

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2018)
Heft: 135

Artikel: Train simulators : what can you do with a train simulator program?
Autor: Peacock, Garry
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853762>

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Train Simulators

Garry Peacock

What can you do with a Train Simulator Program?

A heavy freight crosses the Kander viaduct on the climb to the Lötschberg Tunnel.

The answer is that you can do just about anything that you can do with a conventional model railway. A program contains routes and rolling stock, plus activities to follow; driving a train with your computer showing the operator's view, or driving from an external location. Activities can be set at day or night; or for different seasons and weather. In addition to the initial package provided, routes, activities, and rolling stock are available to download, some free, some to buy. Programs also allow writing your own activities and developing routes. For example any of the rolling stock can be used to form a long freight train, headed by Re10/10s, 'driven' up to the Lötschberg tunnel. Building any real or imaginary location, or route, this way is not limited by room sizes. My interest lies in building a model of a real life route; laying track, making buildings, etc., but I rarely drive a train along it. Simulation can be done with minimal expenditure. My current route has over 50 double slips on the approach to Zürich Hbf. costing nothing, against over £30 each on an HO layout.

Train Simulators

These are my experiences with different programs whilst building a 'real life' route.

Train Simulator 2017 (TS2017) can be downloaded from "Steam" (enter "Train Simulator" in the search box). If you are going to buy this, wait for a sale - 80% off! This was originally released as 'Railworks' in 2009, and regularly upgraded since then. This is an up to date simulator, with good graphics and detail, using all your computer's features to give smooth movement through the scenery. Many enthusiasts use this and most of the files currently being added to the "UKTrainSim" website are TS2017 activities. As most of these have been written to run on commercial add-on routes you have to buy the route. Some have a stock list that requires you to buy this as well. Several attempts to build a route using this simulator have run into problems laying track. All track work, including points and junctions, use flexitrack but I have always had

problems trying to get complicated track work on a station approach to work. Giving-up I have gone back to MSTS.



TS2017 and Microsoft Train Simulator.

Microsoft Train Simulator (MSTS) was released in 2001, had a few improvements after this date, but little upgrading since it was discontinued in 2003. MSTS can still be run successfully on Windows 7, 8, and 10, carefully following the online installation instructions. It suffers due to its age; the graphics are not as good as TS 2017; the CPU is used to handle the graphics not your new graphics card; the motion can be jerky (as new files load into memory), and it will not use all a new monitor's resolution. The Route Editor is slightly unstable; suffering from unexpected crashes, but if you save often this is not too disastrous. Trackwork is like buying a Hornby set in a box, with a large selection of straights, curves and pre-made points, which slot together with few problems, plus a flexitrack piece for difficult situations. Few still model with MSTS, however there are a vast array of free resources to be downloaded representing many railways around the world. New and used versions can be bought online at various prices.

Open Rails (OR) is a new free simulator under development needing the files that come with MSTS. It is being developed by a group of programmers aiming to take advantage of recent computing developments to improve upon previous MSTS. features. It runs smoother than MSTS and it uses the full resolution of your monitor and the power of your graphics card. Open Rails does not yet have a route editor or an activity editor. Although I rarely drive trains I use OR to look at my route as it develops.

Train Sim Route Explorer (TSRE5) is a new route editor being developed in Poland by 'Goku', originally as a university project. I now use this route editor to build my routes as it has many useful features that were not available with MSTS - and it does not crash at every opportunity! The graphics are not as good as OR; you cannot view the route at night or under snow, hence I view the route in OR.

Swiss Routes

There are Swiss routes available for these simulators. None are free for TS2017, but the '3 Country Corner' route is available from "Just Trains". This covers where Switzerland, Germany and Austria meet. Another route is 'Swiss Route 1' by "sim-train.ch" that covers 70km from Pfäffikon to Landquart. For MSTS/OR there are routes that can be downloaded for free. From "UKTrainsim" you can get RhB's Albula route, or the BLS Bern-Brig route. Searching the Internet will find the SOB route, the "payware" Gotthard Route 2, and several others. 

1. Zurich Altstetten in Open Rails.
2. The UKTrainsim website.
3. Swiss Route 1 for TS2017.
4. Rorschach in the 3 Country Corner Route (screenshot from TS2017).
5. Gotthard Route 2 for MSTS.



6. A well known location on the Albula Route (screenshot from Open Rails).

