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tech.life@play | There's really only one airline sim

Airline 5's designer turned his lifelong passion into an eclectic, addictive game.

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Inquirer Columnist

Airline 5

Efzed. PC. \$59.95. Not rated, but suitable for all ages.



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U·S AIRWAYS

While booking my travel to this week's video-game trade show, the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles, I was forced to run the unfathomable gauntlet that is airline ticket pricing. Why does one airline want \$2,200 for a midweek trip to L.A., while another will fly you there for \$280?

As usual, when life became too perplexing, I turned to games.

Would-be air barons will be glad to learn that there are several business-simulation games with an air-travel theme. For the most part, however, these have been about as satisfying to gamers as airline food is to frequent fliers.

The first such game, 1993's Air Bucks, was fine for its time. But even if you manage to find a copy on eBay, the DOS-based title will not play nicely with modern Windows PCs.

More recent titles such as Airline Tycoon Evolution and Airlines 2 are simply lightweights when it comes to realism. It is best to keep them in a holding pattern.

For the gamer who really wants to smell the jet fuel, there is only one sim: Airline 5, the brainchild of Frank Zimmermann, an Australian designer who turned his lifelong fascination with air travel into an eclectic, addictive computer game.

Airline 5 will not please every palate. If you are hoping for a winged version of Roller Coaster Tycoon or SimCity, expect to be disappointed. Those graphics-heavy titles were developed by major game publishers with deep pockets. Airline 5 is a labor of love with a distinctly low-budget aura.

While short on looks, though, it contains an M.B.A.'s worth of insight into the airline business.

In fact, it is almost unfair to label Airline 5 a game; it is more like a Wharton School case

study.

Players are required to make difficult business decisions every step of the way, from hiring key staff members to choosing a hub airport to naming the in-flight magazine. The sheer weight of detail will turn some players off.

But Airline 5 can be excused for its excesses, as it evinces Zimmermann's passion for the business. There are, for instance, more than 5,000 actual airports available for use in the game, and more than 100 authentic aircraft. Players can compete against computer-controlled or human opponents in the global travel arena or more regionally in the continental market their choice.

While Airline 5 is a one-of-a-kind gem, gamers will have to ride out some turbulence. The game's user interface, for example, is only slightly less complex than the flight deck of a Boeing 767. And since there is no manual to speak of, players will find themselves scouring the game's Help file as they play.

What's more, you will find that Airline 5 is only available from Zimmermann's Web site. And that means you will have to wait while it is shipped from Australia.

But if you love the idea of running your own airline, this is the game for you.

Still on the fence? Zimmermann is promising buyers of Airline 5 a free upgrade to version 6 when it appears.

On the Web

www.airlinesimulation.com

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