Archive
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You're next in line to take off, runway No. 3

James Turner, Special to The Christian Science Monitor

BOSTON— If you've just seen the newly released movie "Pushing Tin" and you've developed a hankering to try your hand at air traffic control (ATC), you might think you're out of luck. After all, you can rent a plane if you want to learn to fly. But the FAA is unlikely to let you sit down and start handling incoming traffic to O'Hare International.

Fortunately, just as Microsoft Flight Simulator lets you get a taste of piloting without leaving the ground, ProController lets you try out the world of an air-traffic controller in the privacy of your home. ProController, the idea of programmer Jason Grooms, turns a Windows-based PC with an Internet connection into a virtual ATC station, complete with radar, flight strips, and pilots trying to get safely from point A to point B.

The pilots are real people using Microsoft Flight Simulator and a companion piece of software called SquawkBox. Both pieces of software talk to a common server, letting the controller see the positions of all the aircraft in their sector, and the pilots and controllers communicate with each other. In addition, all the controllers can talk to each other, allowing them to "hand off" traffic as planes pass from sector to sector.

You'll need to bone up on ATC procedures before you can start vectoring traffic, though. Although anyone with a copy of MS Flight Simulator can fly in the virtual airspace, controllers must pass a series of tests and undergo an apprenticeship before they are allowed to control by themselves.

All of this is administered by SATCO, the Simulated Air Traffic Controllers Organization. SATCO has recently added voice control to the ATC experience, letting the controllers and pilots use off-the-shelf programs like BattleCom to communicate.

How well does it work? On a busy night working as Cleveland Center (CLE_CTR), you might have half-a-dozen aircraft heading toward Cleveland's metropolitan airports, with another dozen crossing overhead between Chicago, Boston, New York, Indianapolis, and Toronto Centers (all of which border Cleveland's airspace.) Keeping all the traffic separated, sequencing the approaches into Cleveland, and dealing with what are sometimes less than perfect pilots will have your palms sweaty in nothing flat.

The SATCO Web pages provide all the training materials and a lot of the charts and maps you'll need to get familiar with ATC procedures. A visit to your local pilots' shop can supply the rest.

To start, visit www.satco.org

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