Why SimCity Has Lost its Way

By Theodore Brown

For:

You don't win SimCity 2000. There's no final cut scene after you figure out the golden ratio of commercial-to-residential zoning or light boxed VICTORY that pops up after you fit one last green/blue/yellow square onto the digital landscape. But there are Launch Arcologies.

Launch Arcologies are what would happen if you fit Endor into a snow globe and stuck it on top of an especially obese chicken walker. There are actually a bunch of Arcologies in SimCity 2000: one looks like the house from Blade Runner where Dr. Tyrell lives; another like an especially sad (and constipated) ebony idol; the last one looks like a game designer got bored and started eating too many donuts. Hallucinogenic architecture doesn't come cheap so you'll either have to tax the hell out of your sim-stituents or type "imacheat" during gameplay to get $500,000 instantly. (The free money comes with a couple string attached: first of all, Maxis has taken your pride by making you admit you're a cheater. Secondly, the windfall is usually bookended with a natural disaster of some kind—though you can stop a flood by typing "moses." You can also start a nuclear disaster by typing "gomorrah." The guys at Maxis seems to have a thing for getting all Old Testament on your citizens.)

If you want to come as close to "winning" as you can while playing SimCity 2000 you'll build as many of the Launch Arcologies as your coffers will allow because once the calendar hits 2051 and you have 300 of these weird, robot looking park-city things, your citizens will be rocketed upwards in their eco-domes to salvation while all the poor schmucks living in "condos" will be doomed to perdition, Maxis style. I would start saving for a spot in a Launch Arcology now. You wouldn't want to be Left Behind.

The simultaneous launch of the Arcologies is pretty satisfying. SimCity 2000 was created in 1994 and isn't what you would call dynamic by today's standards, though compared to SimEarth it might as well be Mass Effect 3. So when you see these little glass rockets separate from their terrestrial thunder thighs and make a beeline for the heavens, it's as good an ending as you could for though I wish the little statue Arcologies starting going Godzilla on the city at some point as well

As far as simulators go, there's Maxis and everyone else. Will Wright, the brain behind the SimCity franchise (minus the newest version, but we'll get to that later), is the godfather of "software toys"— games that cannot be won or lost. It's best to think of the Wright-era Maxis games as a sandbox rather than a baseball diamond. If you owned a computer in the last two decades there's a good chance you ran into one of Wright's creations, whether it was the infinitely expansion pack host The Sims or the more traditional evolution game Spore, which sold 2 million copies in its first three weeks on the shelf. He also designed SimAnt and SimCopter which, I mean, cool I guess. (Conspicuously absent from his C.V.: SimTower. This is still my second favorite Maxis game for no logical reason and I was always pissed that my 47th floor movie theater needed two floors of space because it screwed up the vibe

of my building. Plus I could never figure out the tiered/express elevator system and now that I work in a building with that system I feel stupid for not getting it. Director: Yoot Saito.)

Wright's stock in interactive game design isn't so much an investment as it is a personal Tony Robbins audio loop. He was more interested in concepts like resource planning and "industrial food chains" than racking up points that would eventually be exchanged for congratulations. Wright's games aways give players a single role: Creator—not God. You're allowed to create and customize characters in the Sims but you can't control consequences; it's less dollhouse and more science project, a division that he expanded on in a conversation with Game Studies in 2001:

> [The school system] is not designed for experimenting with complex systems and navigating your way through them in an intuitive way, which is what games teach. It's not really designed for failure, which is also something games teach. I mean, I think that failure is a better teacher than success. Trial and error, reverse-engineering stuff in your mind—all the ways that kids interact with games—that's the kind of thinking schools should be teaching. And I would argue that as the world becomes more complex, and as outcomes become less about success or failure, games are better at preparing you.

You cynics are thinking that Wright's outlook is absurdly rosy and that we do measure life in wins and losses and they're called income tax brackets. (It used to be called gout!) It's not as if learning from failure is a concept that is only present in Wright's Sim-era games, either. Learning how to defeat Sephiroth was always about (infinitely frustrating, infuriating) trial and error as well.

Where Wright's comments become especially lucid are when he talks about the obsolescence of true "success or failure" as the world complexities begin to unpeel.

Play the new SimCity that Electronic Arts released this March and you can probably guess Wright has been out to pasture. (EA bought Maxis in 1997.) The bones of SimCity's ancestors are still there, but the dedication to systems, infrastructure, and efficiency—things that planners get hard ons for—has been replaced by design. The game is beautiful. The granularity of the architecture is sublime. It's worth the $60 price tag just to see your towers rise and commercial centers boom like a Lisa Simpson science experiment. It's also like playing a sandbox that happens to be the size of a tabletop zen garden where the little rake costs $15 and the rocks are being released in Spring 2014.

The plot size for your city in SimCity is claustrophobic. Will Wright is balanced in his comments on the new game. In an interview with NowGamer he said, "It's interesting, in some sense it reminds me of the post-economic crash. It's not about making your city big, it's about making them not poor. [The size] makes you focus more on interrelations of those factors, so you could make a city four times bigger but you'd be dealing with the exact same variables." As a planner that kind of statement is a bummer. Listen, SimCity was never designed to teach 12 year olds about code-based development or right-of-ways or grant anticipation revenue bonds for infrastructure projects. It's still as much a preparation for city planning as a flight simulator is for flying a F-14, but there's no downplaying its importance in launching thousands of careers in architecture, design, and urban planning.

Size is what makes cities so hard to manage. Sure, townships are corrupt and go bankrupt and have crime, but the idea that city issues are just town issues blown up is tough to swallow, especially from a doyen like Wright who always devoted himself to understanding the real world complexities surrounding his projects. (Just to put this in perspective: Wright designed scenarios in SimCity 2000 where you could deal with the fallout from any number of natural and anthropogenic disasters including the 1991 Oakland firestorm, Hurricane Hugo, and the 1970's economic recession in Flint, Michigan. This isn't some pseudo-historical bullshit rendered in DOS like Oregon Trail, it's the history of urban America. He also read Jay Forrester's Urban Dynamics and World Dynamics.) His comments sound like resignation and disillusionment. Or maybe he gets that it's just a game.

In a fiery review covered by StreetsBlog, a commentator takes the SimCity developers at EA to task for ditching some of the more forward-thinking aspects that were present in the last go round, SimCity 4:

> Not only did the game not add mixed use, but now density is tied to the kind of road you build (not transit or zoning). Want a modern subway system? Nope, not available, even though every game in the series has let you build one. Streetcars? They've been added – but only running in the middle of a 6-lane "avenue." Pedestrian malls? Of course not, and don't even ask about bikes.

At first, I thought the criticisms were just funny. People don't complain about Call of Duty's lack of multilateral diplomacy or economic sanctions and I'm guessing astrophysicists aren't crowing about propulsion schemes in Deadspace. Progressive planning advocates are a loud and knowledgeable corner of the blogosphere, but like any other niche they tend to get trapped in their own echo chamber from time to time and the StreetsBlog review sounded tone deaf and naive.

But then you read more about Wright's philosophy on games being able to teach and you realize reviews like this—and there are plenty—aren't lamenting the failure of a game to include bike lanes, they're eulogizing the end of Wright's campaign to make kids learn through trial and error. Now you have to play in EA's world. There isn't an offline version where you can build a loose duplicate of Philadelphia or Memphis just to blow it up and replace it with Prague. Destruction is what made previous iterations of SimCity a digital palimpsest and now it's not even an option.

SimCity is still an interactive game and there are significant nods to urban planning as a scientific discipline—you can issue bonds, control tax rates, tinker with the power grid, even pull up some really interesting integrated map schemes—but you get the feeling from playing that the game has lost its ability to hypnotize. You won't see another generation of architects and planners waxing nostalgic about SimCity sparking their love of cities. The sandbox that Wright and Maxis built is just another poorly backlit screen in a basement now.

Is the dream dead? Just mostly dead. You'll probably be able to buy a simple resurrection for $20 come Winter. I'm hoping it'll be called the Portland Pack and maybe it'll come with a special fixed-gear Sim if you pre-order NOW. Still, EA's decision to release this clunky version of a game that has such a dogged idealistic following is curious at best. I figure there are two ways they thought about this during final development:

1. The people who really love this game will shell out money for expansion packs to get more granular features. Hell, they'll probably even pay $15 just to get a "bike lane" option. Suckers.
2. Shit, did we forget to put in subway systems? Eh, whatever Phoenix is doing just fine with their transit system, right? What do you mean property values fell 40% during the recession? The central business district is decaying too? And they traded Steve Nash for who?

It wouldn't be the first time that a beloved franchise took an ideological u-turn (they've still sold over one million copies so dogma might be overrated), but either way it's a shame. Still, for SimCity cultists, EA's decision to snatch away player independence is probably its most unforgivable offense. There's a chance that the game producers are betting long on the ubiquity of wireless networks and it's probably a wise wager considering how much of a push major cities are making for public WiFi. But that barrier completely marred SimCity's release in March—EA's servers couldn't handle the rush of players fiending for some sweet, sweet urban planning action, so many, including yours truly, didn't get a crack at the game for the first week. You are at the mercy of your network connection this time around, and wireless fidelity is not a forgiving mistress.

I recently downloaded the old DOS version of SimCity 2000. It looks awful, the way most artifacts of nostalgia lose their sparkle once you're face to face with them again. I'm

relearning the old development strategies my brother taught me in 1996, when he was a sophomore in high school and spent sleepless nights trying to build up a struggling metropolis: don't make the airport too big; keep taxes high; build industrial as far out on the grid as possible. I'm getting the hang of it again and now that I do this for a living (ok, not really) the game has taken on this odd spiritual component. Whenever I design a subway or water supply just right, it's nerd nirvana. I still can't win. I still don't care.