Aerobiz Supersonic: A Glimpse into the Addictive Business Simulation

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Introduction

  Aerobiz Supersonic from the Koei Corporation arguably has to be one of the best turn-based strategy simulation games ever made; however, it also has to be one of the least well known. Unlike other similar games like Maxis' *SimCity* (1989) or Microprose's *Civilization* (1991), *Aerobiz Supersonic* stood out and emerged as a strategy simulation that had a little bit of everything: business strategy, addictive game-play, educational value, and multiplayer capabilities. As one of the first games ever to follow an entire airline industry, the game provided a challenging atmosphere for those who crave business strategy involving a balanced budget. The producer, Kou Shibusawa, wanted a game that was similar to powerhouses like *SimCity* and *Civilization* in terms of addictiveness, yet original enough to launch as its own title. Furthermore, his sense of adventure propelled him to create, unbeknownst to the creator, a new genre of video gaming: the business simulation.

Taking Flight

  As a video game publisher, Koei Corporation began as the Koei Company Limited of Japan. In 1988, they expanded operations and opened a subsidiary in the San Francisco Bay Area, tapping into the United States personal computer and game console market ("Koei Corporation"). Koei is well known for its strategy and role-playing titles such as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* series, and the *Dynasty Warriors* and *Kessen* series ("Business"). Currently, the company is providing games for the new Sony Playstation console as well as for Nintendo

and Sega. It is also looking to expand its genre selection to include action role-playing games, rhythmic action games, action sports games, and battlefield action games, thereby taking a step further into the future of gaming. The chief producer and distributor of *Aerobiz Supersonic*, Kou Shibusawa, worked for Koei on and off for about eight years. Shibusawa started developing titles for Koei from as early as 1989 until about 1996 ("Rap Sheet"). In 1994, the company released the game in the United States on both the Super Nintendo Entertainment System and the Sega Genesis system. Unknown to most people, *Aerobiz Supersonic* is actually a remake of the original *Aerobiz*. In the newer version, commercial airplanes could fly in and out of minor cities as well as major ones and other factors that could affect profits such as business ventures were introduced. The addition of a hotel resort, a golf course, or an amusement park in New York or Hong Kong could potentially boost sales for an airline.

 Upon the release of *Aerobiz Supersonic*, critics raved about the playability of the game despite its lack of "eye-popping" graphics and sound effects ("GameFAQs"). The genre of simulation games had just taken off with the successful introductions from both Maxis and Microprose. Whereas these two were juggernauts in the personal computer market, Koei's creation was only playable on the SNES and the Sega Genesis and did not have the de-facto elite status that made *SimCity* and *Civilization* famous. Nevertheless, its originality and style spawned hundreds of fan sites dedicated to positive feedback and reviews. In one particular website, the author acknowledged that the game was the "only airline running simulation game out there…aside from the original *Aerobiz*" ("GameFAQs"). To some people, the thought of such obscurity "sounds just about as exciting as a barrel full of monkeys... dead monkeys" and "yet there is something about it that makes [people] want to play it still" ("Game Review").
Aerobiz Supersonic was a game that was incomparable to most others of its time. With the exception of perhaps the first ever business simulation game, *Cartel$ and Cutthroats*, there were

very few games at the time that dealt so much with the intricacies of economics. Could it be the strategy, the simulation, the competition, or the business aspect of playing that proved intriguing? Arguably, it generated a new genre of video gaming, encompassing all that is necessary to make it a business simulation. As the forerunner, it stood to be judged by the thousands of gamers who demanded a new breed of simulation.

Technology and Game-Play

As a strategy simulation game, *Aerobiz Supersonic* offers the gamer an extended amount of playing time from a few hours to upwards of a few days with its "save and load" feature. The game's realistic attention to detail is also noteworthy. In the second and third scenarios, the summer Olympics are held in Seoul, Korea in 1988, which in turn helps the East Asian flight market during that time. The game is designed so realistically that it even foresaw the creation of the Euro, the common currency of the European Union.

This reference to currency is what sets the game apart from many other simulations of the time. Unlike other normal simulation games, *Aerobiz Supersonic* introduces the concept of a balanced budget, further increasing the strategy involved. On one hand, the airline must make money on certain routes from one city to another. On the other hand, it must have the money to plan the route in the first place. This contradiction introduces the concept of a review board that constantly monitors the airline's financial status. For the mediocre player, this group of experts is more of a nuisance that he or she can do without, but the expert gamers know that their updates are the deciding factors between winning and losing. The strategy to crush the competition and the desire to become the best airline in the world make this game highly addicting. It is not a strategy simulation, but rather a business simulation involving strategy.
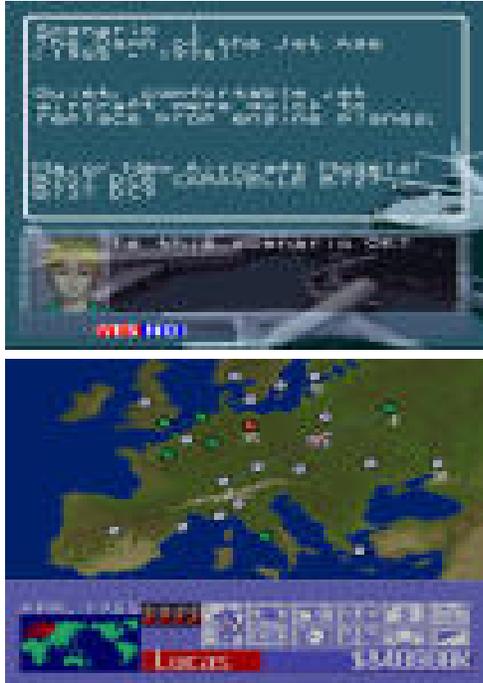
The game-play begins by asking the player or players several questions in the customization phase of the game. This ranges from minor decisions, such as the main color of the CEO's company, to major ones such as the location of their domestic and international hubs. One of the many primary objectives of the game, depending on the level of difficulty that the player chooses, is to expand flight operations to every region and to gain the number one market share in six of the seven regions within twenty years. These regions are: North and South America, Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and the Mid East. The computer then brings the player to a screen where he or she can plan new routes, send representatives to bid for airport slots, or negotiate with a city for business ventures.

While the graphical interface of *Aerobiz Supersonic* is not as impressive as the polygonal 3-D game engine that is considered the norm today, it is one of the least important aspects of the game. The designers of the strategy simulation want to focus more on the actual game-play and the airline company development than on a few pretty pictures. Having a basic or minimal graphics display is also one of the reasons why this game is so highly addictive. Aside from the obvious technological restrictions that were prevalent in the early nineties, there was simply no need for streaming video clips or three-dimensional characters. In fact, such highly distracting details would detract from the player-to-computer or player-to-player interactions, making this simulation much less enjoyable.

Additionally, the sound for this game consists of a set of basic midi scores that varies as the player moves from region to region. The music constantly runs in a loop and can become

quite annoying after the first fifteen minutes. There are also the few expected sound effects for pressing a key or selecting a menu, which is a commonplace for all games during this time. While the sound and music do not add anything major in terms of playing experience, one would notice the awkwardness of these missing complements if they were not included. Just like its visual counterpart, the auditory aspect of this game is less important as the producers and designers are concentrating more on other aspects such as economic balance and managerial concepts to enhance the overall experience of the game.

One of the game's most unique features is its replay value. While many other personal computer and console games appear dull and repetitive after a week's worth of playtime, the multitude of start-up options offered by *Aerobiz Supersonic* ensures that every game is different. The game's design and interface, especially that of the save feature, implicitly forces its players to keep coming back for more. This goes hand in hand with Geoffrey and Elizabeth Loftus' statement of why people play games. They argue that the players' enjoyment is fulfilled by the constant reinforcement of accomplishing minor goals until they eventually beat the game (Geoffery Loftus 14). The planning and building phases take up the majority of the time and are interrupted only by one thing--the player's motivation to continue. In *Aerobiz Supersonic* as well as games of similar design, expansion is limited only by the player's own will.

Another relatively significant characteristic of the game is its turn-based multiplayer functionality. Since the game time in years is divided into four quarters like that of the business world, *Aerobiz Supersonic* operates on a turn-based style which allows a player to consider their decisions while they await their turn. This can become quite a nuisance for each individual if there are a total of four human players as the "downtime" for each person accumulates. While one can recognize the obvious folly of this setup, many gamers argue that the interim actually helps increase their awareness of the other companies' moves and strategies. Not only do they

feel less pressure in making the wrong decisions that could potentially bankrupt them, but they also gain more time necessary to evaluate each decision much more carefully. Moreover, the skilled players who are able to memorize the different buttons for each different option can cut down on this extra time, allowing the game to smoothly transition from one quarter to the next.

The Business Simulation
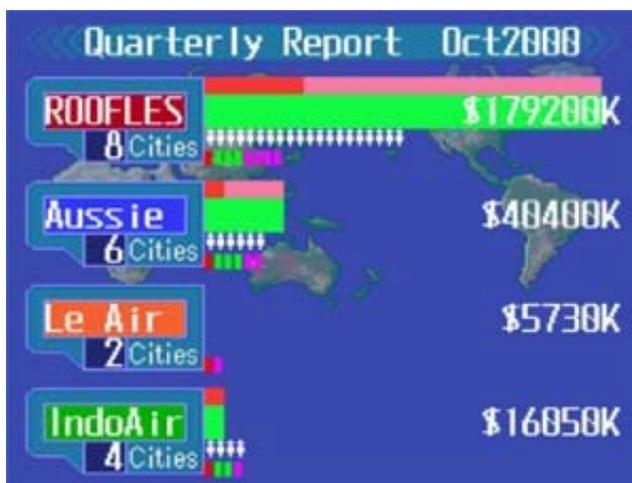
What is it that makes this game a good business simulation? First, knowing the correct definition of a business simulation is crucial in understanding the type of game for which *Aerobiz Supersonic* is qualified. According to one expert, the business simulation is "a simulation of the basic tenets in finance and economics" ("MobyGames"). Although this airline simulation portrays only a simplified version of economics, to argue that it does not exist would be fallacious. The game constantly reminds its players of this fact by presenting updates of quarterly reports after every round of turns. These reports display the fundamental figures and numbers for comparing one's airline with its competitions. For instance, a typical diagram illustrates the revenues and costs of the company, the number of passengers and cities that it has, and the profit that it has earned for that particular quarter.

The attention to these monetary issues leads to the discussion of the business strategies involved among the players and their respective airlines. For one, it is necessary for everybody to constantly juggle airfares in order to react to the competition's actions and policies. Since this

game represents the economic model of an oligopoly, in which only four airlines compete with each other, and not a monopolistic model where one airline dominates, each player needs to fine-tune and improve existing routes in order to maximize profits. This constant raising and lowering of prices creates a perfect equilibrium and balances the gaming strategy with business acumen. On the other hand, the experimentation of different routes at different prices often leads to frustration since the myriad of routes can quickly become a maintenance nightmare, especially towards the end of a scenario. This confusion is the reason why it is particularly helpful to have the concept of board meetings, as mentioned above, to monitor and evaluate certain flights that are operating in the black or red (profitable versus unprofitable). By allowing the computer to offer suggestions as to how to make smart and lucrative adjustments, the player can in turn concentrate on other significant facets of game strategy.

Additionally, the notions of time and opportunity are as important in a business sim as the aforementioned strategies. The idea of time in a video game further increases the player's strategy, adding to it an extra element for consideration. The computer occasionally offers one airline "the opportunity of a lifetime" by slashing the jet prices in half. The question here is not whether one should take the deal or pass it, but rather how many planes one should buy given this incredible opportunity. On one hand, if a company purchases too many airplanes, it risks the possibility of draining its resources too early. It also risks its competitive power in the future market as the more innovative and superior planes will inevitably replace the older models. In addition to managing monetary wealth, each competitor now has to take into account the economic effects of time and opportunity.

Finally, the simulation works based on several assumptions just like any other game. The primary assumption the game operates around is that low fares encourage passengers and high fares discourage them. There are no first or business class travelers; thus, it represents only a

portion of the travel industry. Yet Ted Friedman best summarizes this game and simulations in general in an article that he posted about the *Semiotics of SimCity*. "The simulation acts as a kind of map-in-time, visually and viscerally (as the player internalizes the game's logic) demonstrating the repercussions and interrelatedness of many different social decisions" ("Semiotics of SimCity").

What about games like *SimCity*, *Civilization*, *Warcraft*, *Age of Empires*, and *Cartel$ and Cutthroats*? More specifically, what are the main similarities and differences between these games and *Aerobiz Supersonic*? For starters, *SimCity* and *Civilization* are similar in that the player is initially given a title. While being called the chief executive, the mayor or the emperor makes no difference whatsoever in the actual play, it does add to the experience by virtue of making the individual feel more important and wanted. The two games of Will Wright and Sid Meier are similar in terms of giving the gamer the control that he or she desires. Their powerful presence in the game world is felt by the constant changes of landscape and population due to the commands by their fingertips. According to Friedman, "representing flux and change is exactly what a simulation can do" ("Semiotics of SimCity"). While *Aerobiz Supersonic* is a business simulation of planes, *SimCity* is a simulation of a city and *Civilization* is a simulation of war.

The *Warcraft* and *Age of Empires (AOE)* series are also quite similar aside from the obvious real-time strategy versus turn-based strategy discrepancy. All of them deal with some sort of resource management. In *Warcraft* and *AOE*, the main resources are gold, lumber, and food, although food is more of an explicit need in the latter than the former. Can these games then be classified as a business simulation because they encompass a form of micromanagement? While these games do have an economic side to them, the economical aspect is neither the focus nor developed enough to warrant such classification. Conversely, the simulation *Cartel$ and Cutthroat$* has a complex system of finances, which includes the economic principles of

marginal costs and revenues, interest rates, and trade. *Aerobiz Supersonic* also contains an economic system, although it is not quite as intricate as *Cartel$ and Cutthroat$*. The acts of buying and selling planes, advertising businesses, analyzing complex data reports, and maximizing profits are all part of the struggle in becoming the number one airline in the world.

Valuable and Appreciated

Despite *Aerobiz Supersonic's* lack of receptivity in the gaming world and the design's technological limitations, anyone who has ever played it would probably agree that the game leaves behind an everlasting impression. It may not have been as appreciated as the more popular games during its time, but it had the potential to be great and can even be considered a classic. In today's gaming community that is dominated mostly by fast-paced action and massively multiplayer games, *Aerobiz Supersonic* stands out as being rare and innovative. As one of the only business games out there, it strikes a perfect balance between the rudiments of style, playability, and enjoyment**.**

Whereas this simulation is well respected for its sake of game-play, its true value lies in the fact that it has become a successful blueprint for today's business game design. If one looks at the design of a game like *Railroad Tycoon II*, one can notice the obvious similarities between the two. For one, *Railroad Tycoon II* has a complex economic system that includes the basics of buying and selling capital, managing resources, and even trading stocks and bonds on the open market. It also borrows many ideas and assumptions of price setting from *Aerobiz Supersonic*, simulating various consumer behaviors and simplifying them for the gamer. The biggest difference is that the graphical interface is a whole lot better.

As the gaming industry changes to meet the demands of the variable game culture and its consumers, it is interesting to reflect on the history of business simulations and to explore their future possibilities. One issue to ponder is on the relative educational value of these simulations. The possibility of using any type of business sim as a method of corporate training is thought provoking. Supporters see no reason why this cannot be implemented, arguing analogously that professional pilots have been using the *Microsoft Flight Simulator* to log real flight hours in front of the computer screen. Since such an idea may seem absurd and can have serious societal implications about the future of business, the likelihood of this becoming a mainstream operation with the current technology is small; it is still years from being effective. After all, *Aerobiz Supersonic* may simply be a video game about managing airplanes.

Conclusion

In short, Koei has created a gem. Considering that the genre of business strategy simulation is a fairly new one, one cannot underestimate its importance in the culture of gaming. *Aerobiz Supersonic* provides its most sacred fans a challenging environment of play by incorporating economical strategies in the form of managing a multitude of variables. While the game is not held as high in esteem as some of its counterparts, it does hold a special place in the gaming community that it serves. The game is not about blowing away aliens from the third dimension or even exploring new worlds, yet it has the ability to entrance and enthrall gamers unlike many other games. As one video game writer Janet Murray describes it, "we lose consciousness of the medium and see neither print nor film but only the power of the story itself" (26). Those who are fortunate enough to have played the game realize that it is not just about building an airline; it is about forging a profitable empire.

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