

SimCity Classic
History and Review

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Tokyo, 1957. In a city recovering from the scars of war twelve years earlier, taxes are low, and people are happy. That is, until one morning when a giant green monster takes a stroll through the city...and you, as mayor, spend the next five years trying to clean up the mess.

Heresville, 1900. An empty landscape and \$20,000 in cash presents a new beginning. A chance to build something grand, a New New York, or Chicago, or Boston, but better. A city with thousands – no, *hundreds* of thousands – of happy people enjoying low taxes, minimal traffic, low crime, quality mass transit, and affordable housing. Oh, and a wildly popular mayor...you.

Such is the promise of SimCity. The first popular game of its genre (often called simulation games or, more colloquially, God games), SimCity took the world by surprise and then by storm when it was published by Maxis in 1989. SimCity was one of the first open-ended games – there's no way to win, and in some sense, losing is also impossible. The goal is simply to build the best city possible, where "best" refers to the population. 10,000 people is a good start; 50,000 a worthwhile town; 100,000 an impressive city; and 500,000 nearly impossible. That's not all, though, since the game shipped with six additional scenarios (including the Tokyo one mentioned above) that combined emulated versions of real cities with an assortment of natural and unnatural disasters, challenging players to respond to those disasters in a limited amount of time and rebuild each city to its original greatness...or better.

SimCity was born from the tools used to build a Nintendo game, Raid of Bungeling Bay, which Hudson published in 1985. The game involved a helicopter attack on a series of islands and was largely a standard combat fighter. It wouldn't be more than

a footnote in history except that one of the designers, Will Wright, decided to take the tools that he used to construct the islands for the game and try his hand at building a complete game of his own. Wright's interest in urban planning combined with his island editor and with buildings, transportation, and power added, the result was SimCity.

Wright worked on SimCity on his own for a year. He shipped a version for the Commodore 64 in 1987, but without funds for marketing or any backing from publishers (who couldn't understand how it would work as a game), sales were slow. Defining a new genre is quite a challenge, especially for designers working alone. When Wright found a partner, Jeff Braun, and the two formed a company, things started to turn around.

Maxis was created expressly to sell SimCity. Under Braun's management, Broderbund agreed to co-publish the game in 1989, and the world began to take notice. Initial sales were slow, but word of the game spread and within months SimCity was winning awards and a smash hit. Its success was especially impressive in light of the programming effort behind the game, which consisted entirely of Will Wright. He was the entire design team as well, with Braun handling the business side of things and Broderbund providing enough backing to get the game onto store shelves. The release was simultaneous for both the Macintosh and the PC, and eventually SimCity would ship on a large number of different platforms, from the original Commodore 64 version to the Super Nintendo and even the Palm Pilot.

The game itself either has no story line or an incredibly complex one, depending on the player's perspective. Unlike almost all other games, SimCity follows no proscribed plot, with each game dramatically affected by the player's decisions. Those decisions in turn affect the game play itself, as available strategies change based on things

varying from the current tax rate to the state of the fires left by the last giant monster to walk through town. In the most common form of game play, the player starts with an empty landscape of trees, lakes, rivers, and dirt, plus a budget of \$5000 to \$20,000 (depending on a choice of difficulty level). Once the game itself starts, time begins, moving from January 1900 and advancing one month at a time at regular intervals. Meanwhile, the player selects from a variety of city components, from trees and power lines to nuclear power plants and airports, each of which has an assigned cost, and places those on the landscape as needed to form a city. Buildings themselves aren't so much built as grown, with zones for residential, commercial, and industrial development running \$100 apiece.

Naturally, no residents would show up without buildings, so at least a few zones always come out of the initial budget. Buildings require power, though, so somewhere in the budget the player has to find room for a power plant, which can either be the heavily-polluting coal (\$3000) variety or the clean nuclear plant (\$5000). In an attempt to be more true to form, cost isn't the only tradeoff between coal and nuclear power – the heavy pollution of coal drives citizens away from nearby residential areas while nuclear power plants are more likely to break down and need to be replaced. Not even a power plant with power lines (\$5 apiece) connecting the plant to the zones is enough to attract residents, though; the player also had to build roads (\$10 apiece) or rail lines (\$20).

With those in place, a city starts to grow. Buildings go up, residents move in, and traffic starts to appear on the streets. Before long, the residents complain of high crime, requiring a police station (\$500), and it's always a good idea to build fire stations (\$500) around town as well. As the town gets larger, the residents come to expect things that

other similarly-sized cities have, namely stadiums (\$3000), seaports (\$5000), and the most expensive item in the game, an airport (\$10,000). All of that adds up to more than the city's initial budget, but the game includes a yearly budgeting process where the player sets the tax rate while collecting the previous year's taxes and deciding what portion of the police and fire budgets (\$100 per station per year for full funding) and transportation budgets (\$1 per square per year) to fund. Finding the precarious balance between funding for municipal services, tax revenues, and spending towards growth is the fundamental challenge of the game – without a delicate balancing act there, residents leave when the taxes are too high or development ceases when spending falls too low.

What makes the game interesting was not its graphics, which have never blazed a trail and started out in black and white (and are still black and white on certain Palm Pilot versions, for example) or its music, or any of the visible technologies often noted in games in other genres. Rather, the artificial intelligence – the quality of the simulation – is the core of the entire game. It would have been tedious if year after year of a 7% tax rate, patterned zoning, and standard police and fire coverage the population continued to grow, and to make matters worse, that would not have been realistic. Instead, every single move that the player makes has an effect on the outcome. Don't build enough mass transit, and traffic gets so bad that residents leave. Build residential areas next to high-pollution industrial complexes, and houses won't be built. Ignore the businesses that clamor for a seaport and watch as commerce decides that another city will be more receptive and leaves. Of course, keeping people happy requires spending a lot of money...but raise taxes to pay for the improvements and watch the population drop. Or

leave taxes the same but underfund police and fire services and watch the crime rate increase or a small fire take out multiple city blocks.

The interface for all of this complexity was somewhat awkward with the early DOS version of the game, though the interface improved in later editions for more advanced systems such as the Super Nintendo. Wright was not a graphic designer or an expert in human interface design, and the game may have suffered somewhat from its relatively bland graphics and wide array of player options. Maxis clearly considered those issues when it reissued SimCity for other systems, as the company hired graphic artists and simplified the interface without removing features, and graphical and interface improvements were the focus of the game's two direct sequels, SimCity 2000 and SimCity 3000.

Though the interface may have fallen short of other popular games, the game design was superb. No two games of SimCity are ever the same, or even close to it – with every action and reaction having some unknown element of randomness, the result is a product that was infinitely replayable. It is unclear if the difficulty level chosen at the start of each game affects game play itself or merely changes the initial city fund, but without any explicit way to lose (and with a cheat code for acquiring an additional \$10,000 so widely known that it was mentioned in a newspaper review of the game), players of all levels can play and enjoy it. The challenge is as much as each player makes of it, since there is no time limit, and the game rarely introduces overt stumbling blocks like natural disasters to cities that aren't large enough to handle a blow.

While it is possible for players of all ages and skill levels to enjoy SimCity and even build cities of a reasonable size, quite a bit of strategy and advance planning goes

into any city that grows well beyond 100,000 residents. The emulation takes so many factors into account – from the distribution of zones by both number and location to the positioning of individual zones by water, the availability of parks, and the number of buildings that can be supported by each power plant (and each type of power plant) – that successful cities require good design from the ground up. They also cannot succeed without successful budget management, some flexibility in the initial design for rebuilding when plans for a specific area fail, and a bit of luck in avoiding serious disasters. Part of the joy of the game is that any player can rise to the challenge – with enough effort and thought, the strategy and planning can be learned and improved, and, most importantly, refined by creating city after city. There is no physical skill involved.

SimCity is the epitome of a classic game. It defined a genre, bringing the art of simulation into game design and inspiring later efforts like Sid Meier's Railroad Tycoon and Civilization. The design was wildly successful; the significant effort that was put into the emulation itself created such a captivating game that critics and players alike didn't care about its graphics. Playability and excitement mattered much, much more, and SimCity's achievements with each of those kept copies flying off of store shelves. Of course, the ability to remake the world just the way you want it didn't hurt, either – especially if you felt like sending a giant monster through downtown Tokyo in 1957 or just creating the town of your dreams.

References:

- 1) Gamespot's SIMply Devine: The Story of Maxis.
<<http://www.gamespot.com/features/maxis/>>
- 2) SimCity Classic (DOS version).
<<http://www.dosgamesarchive.com/download/template.cgi?simcity>>
- 3) History of a Classic. <<http://simcity.ea.com/us/guide/classic/history/index.phtml>>

It should be noted that this review does not reference Ted Friedman's Semiotics of SimCity paper, as this is much more of a review of playing the game than the philosophy behind it. Perhaps that's an oversight; a more in-depth review of SimCity would unquestionably cover more of the topics included in Friedman's paper.

I should also mention that references to the Palm Pilot version of SimCity are in regard to the version written and distributed by Atelier
<<http://www.ateliersoftware.com/palm/scc.html>>. I own a copy of this version, as well as the Super Nintendo version, and have also played the DOS version. Despite all of that, I've never played SimCity 2000 or 3000 or The Sims...I'm happy enough with the original.