

REVIEW **Software** **Armchair Modelers... You Do Have Room for a Layout!**

Review by Phil Scandura

TrainPlayer Deluxe, Software for Model Railroads, MSRP: \$59.95

Train Player 2.0, MSRP: \$29.95

TrainPlayer Software
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(no voice line at this time)
Fax: 925-552-8180
www.trainplayer.com

“WOW! This is really cool!” I must have used those exact words at least a dozen times while playing with TrainPlayer (okay, maybe two dozen). This is a really fun software package, well implemented, well documented, and intuitive to use. Simply put, TrainPlayer is a software program that allows you to simulate the operation of a model railroad layout. For the armchair modeling community, the excuse “I don’t have room for a layout” is no longer acceptable; all you need is a computer. And for those that do have the room to build a layout, but aren’t sure how best to use it, TrainPlayer is a great place to start experimenting with the possibilities. We’ve all looked through layout plan books for hours at a time, thinking to ourselves “what if?” Now with the help of TrainPlayer and your computer, the answer is closer than you think.

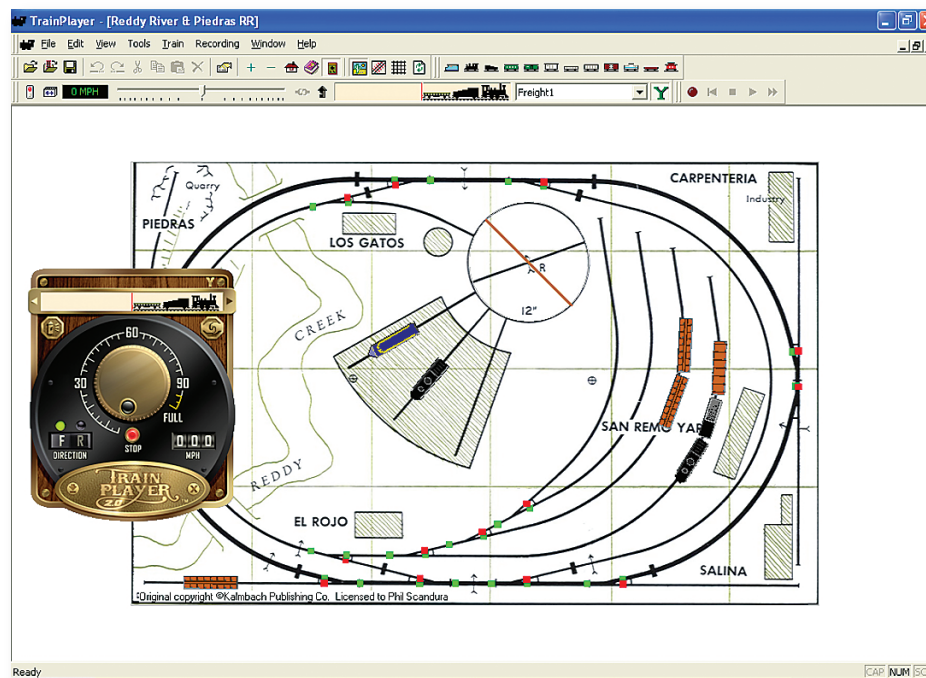
Depending upon the TrainPlayer package purchased, you’ll enjoy a wide selection of layouts to choose from, including simple shelf layouts, switching layouts, 4x8 layouts, and even basement-sized empires. The product reviewed here, TrainPlayer Deluxe, includes all 101 layouts from Linn Westcott’s classic 101 Track Plans for Model Railroaders (these layout plans are owned and copyrighted by Kalmbach Publishing Co., used by TrainPlayer Software with permission). The TrainPlayer web site also includes additional plans that have been contributed by various modelers, all available to be downloaded free of charge.

The best way to explain the various uses for TrainPlayer can be found in the Help File listed under “What For?”:

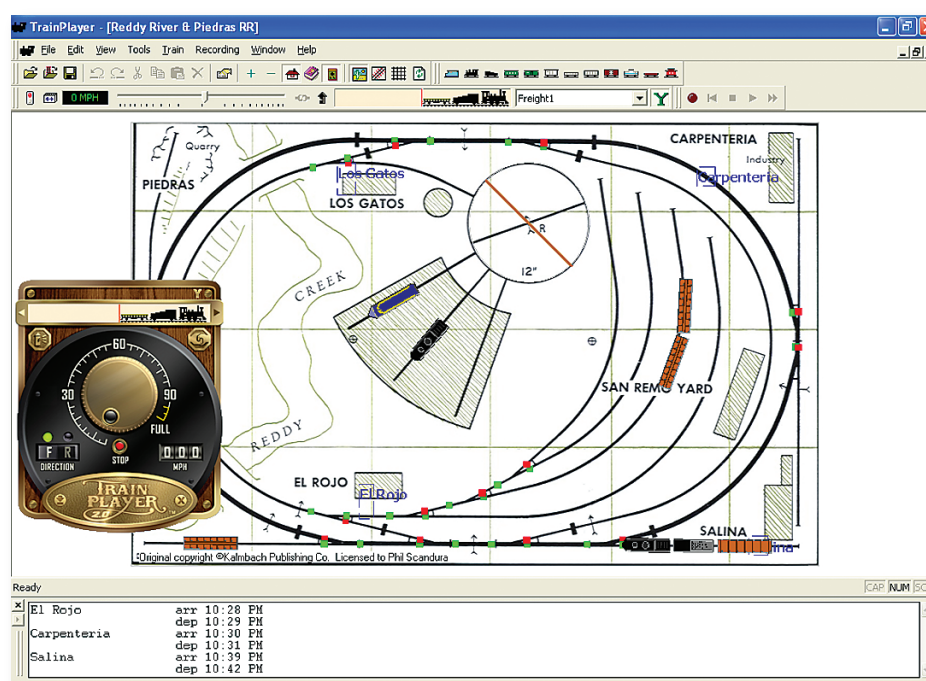
Q: Is there any point to moving little make-believe trains around an image of a model pretending to be a railroad?

A: Sure:

- **Explore layout designs.** When you’re thinking about designing a railroad, there is nothing handier than a book of track plans. Well-designed plans give you ideas about how different track configurations might work with your theme and fit in the space you have. Attractive artwork inspires you to think about the terrain and the scenery. TrainPlayer brings you some of the world’s finest track plans to browse, appreciate, and try.



This example screen capture depicts TrainPlayer, the Reddy River & Piedras Railroad and the virtual power pack.



As seen in this screen capture, TrainPlayer provides a “schedule by driving” mode, including a scale speed clock, layout station stops, and a schedule window showing station arrivals and departures. This is a great way to experience the thrill of operating your railroad, instead of just running trains.

- **Develop operating plans.** If you had an operating railroad and an unlimited supply of rolling stock, how would you go about running it? You need to figure out how to deliver goods and passengers for your customers, what cars you need to run on what schedule, how to avoid delaying the express while the local is tying up the main line. With TrainPlayer, you can develop timetables and schedules by driving the layout and letting the program keep track of times and distances.
- **Test your equipment.** Do you already have a collection of cars? Customize the ones in the program so they match yours, and see if your 86-foot flat cars look realistic going around the 16-inch curves on your target plan.
- **Learn train moves.** It isn’t obvious how to shuffle a dense yard of cars when you have a schedule to meet. With TrainPlayer, you can learn by practicing. Figure out how to classify cars so they’re on the right tracks at the right time. Learn to minimize the number of moves it takes. Try your hand at a switching puzzle.
- **Teach train moves.** If you’re already

a skilled operator, use TrainPlayer to spread your knowledge. Use the recorder to capture a sequence of moves, and play it back for the learners. Demonstrate how to handle a meet on the main line, or switch an industrial siding.

And of course —

- **Play with trains.**

Installation Requirements

TrainPlayer runs on practically all Microsoft Windows platforms, as far back as Win95 (according to the web site frequently asked questions, a Macintosh version should be available in the summer of 2006). For this review, I tested TrainPlayer Deluxe version 2.0 on a desktop computer running Windows 98SE, another desktop running XP Home Edition and a laptop running XP Professional Edition, with no visible performance or operational differences. TrainPlayer is currently available via download from their web site or you can order a CD-ROM. The download size for TrainPlayer Deluxe, which includes the basic TrainPlayer software and all 101 layouts, is approximately 100 mega-

bytes. Those users with dial-up may want to order the CD-ROM version, or start the download before going to bed. Once installed, the software and layout files consume approximately 110 megabytes of hard disk space. All typical Windows conventions have been followed, giving it the classic look and feel of Windows software. Both an installer and uninstaller are provided, as well as comprehensive on-screen help menus. You’ll be up and running on TrainPlayer in a matter of minutes!

In terms of warranty, the makers of TrainPlayer are happy to refund the full purchase price if you are dissatisfied or cannot get the program to work. Judging from my experience, however, I’m sure you’ll have so much fun with TrainPlayer that other family members may never get to use the computer again. The web site also includes a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section and product support page, if you encounter problems with the software.

In addition to the generous warranty, free product updates are provided until the next major upgrade. In other words, if you have purchased release 2.x, you are entitled to release 1.y for free, but you’ll have to pay for release 3.0 once it becomes available. For owners of TrainPlayer, an upgrade price will be charged for those interested in the TrackLayer product once it becomes available (more on TrackLayer later in the review).

Running Trains

TrainPlayer allows you to create train consists, place them on the layout, and operate them using a simulated power pack. Trains are made up of one or more locomotives (diesel or steam) and various types of rolling stock, including passenger cars. Multiple trains can be operated on the layout simultaneously, simply by clicking on the desired train to make it active and then using the power pack. By definition, a train is one or more cars, whether or not a locomotive is attached. That means cars spotted at siding and spurs all count as individual trains. Once a locomotive couples to them, they are assimilated into one train.

Changing routes is as easy as clicking on a turnout or pressing the spacebar. TrainPlayer can be configured to “barrel through” a turnout, if it is set against the train. A more typical configuration will auto-throw the turnout to the correct route, after passing through it. The final setting randomly flips turnouts as the train is running, to add variety to unattended operation. TrainPlayer even supports turntables, rotating the table to align with the desired track.

Operating Trains

You can play with trains all day long, or you can graduate to operating trains. TrainPlayer provides a “schedule by driving” mode, consisting of a railroad clock which runs at scale speed, station stops defined on each layout (you can also add your own stations), and a schedule window showing station arrivals and departures. Once you move the first train, TrainPlayer automatically starts the clock and records arrival and departure times

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REVIEW **Software** **RailOP for Windows Operations**

Version 7.2 (August 15, 2005)

Review by Pete Birdsong

All Scales: Software

Basic version, MRSP: \$99.00

Advanced version, MSRP: \$139.00

Upgrade for downloadable copies, MSRP: \$40.00

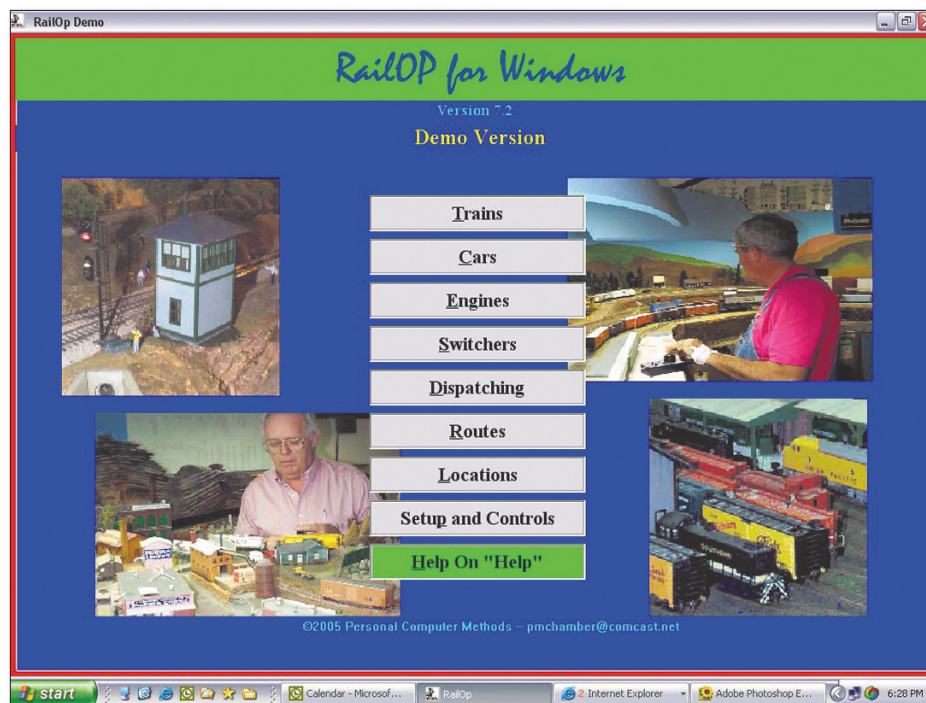
or \$15.00 more for CD copies

RailOP for Windows
3535 Courtdale Dr • Dallas, TX 75234
www.railop.com

RailOP operations software supports setting up and running your operating sessions, using randomly generated loadings based on your layout's cars, routes, etc. The Basic version includes the ability to enter descriptions of the layout, data for trains, cars, routes and engines, and allows making up, modifying and running trains, as well as printing all the data in support of that, such as manifests, switch lists, car locations & rosters, etc. The Advanced version adds additional capabilities, such as creation of a graphical, updateable Dispatcher Panel, scheduling via fast clock, and customizable reports.

A free downloadable demonstration version is available at the web site, or via a mailed CD for a \$15.00 charge (refundable with an order), which gives a good idea of the capability of the product, but does not allow setting it up for your own situation, since it does not allow saving data. A full version with an expiration date would be more desirable for evaluation purposes.

The product has recently been sold to a new owner, Eric Doolittle of Baton Rouge, LA. Eric has been a member of the

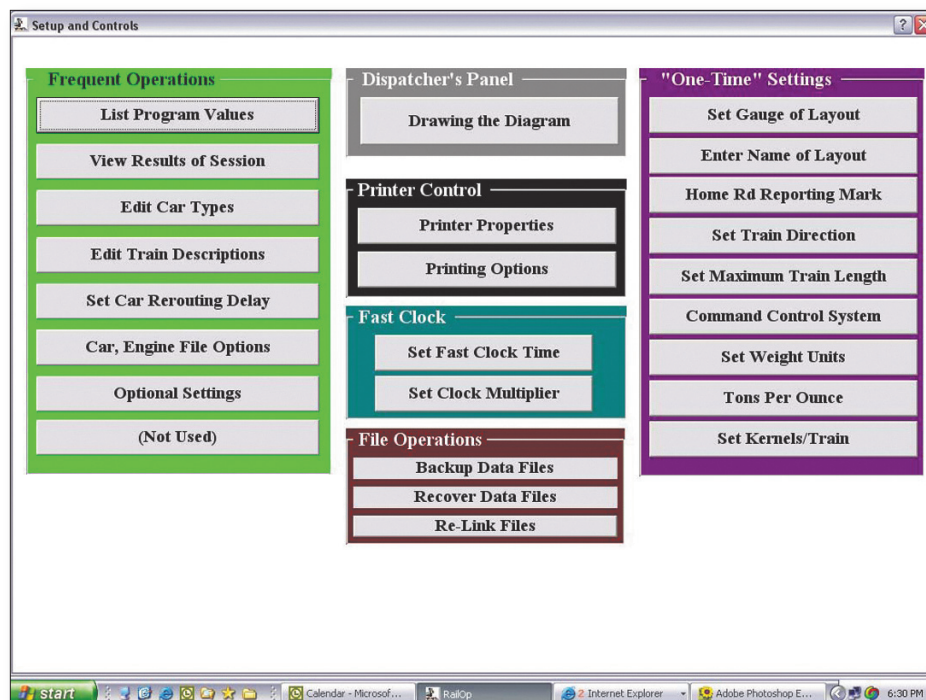


RailOP's main window highlights all the features offered in the program. We reviewed the demo version which is available at RailOP's web site for those wishing to test the program before buying.

very active Yahoo discussion group, which covers the product. Contact information for Eric should be on the web site by the time you read this. The current owner,

Phil Chamberlain, in conjunction with Doug Farmer, will turn over support for future releases beyond 7.2 to Eric.

The Yahoo group, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/RailOp/>



The setup screen shows all the options available to you at the click of the button.

com/group/RailOp/ started February 20, 2003, has over 220 members, and about 3,000 postings. Members have traditionally given very high marks both to the software and to the support provided by Phil. Free updates have been provided by request in the past, but it would be best to inquire about product and support pricing from the new owner as the transition takes place.

In reviewing the demonstration version, the product appears very user friendly, with uncluttered screens, a logical and consistent pattern for navigation across the application, and easily read screen data and reports. It is organized into several categories: SETUP & CONTROLS is for configuring the system, entering customizable data, setting the fast clock, backing up (an activity anyone with an operation of any size will want to perform religiously), and drawing the Dispatcher Panel. Locations allows defining towns and other entities, and the associated sidings. CARS, ENGINES, ROUTES and SWITCHERS, allow setup and manipulation of those entities, while TRAINS, in addition to setting these up based on some of the other components, supports modifying and running them. DISPATCHING allows tracking the progress of the trains.

An operating session can be set up in advance, or, if a computer is available close to the train run, run in real time during the session. Quite a bit of flexibility has been built into the system, which supports, for example, multiple routes with different characteristics between the same locations, multiple railroad lines with interchanging, and simulation of prototypical features such as tonnage, engine pulling power, grade loading, and many others. Although the system supports a unique approach to specifying loads and empties for cars, it does not currently support true car loading with specific bills of lading.

Overall, the system seems to provide a great deal of fun, flexibility, and relative simplicity (if you start simply), and room for growth and change as your layout evolves over the years, at a reasonable price, especially if the current policy of free updates continues.

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at each station. When completed, you can print out the schedule for future use.

If you're interested in using switch lists, TrainPlayer provides the "Show Car IDs" option that displays a unique number on top of each car which can be used in generating your own switch list.

Finally, the record/playback feature can capture your entire operating session and play it back at a later time. Each train is recorded individually, permitting you to play back the recording of one train while you're driving another.

Designing Your Own Layout

The layouts available for TrainPlayer are currently created by the TrainPlayer staff; you are not able to create your own layouts (at least not yet). (Editor's Note: TrackLayer released as we went to press. Full details

are available on the company web site.) It is described as "...an expanded version of TrainPlayer, with an additional module designed to do a very specific job: apply track on top of diagrams." Not intended to be a full-fledged layout design program, TrackLayer provides "...simple but powerful tools for drawing track, curves, and turntables."

In the meantime, the TrainPlayer staff provides a service to convert your track plan for use with TrainPlayer. The only condition is that once converted, your plan will be posted on the web site and made available for public download. Frankly, I would be proud to have my layout available for others to see and use (flaws and all).

Nit-picking

As a typical modeler with a tendency to nit-pick, I found a couple of suggested improvements that should be considered for future TrainPlayer

releases. I found that enabling the sound feature "train chuffing sound" produced a steam chuff sound, regardless of the choice of steam or diesel locomotive. Additionally, as the speed of the locomotive increased, the steam chuff "sound quality" deteriorated rapidly, as the computer tried to synchronize the chuff with the speed of the locomotive.

A second concerns the control panel "whistle" push-button; it produces a diesel horn blast (with crossing bells in the background) instead of a whistle, regardless of the choice of steam or diesel locomotive.

Other than these small sound nits, I found TrainPlayer to be a solid Windows program. While I did not explore every option of the program, I did not experience any surprises or problems using it. Everything worked as I would expect, making the TrainPlayer refreshingly easy to use. And fun, of course!

Closing Thoughts

I have to say it again, "Wow! This is really cool!" Having used various layout design packages in the past, I have an appreciation for designing and running virtual layouts. As one would expect, the range of layout design programs spans the very simple (and limited in capabilities) to the very complicated. Rather than getting caught in the nuances and fine details of a design program, TrainPlayer provides the ability to both play and operate your layout quickly and easily, with virtually no learning curve. But don't just take my word for it; I encourage you to try before you buy! Experience TrainPlayer for yourself by visiting the web site; there you can watch an animated demo and download a free trial version.

"Wow! This is really cool!"