That time a customer reported an error in the map used by Flight Simulator

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Microsoft Flight Simulator prided itself on its accuracy and realism. One of the things it has to get right are maps, because knowing where you are is kind of important when you're flying a plane. (There are clubs whose members form a virtual airline, clocking hours flying virtual airplanes on virtual routes around the globe.)

A call came in to product support to report that one of the maps in the game was incorrect. Specifically, the border between two European countries was incorrectly placed. This was a legitimate possibility, because this story took place at a time when the map of Europe was in a state of flux after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The product support engineer took notes on the error for the Flight Simulator team to look at. Microsoft has an internal department responsible for maps and geography, and that team investigated the issue and concluded that the map in the Flight Simulator game was correct.

This conclusion was reported back to the customer, but the story doesn't end there. The customer was dissatisfied with the resolution of the matter and decided to do the obvious thing when this happens to you: The customer sent email to Bill Gates.

Bill Gates actually reads his email, and he forwarded the message to the head of the Flight Simulator team with the note, "Please look into this."

Now, if you're the head of the Flight Simulator project, you have plenty of things to deal with already, and one of the last things you want to get is a piece of email from Bill Gates asking you to look into something. (Related story.)

The Flight Simulator team went back to the geographers and asked them to re-check their information. The geographers re-checked their maps, looked at the internationally-recognized border between the two countries, searched for any information that would suggest that there was an active border dispute between the two countries, but they couldn't find anything that would indicate that the map included in Flight Simulator was incorrect.

The product team called the customer back to get some more information. "As far as we can tell, the map in Flight Simulator respects the current internationally-recognized border. It is in agreement with the XYZ Treaty and is consistent with United Nations map number 31415. Can you tell us what specifically is wrong with the map?"

The customer replied, "Finally, somebody is going to do something about fixing the map. In Flight Simulator, the border between the two countries goes from blah to blah to blah, but it's supposed to go from blah to blah to blah."

"Hm, that's not what our information says. What map are you using?"

The customer answered, "I'm using the world map on my shower curtain."

I don't know exactly what the product team said in response to that. I hope they said, "You might want to upgrade your shower curtain."

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