

GT-COMMAND LAYOUT CONTROL SOFTWARE BY GAMESONTRACK

Distributed by All Aboard Modellbahn, P O Box 388, Mittagong NSW 2575

GT-Command is essentially a computer program and is, for me, something completely different. It allows you to control your DCC layout by spoken voice, and not just your locomotives, but turnouts, signals, routes, turntables or anything that is controlled by an accessory decoder. This is not just different, it is revolutionary and deserves a look. Not only does GT-Command allow voice control of the layout, it also monitors the state of the whole layout and allows completely automatic operation if desired. Their advertising spiel says: "I talked to my train today!" but, before you dismiss it as a silly gimmick, let me tell you some more about it.

Firstly, GT-Command works only with DCC layouts, and then only with those using one of the following systems:

Uhlenbrock Intellibox

Fleischmann Twin Center

Roco 10785 PC interface

ESU Ecos

Märklin Digital Central

Motorola

These are, of course, European DCC systems but they are well known and popular in Australia. The first three systems have a built-in connection to the computer by serial cable, while the Ecos and Märklin systems connect via a wireless router or a direct network cable. The Motorola system works through either the Intellibox or the Marklin Digital Central. I understand that an upgrade to the program is about to be released which will include the Lenz LV100 command station and Marklin CS II. The program is designed for Windows XP and Vista, but can be used with a dual booting Mac. GT-Command is produced by a Danish company called GamesOnTrack (and you can find their English language site on the web at gamesontrack.co.uk), a company which specializes in simulation and gaming programs. For my review, I loaded the program on my Vista laptop and connected via a USB/serial adapter to the serial port on a Uhlenbrock Intellibox DCC command station. The program loaded without problems and performed on my computer exactly as stated in the extensive manual provided on the program disk.

Having connected the computer to the command station, and the command station to the layout, the program is started. As with any new program, the opening screens require "setup" to be selected, and then the command station selected from a list (the program calls the command station a "controller"). From there "start auto search" is selected. With the Uhlenbrock, Fleischmann and Roco systems, the program will find the com port in use and automatically set up serial communications with the command station. If it fails to find this connection, there is an option to do it manually, knowing the com port and baud rate selected. The Ecos and Marklin systems connect automatically via the router, or can be set up manually by direct network cable. In every case, once communication between the computer and the command station has been achieved, a big green bar labeled "Ready" appears on the screen. A press of "OK" and the program is connected and ready. This needs only to be done once, unless any of the settings change, as the computer will connect to the command station automatically from now on. All this only takes a few minutes, and now we are ready to start talking to our trains!

In the box with the GT-Command program CDROM is a quality-looking mike and earpiece headset. This of course plugs in to the mike and earphone sockets on the computer, and leaves both hands free. Any good headset mike should work, but I feel that a radio mike would be even better to allow the operator to follow the trains around the layout. The opening "Command" screen, once communications with the command station have been established, offers the choice of some sample layouts already programmed into the system, or for a new layout to be started. By default it opens with a very simple layout featuring an oval, three turnouts and two locomotives (in the program, a loco is referred to as "lok", which is the German word for "loco"). On this opening page are tabs for locos, turnouts (devices), blocks, routes and automation, but the important one is a button labelled "First time wizard." Clicking on this brings up a screen which asks you to speak different words into the mike to ensure that the mike levels are correct and working. Once this has been achieved, and it takes only a few minutes, it tells you that the voice recognition has finished and returns you to the command screen.

Voice operation at present works in three languages, English, German and Danish, but other languages are coming. Locomotives are addressed by spoken names, turnouts by the phonetic TANGO, devices by the phonetic DELTA, blocks by the phonetic BRAVO, signals by the phonetic VICTOR and routes by the phonetic ROMEO. Here is where the tabs on the command page are used. Under the "Lok" tab, is a table where the locos are listed by system ID, DCC address and spoken name. The two locos already in the simple default layout are called "Odin" and "Barbara," so I put two locos physically on the layout and entered their DCC addresses in the appropriate column. I then tried the voice command "Odin – forward two five" and the loco moved off in the forward direction at speed step 25. At the command "Odin stop" the loco stopped. I then tried "Odin – light on" and the headlight came on. It worked a treat, and I quickly got used to speaking at a natural tone and speed, with the loco doing what I told it to. The other loco responded just the same when I spoke to "Barbara." The next step was to open the Device tab and fill in the DCC address of three turnouts on my layout for the three in the device table. To command a turnout, it is called as "TANGO one zero one" (the system ID) followed by "red" or "green." This follows European practice where "green" refers to the straight route and "red" the curved route through the turnout. The words "straight" and "turn" also work, but I found red and green easier to say. In no time at all, I had my two locos running back and forth, picking up and dropping off cars in the area where the three turnouts were located. It was a lot of fun, and certainly different, speaking to my trains rather than twiddling knobs on a controller or throttle.

This is just the basics of what GT-Command can do. To use the program to its full effectiveness, every locomotive and every device on the layout needs to be written in as a "new layout". There is a very extensive list of spoken words which the program recognises, and these can be used as loco names or device names. Further words can be added, but care must be taken in selecting words to use that they are not similar sounding to other words in use. For example, it may be a choice to call a loco "mango", but the program could mistake this for "tango." Beyond the setting up of your layout in the program, it has a "learning" function, which will pick up every device and loco in use, and keep an accurate record timed to every second as to what has happened. It can use this to automate layout operation, that is to play everything back in real time. Try that for a less tiring way of operating an exhibition layout! Also, it has what it calls a

“game” function whereby you can try to beat your own record for layout movements in a given period of time.

So, what is my assessment of all this? I must admit that I had a lot of fun moving trains around my layout by spoken voice, and I found that the program really worked as advertised. It was easy to set up, ran well on my Windows Vista computer and showed me a whole new dimension of the model railway hobby. This is where gaming and computer simulation meet up with real time control of a model railway layout. However, its limitation is that it works only with DCC controlled layouts, and then only with certain specific DCC command stations. I can see that it does have a valuable application with a large layout, especially if the operator wants to walk around with the train under control. To achieve this, a radio mike would need to be used, and having both hands free to couple and uncouple trains and manipulate paperwork is a considerable advantage. Also, the learning and automation functions of the program have a lot of potential. This is something new in our hobby, and I would hope that many people would give it a try. It certainly has my recommendation.

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