

## Fly Me Through the Sims

By Camas Frank

Most humans are fascinated with flight. We can't help it. From the first time a hawk soars overhead to the hassles at the TSA gate, the idea of soaring through the clouds is both alluring and daunting.

Luckily, given enough time and money, it's something the modern age lets you master, be it with a ride-along in a flight school two-seater or a rented hanger with your own plane. Unfortunately, obtaining and keeping the skills necessary, at least to the satisfaction

of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), isn't always simple. For would-be pilots, and those with an existing license that's far too easy to let lapse, it's a constant challenge.

Enter Fly This Sim, a small San Luis Obispo-based company whose founders have tackled the problem of getting and keeping those skills with a unique set of solutions.

"Our clients are primarily pilots with new planes or flight schools that need a trainer," explains Eric Paton, a Cal Poly alum that brought Fly This Sim back to San Luis Obispo after starting it as a second company in the Bay Area. "I could say we're selling them like hotcakes, but what it really means is we are growing to meet demand."

With a crew of mostly Cal Poly aviation engineering students packing a room just off of Tank Farm Road, Paton and co-founder Carl Suttle have been running an operation for the last nine months that's part programming lab, assembly line and troubleshooting garage. What they're turning out are individualized desktop flight simulators.

With optional panoramic display monitors, a touch-screen interface that



allows them to simulate a nearly infinite variety of real-life cockpit controls, and the obligatory joystick, foot controls and throttle, their simulator has won the distinction of becoming the first and only such trainers approved by the FAA to meet requirements.

"That took about six months to go through the process with them," Suttle explained. "Our take on it was, 'Look, we're going to make this anyway, because there's a need for it and people will buy them.' They (the FAA) contacted us and asked us to prepare specifications on how we deviate from the standard model."

Suttle, a retired designer of high-end physical simulators for the U.S. Navy, had already put years of work into software behind Fly This Sim's digital instrumentation. Sales of software to other touch screen developers and direct-to-customer sales for their own use make up a sizable percentage of the company.

But, he said, putting it all together as a "turnkey" unit allows anyone with very little computer or outside knowledge to take the simulator right out of the box and get to work on their instrument rating for the common Cirrus, Cessna or Diamond aircrafts.

"It arrives in two boxes, prewired and ready to go. We've designed a custom hardware table, but other than that, the components are off the shelf," he explains. "All our real work goes into the instruments."

As he demonstrates what makes the sim different from the physical duplication of cockpit controls with plastic knobs and buttons that older teaching aids relied on, he puts a half assembled order through its paces.

This one is destined for a flight school in Van Nuys, Calif., but on the screen he can call up 3D models of any airport in the country and flight controls and characteristics for any of the planes they've finished modeling.

For the benefit of a non-pilot audience, he calls up the recognizable runway 26 at San Luis Obispo Regional Airport.

While all the landmarks are readily recognizable, Suttle points to the smaller touch screen pad on the right, which is busy simulating an autopilot navigation screen and a radar transponder. "In reality you wouldn't actually see the ground for most of a routine flight. The idea is to be comfortable with these panels before you ever take off."

With a starting price of \$4,400 per unit, the company is definitely aiming for the half a million or so American pilots and some of the worldwide market. It's not something, Paton said, that they can market very locally, but, he added, they'd eventually like to do more with the surrounding community. Perhaps, he said, they could get some kids away from video games and let them try something closer to the real thing for awhile.

*For more information about the Fly This Sim Touch Trainers, visit [flythissim.com](http://flythissim.com) or call 866-854-2674. ❖*