for X-Plane. However, I discovered the modeler went to meticulous detail on such things as the linkage on the landing gear doors but failed to include any functionality in the instrument panel. Sigh...

More recently, I have been playing with X-Plane. In fact, I got a Meta Quest 3 virtual reality goggle thing with the express intent to use it with the flight simulator to get back to work on that instrument ticket. However, when my son, John, tried to make the Quest 3 work on my PC, he told me my PC was from the silent film era - like he knows when that was. I remember black and white TV, but talkies were being made long before I came into the world. Fast forward a few months, and I have a new PC and the VR goggles working with X-Plane. That certainly simplifies the process of looking around. Have you tried fumbling to find the right keyboard keys to glance left to see if you are abeam the numbers? With the VR goggles, just turn your head and look. However, VR technology introduces some new challenges. Interaction with any instrumentation (GPS, VOR, FMS, HSI...) is nigh impossible. The difference between turning the big knob and the little knob is only a hair's breadth. Try to fly direct to a five letter fix, and you could find yourself bound for an obscure airport in east Africa. Your first indication will be that the ETE has increased to fifty hours. It may be possible to buy those dedicated box simulators. In addition to the yoke (or joystick) and pedals, you can get a box (or boxes) with knobs and switches that will replicate the controls in the simulator. I haven't crawled very far down that rabbit hole.

I am thinking the answer for me may be simply leaving the VR stuff out of the loop. Instrument flying is supposed to be done by reference to those gadgets on the panel. Looking out the window isn't an issue until getting close to minimums. Then, for most approaches, what you are hoping to see will be right in front of you, well within the field of view of the PC monitor. If you get a chance to fly an approach in either MSFS or X-Plane, go to KGJT and fly the ILS to Rwy 11. There is a DME arc, radial DME fixes, and cross radial fixes. Set the cloud bases to be 5000 MSL. That way, all the mountains around the airport will be obscured. They go up to 4000 feet above the airport elevation.

I am happy to report that the VR goggles are getting good use on the miniature golf game. I have become a huge fan of Walkabout Mini Golf. There are a dozen courses to play with lots of nifty effects. One of the courses has lasers that will cut your ball in half and leave smoldering pieces on the course. Of course, none of that gets the plane built or a dozen other projects completed. But I have enjoyed playing a round with John while 1500 miles lies between us.

**- Stormy Weathers**