

VATSIM CONFERENCE 2014



Conference sponsor Aviation Academy Austria receiving an award from VATSIM's Norman Blackburn

Jessica Bannister-Pearce files her report on the 2014 conference of this well-respected organisation

The city of Vienna, home of the Danube and the Eurovision Winner, Conchita Wurst, was the setting for VATSIM's first conference held in Germany in 2006. This year, 120 delegates were expected from around the world with Austria vACC (Virtual Air Control Centre) acting as hosts. Like many, I use VATSIM as a pilot, but the conference delegates are mostly Air Traffic Controllers. These guys are the disembodied voices we talk to. They of course refer to us pilots as 'dots that occasionally talk back'. So I expected to learn something new here.

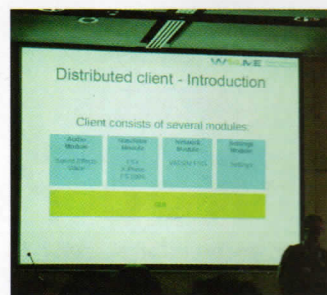
There were various talks scheduled at the conference, from 'how to become a commercial pilot' presented by show sponsor, Aviation Academy Austria, to a talk on 'scenery design' from Aerosoft. There were also a few big announcements.

Euroscope

Euroscope, the standard ATC software for Europe, will be bit of a mystery to most pilots, so I sat and listened to its developer Gergely Csernák. ATC users in Europe will be more than familiar with version 3.1

which was released in 2009. It allows users to not only log on to VATSIM but can also be used to train controllers offline via scenarios. An update has been in the works for a few years, and the good news, announced at the conference, is that Version 3.2 is on its way, and by the time you get this magazine, it will be available for download.

There are several new features and changes to version 3.2. Gergely has reworked a lot of the code so that it's now more streamlined, removing the dual install options for sweatbox and a standalone version. The new version only features a single install version for both.



The Swift Pilot client team explain how the various modules of the program integrate

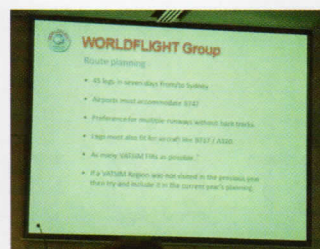
The reworked code has been put to good effect. Both FSX and Prepar3D are supported and multiple connections are possible to enable 360-degree tower views. If you are working the tower, traffic now moves smoothly. Speaking of traffic, users now have the option of driving ground vehicles like the 'follow-me' car and the AI traffic will follow the user, just like in real life. Gergely also showed improvements to the taxi routes, where users are able to point and click on a route. Taxiing aircraft can now be told to follow aircraft ahead and they will stop and start as the lead aircraft does.

While ground handling is greatly

improved, aircraft now land in sequence and leave the runway correctly. Finally, emergencies now offer added effects: AI traffic can show smoking engines, damaged gear and various other problems.

What surprised me most was that all of the above can be used offline to train new controllers before letting them loose on the network itself.

For online controllers, there are a few new features as well. Collision conflict warning can be flagged up before a controller assigns a flight level. I'm guessing this is a huge improvement as the room erupted into applause when this was announced at the conference.



The logistics for planning Worldflight are certainly unique, from routes to suit both long and short-haul aircraft, through to providing around the clock ATC coverage



Worldflight raised more than £22,000 at last year's event



Welcome to Vienna from the W14 team (Left to right) Florian Harms, Norman Blackburn, Luca Benalli and Stephan Reitinger



Austro Control Controller Alex Arlow shows how close Euroscope can be to the real thing



VP of network systems, Luca Benalli leads a discussion on the newest Vatsim Technologies



It was a decent sized crowd that attended the conference in Vienna



Saturday night and it's time to relax



The stand of Aviation Academy Austria - one of several exhibitors on the Saturday



The view from the conference centre

Finally, a new feature coming via a plugin is the ability to call fellow controllers to hand-off aircraft, just like in real life. Again the room applauded.

Global Nav Generator

Next up, a new product for ATC – Global Nav Generator. This is a platform developed by Aeronay Association and presented by Nicholas Amman and Mike Welter. With support from Aerosoft and Trinad, GNG takes Nav Data from Aerosoft and uses it to produce the Sector files for ATC. Best of all, it allows the various vACCs to share the data between them easily, so the sector files are always up to date. It does depend on the various vACCs to input the sector data to keep things current, then the runway data is taken from Aerosoft's Navdata Pro. Finally Aeronay provides the databases with Virtual airline call signs, actual airline call signs and aircraft data. They also provide a great SID/STAR plotter that helps new controllers get a better understanding of the airspace around them, which benefits everyone.

vRoute and Flightpad

vRoute creator Michal Rok took the opportunity to talk about a few of vRoute's least well-known features and highlight how much the program has grown since its inception. At the time of presentation, there were 155,185 routes added to the vRoute database and it is still growing. More than 280,000 submissions have been made by users – truly power to the people then.

Mickal also took the opportunity to announce a new app for iPad, called Flightpad. It seems to be a one-stop shop for FSX pilots. It can display online traffic, with position updates every five seconds. It also shows fuel consumption, sector charts, airfield charts and it acts as a user's logbook. It can record every flight and allow other users to view your flight hours, achievements and other things via their own personal webpage. It looks great and it could become an essential item.

VATSIM technology

The VATSIM ATC servers, run continuously, and the man in charge of it all is Vice President of network systems, Luca Benalli. Addressing the conference he spoke of various issues maintaining the servers and how problems crop up due to old code. A great example was during this year's 'Cross the Pond' event, where what looked like a bug caused mass disconnections. It turned out to be a very old feature. It has since

been fixed but it's clear Luca's job isn't easy at times. Still, he outlined a few new items coming soon.

The first new pilot client since FSinn, called vPilot was released on May 1, and there has been an upsurge in connections to the network since its release. Next, there's vATIS (virtual automatic terminal information service) – a new ATIS voice plugin to replace the current one.

Then there's Fennec, developed by David Zhong, which is a voice-receive only client that allows users to listen to VATSIM without logging on. It promises to be a great training aid for both ATC and pilots.

A new ATC client app is also being developed for Apple Mac, although it's only at a very early stage of development.

Finally, the big news is a new protocol called OAUTH that will allow users to log on to any vACC (Virtual Air Control Centre) with their VATSIM details. No more registering with each vACC to get access. It all depends on each vACC signing up for it and the user authorising the sharing of details.

Worldflight

This talk was one that I was looking forward to, and Worldflight organiser, Terry Scanlan didn't disappoint. For those who don't know, Worldflight takes place every year for one week to help raise money for charities around the world. There are a few rules, one being the need to have full-scale cockpit setups. Starting in 2000 with just two cockpits, the event has grown now with teams from the UK, Germany, Australia and US flying around the world in seven days. Pilots operate in teams 24/7 and it is pretty damn gruelling. VATSIM joins in and provides ATC to match. Two teams operate: one works from a base in Australia during the daytime, while at night the 'international' team, led by Florian Harms, covers the Australian night, providing ATC if needed in blank spots. Things can often get hairy though as the teams are often joined by other online supporters, so a quiet airport can often find itself inundated with 120 aircraft. Fortunately, the International ATC team are on hand to help out local controllers. It's a fantastically worthy cause and I'm giving serious thought to joining the Worldflight convoy this year from home.

Swift – the open source pilot client

After his presentation, Luca outlined the problems of users creating

software like squawkbox or FSinn, only to have the developer leave or abandon the project. So, Luca is a big advocate of open source software. With Swift, a name announced here at the conference, Luca could get his wish.

Currently being developed by a team of just three, Swift promises to be the first and last pilot client VATSIM will ever need. It's clear the team has some very big ideas. For starters, Swift will offer connections to X-Plane 10, FSX, Prepar3D and a little later after the initial release, FS2004. It will also be multi-platform. So Mac, PC and Linux users will all be able to connect to VATSIM easily.

There will be improved model matching with a possible user-editable database. There's also hope of improved model movement with proper peer-to-peer implementation for near real-time updates.

The fact that it's almost completely open source (a small bit of VATSIM code is hidden) is the main feature though. The hope is that new functions can be uploaded by different developers, checked, and if they work, can be easily pushed out to other users.

Should enough developers get onboard to help the current team (there are 50,000 lines of code) then the first 1.0 version could be released soon. Either way, this

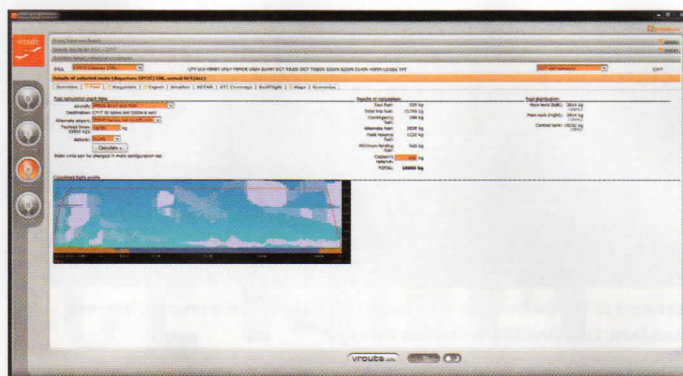
promises to be a great addition to the online pilot community.

Conclusion

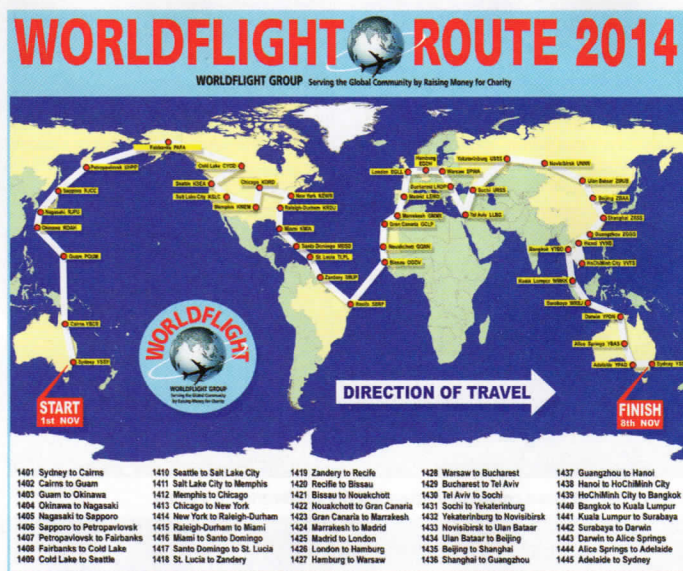
This conference has been a real eye-opener for me, but not in the way you would think. Yes, I now have a much better idea of how our friends in ATC work and how they see us. The real revelation is this: flight simming is a small niche in the gaming world, and online ATC such as VATSIM is a niche within a niche. I've often read that our hobby is dying. It's not though. Over the course of this conference I've been struck by one thing – passion. The people here have a passion for what they do. A dying hobby doesn't innovate, like Euroscope, which was considered by Austro Control to train real ATC students. Swift's open source code is a work of passion and Worldflight is certainly a passion. It's clear that the governors have a passion for what they do, as do the members and that's what surprised me the most. Over the weekend, there have been awards of thanks for long service and so on. Our hobby is not dead. With 43,292 connections to VATSIM this year, our hobby is in fact growing!

My thanks go to Daniel Conrad and the whole crew of vACC and the W14 team for their hospitality and help.

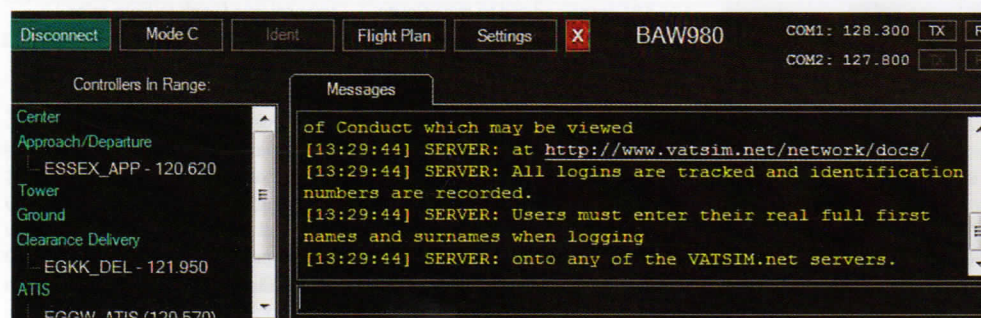
By Jessica Bannister-Pearce



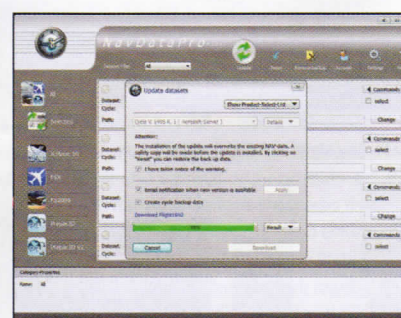
One of the many lesser-known features of vRoute, a chart showing expected cloud cover en Route



This year's WorldFlight Route. 45 legs over 7 days



One of the Vatsim Technologies available: the new vPilot client



Navdata Pro provides GNG with runway data as well as other items



Group shot – 120 delegates from around the world