

# IRREGULAR FEATURE

## Playing trains

I'm sure most rail modellers would, if given the chance, like to get in to a locomotive cab and 'push the buttons and fiddle with the controls' but because most of us have never had and will probably never get the opportunity to do so the computer game gurus have created train driving simulations. I have not yet had a try of one of these but I did recently download a demo rail simulation of a slightly different nature. In this one you are the signal operator and so get to control all the trains by setting the appropriate points and signals. The whole program is based on real signal boxes and timetables. I know at least one of our members who would be taken back to his working days and could probably give an account of the accuracy of the simulations.

On starting, a screen shot of the appropriate station appears (this can be changed by the user if desired). The screen then shows a schematic of the station track plan with signal and point numbers, at the bottom is the timetable (left) a list of trains currently in the simulation (centre) train description and other relevant information (right) a clock and user controls are on the far right. Across the top are other less often-used controls these have standard Windows type drop down menus. The speed of the clock can be varied between 40% and 150% of real time depending on your skill and there is an option to jump time when no trains are in the simulation so that you can be assured of a busy schedule at all times. The demo runs for 40 minutes.

England Power box series		
Brighton	Didcot	Leicester
Carlisle	Ipswich	Trent
Crewe	Guildford	Westbury
Darlington	Liverpool (Lime Street)	York
Heritage series (lever frame)		
Barnham (Sussex)	Ely North Junction	
Bath Green Park	Kettering Junction	
Overseas		
Sydney Australia (power box)		
Champaign (Illinois) USA (lever frame)		

To download the program files (about 1 MB each) go to the Pc Rail web site at <http://www.pcrail.co.uk/> Start with the System 6 file, this will set up a program folder with diagnostics and uninstall information etc. so that the simulations can run on Windows. The individual simulations install automatically into this folder. See the box (left) for the currently available simulations. There are two types, power box and lever frame being a British company most are for English stations but other countries are in the development stages. All of the downloads are self-extracting files I encountered no problems with the installation, simply following the default suggestions and was up and 'playing trains' right away.

I began with one of the power box simulations and found it quite easy to understand the controls and soon had trains running in and out of the station but my confidence was soon shattered when checking my performance a message announced that out of the seven trains timed two were running late and one had been sent to the wrong location! There was more to this 'Fat Controller' job than first assumed. A couple more runs through and it all got a bit easier, a little local knowledge of where the tracks go and how to set up the points for a cross track movement certainly helps.

I then started on one of the lever frame simulations; this was a total different kettle of fish with bell codes, separate point and signal levers, there aren't any automatic bits here except that darn message box telling you how many times you have goofed, and boy is it picky! At the time of writing this I haven't mastered it but I'm having fun trying and will get it in the end. This is the one that the signalling freaks will just love, lots of things to remember and get right (or wrong) and obviously the reason why the railways changed over to the power box style. If like me you find it all a bit too much there are a series of beginners help articles for the lever frame simulations, these are available from the same site.

Catch you down the track...Tony Mikolaj.

Update: There are now 29 different simulations available.