Watch NASA astronauts fly SpaceX’s Crew Dragon using touchscreens

Nearly two hours after NASA astronauts Bob Behnken and Doug Hurley became the first astronauts launched to space on a privately-owned rocket, they also became the first to pilot a spaceship using only touchscreen controls.

SpaceX’s Crew Dragon eschews the famous maze of manual controls and switches found on retired spacecraft like the Space Shuttle or the Apollo command modules. Instead, Crew Dragon pilots have just three large touchscreen panels in front of them and a few spare buttons below. So during the few times that they have to manually control the spacecraft, they do so using a video game-style interface on those screens.

Behnken and Hurley got to take that interface for a brief test ride Saturday afternoon when SpaceX had them manually operate the Crew Dragon to make sure everything was working.

It’s wild seeing them nudge the spacecraft using the same display technology we use to tweet
The company broadcast footage of the test during its live stream, and though it consisted of just a few taps, it was a stunning thing to see astronauts nudge their spacecraft around using the same display technology we use to tweet, check instagram, scroll through email, or swipe for Tinder dates. It’s also remarkable that the user interface is so similar to the online flight simulator that SpaceX released just two weeks ago. (To be fair, the simulator *does* say it features the “controls of the **actual interface** used by NASA Astronauts to manually pilot the SpaceX Dragon 2 vehicle.”)

The test seems to have gone well, though Behnken did note that the thermal camera view of the Earth below briefly cut out as Hurley maneuvered the spacecraft. (SpaceX acknowledged the flickers, and later told the astronauts that it was normal — the cameras had just turned on, and hadn't reached "thermal equilibrium" yet.) And as the announcers said on the stream, the flight test was the "last major task" for the astronauts today other than dinner.

Most of the Crew Dragon's maneuvers are supposed to happen autonomously, so if all goes well during Behnken and Hurley's mission, they won't need to play around with these controls again. And while it may not be as out outrageous as the spaceship controls we often see in sci-fi movies, watching them use the touchscreen interface to control SpaceX's Crew Dragon certainly felt like a big step forward into the future.

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