

Note to grader:

This paper is late because I received an extension from Dr. Lowood. I would also like to mention that I was unable to find many solid, concrete sources, except for Geoff Keighley's "Simply Divine." Though this made for harder research, perhaps this case history is actually something new! Either way, enjoy reading it!

Manu Lakkur

Maxis's Metropolis

The Evolution of the SimCity Series



SimCity's success has been phenomenal. A brainchild of videogame designer Will Wright, the original SimCity, released in 1987, sold over a million copies worldwide and attracted a widespread audience among adults, children, hardcore gamers, and even teachers. Lucy Bradshaw, the current manager of Maxis, the company that produces SimCity, once discovered with surprise that even her New York taxi cab driver had played the game. SimCity's popularity transcends not only age, but also gender. Bradshaw's statistics indicate that over one-fourth of its players are women, an impressive figure considering the overwhelmingly male clientele of most computer games.

Given its success, SimCity inevitably spawned sequels. SimCity 2000, SimCity 3000, and this year's SimCity 4 are each blockbuster videogames in their own right, and they expand on the original title with more complex simulation, engaging game play, and impressive graphics. But another trend in the evolution of SimCity is apparent: the new installments have proven less fixated on numeric data and the raw power of simulation and more focused on pleasing players with entertaining visuals. In the most general sense, the story of the development of SimCity is about balancing accurate city simulation with easy and enjoyable game play in a quest to create realistic cities.

In many ways, however, the tale of SimCity is the history of Maxis. Will Wright and his partner Jeff Braun founded the company in 1987 solely to sell SimCity and the series has dominated the company's sales since. SimCity 2000 then boosted Maxis's earnings, first bringing it to the attention of investors. Later, SimCity 3000 revived the company after several years of dismal profits in the late nineties. The series has undoubtedly been Maxis's mainstay—at least, until *The Sims* was released in 2000 and became the best-selling videogame of all time..

Though Will Wright's newest hit surpassed his oldest one in popularity, the SimCity franchise has not been forgotten. The release of SimCity 4 in January 2003 illustrates the series' continuing importance to Maxis, and its initial success with players and game critics indicates that the market for city simulation remains strong. This paper will follow the evolution of SimCity from its conceptualization in the early 1980's through its first two sequels and briefly touch on the newest version of the game.

A Game for Yuppies

Ironically, the inspiration for SimCity—a game about creating cities—came to Will Wright when he was developing a game about bombing them. In the early 1980's, Wright served as the lead designer for Broderbund Software's *Raid of Bungeling Bay*, a helicopter game released for the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1985. While designing the terrain editor for the landscape, Wright realized that he enjoyed creating the cities and bases in each level much more than destroying them during the game. "I found out that I had a lot more fun building the islands than I did flying around in the helicopter," he later recalled (Keighley 2).

Around that time, Wright developed an interest in urban planning and began to study the work of Jay Forrester, a professor at MIT. Forrester—formally trained in electrical engineering, not urban studies—published the slightly controversial *Urban Dynamics* in 1969 and used computer simulations of cities to test social science theories (Starr 3). Inspired by his application of computers to urban planning, Wright expanded upon the terrain editor for *Raid of Bungeling Bay* to include more complex aspects of cities, such as cars, people, and power networks. This project would eventually result in SimCity.

By 1987—after two years of development—Wright had designed SimCity, but almost no one was interested. Most publishers, including Broderbund, thought that the game was too

open-ended, and that its game play lacked a definite goal. “[They] just kept asking me how I was going to make it into a game,” Wright amusingly recounts (Keighley 2). Though he eventually managed to release a version of the game for the Commodore 64 that year, SimCity remained an obscure title, unable to enter the Macintosh or PC market.

The situation would soon change. In 1987, during a pizza party to recruit software programmers, Wright met Jeff Braun, an entrepreneur who wanted to create a game “that yuppies could play” (Perkins 1). “People who use our software are more interested in experiencing something that doesn’t talk down to them or require quick reflexes,” Braun would later say during an interview with *Red Herring* magazine (1). SimCity proved to be exactly what he was looking for. He immediately sold his previous company for \$100,000 and, with Will Wright as his partner, founded Maxis to publish the game. SimCity was off to a running start, it seemed.

But it took two years of running for something important to actually happen. In 1989, Broderbund finally agreed to sign Maxis up on its affiliate label program. The deal “turned out to be great,” in Braun’s words: Broderbund would keep twenty percent of the profits, and the manufacturer would eat away twenty percent more. But since Maxis had no money at hand, this proposition was perfect, “one of the key deals that made the company” (Perkins 2). Soon he and Wright began shipping SimCity, operating right out of Braun’s apartment in Orinda, California (Keighley 2) “We shipped the first 100,000 units of SimCity while still running the business out of my living room,” he remembered with a laugh (Perkins 2).

.At first sales were slow. But positive reviews, word-of-mouth praise, and a one-page article in *Newsweek* soon sent SimCity’s sales through the roof (Keighley 2). The game churned a profit of three million dollars in its first year of release (Wagoner 2) and scaled

charts to become not only one of the best selling games in 1989 but also—as the respected videogame writer Geoff Keighley dubbed it—“a hit of the industry” (2).

Indeed, SimCity was more than just a best-selling game. It marked the videogame industry’s step into a new arena. Whereas most videogames of the time focused on action, graphics, or narrative, SimCity offered a new type of game play, which Wright likened to a “toy” rather than a game. “My games are more like a hobby—a train set or a doll house,” he told Keighley. “Basically they’re a mellow and creative playground experience” (2). SimCity’s open-ended game play inspired several game designers, including Sid Meier and Peter Molyneux, and indirectly gave rise to the god-game genre, which includes games such as *Civilization*, *Black and White*, and *Age of Empires*. SimCity had become a milestone in computer game design, comparable to Pong or Super Mario Brothers.

The Game Itself

Like many of the best games, SimCity is simple. Wright has always admired creating complexity out of simplicity—he regards the elegant Japanese strategy game ‘Go’ as the touchstone of game design—and he incorporates this principle into SimCity (“Interview with the Goddess” 2). In the usual method of play, the player begins with a large, empty tract of land and an initial reserve of cash, which varies depending on the difficulty setting. These funds can be used to create residential, commercial, or industrial zones, construct power plants, or build civic buildings such as fire departments and stadiums.

Money, however, is the limiting resource in SimCity, and the main challenge of the game is to build a profitable town. The trick lies in developing the city gradually. Wright implements Forrester’s theories to calculate values such as the city’s education, unemployment, and growth rates, and these figures in turn determine whether the city’s



Figure 1: The SimCity classic interface.

population will blossom or plunge. A simple tax engine calculates the city's income based on the number of residents, stores, and industries.

Though intricate theories of urban dynamics dictate SimCity's operation, the experience of playing the game is surprisingly intuitive and

straightforward. Will Wright based the framework of the game on "capitalistic land value ecology," which describes the growth of American cities during the last century (Starr 6). The journalist Paul Starr, who investigated the inner workings of the game's simulator, notes that

The model in SimCity, as Wright describes it, consists of a series of "concentric rings." [...] SimCity assumes that while 70 percent of industrial production is exported outside of a city, 70 percent of commercial production is consumed internally. [...] As the city and its internal market grow, commerce begins to expand, ultimately overtaking industry as the main source of employment (Starr 6).

Such a model sounds abstruse, but in practice works in a instinctive manner. Residential zones without access to industries never develop, since the city's "sim citizens" need places to work. Simultaneously, industries do not flourish if there are not enough workers and a city cannot develop a strong commercial center until it accumulates a sufficient population.

Despite the mathematical models that lie under the hood, on the outside SimCity seems to operate in a realistic, natural manner.

The Inevitable Sequel

It was precisely SimCity's realism that captured the public imagination, and soon fans of the game demanded simulations of other systems. Several organizations, including the Australian Tax Board, the Defense Department, and the CIA, approached Maxis with requests for more serious simulations (Keighley 2). Maxis indulged some of these appeals—including a program for an oil company called SimRefinery—and eventually spun off a company that specialized in “business and public policy applications” (Starr 3). Meanwhile,



Figure 2: SimCity 2000's isometric perspective.

Will Wright, having grown bored of SimCity, began to work on two of Maxis's next titles: SimAnt, a simulation of an ant colony, and SimEarth, an implementation of James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis (Class Lecture 3/7).

Though both titles sold well, Maxis realized it could capitalize on SimCity's success with a follow-up, and the project was given to Fred Haslem, Wright's co-designer for SimEarth. Soon, however, problems began to emerge. The code that Haslem used, loosely based on the SimEarth engine, proved unstable and Wright, having “a change of heart,” agreed to spearhead a second attempt at the game (Keighley 3). A little more than a year later, SimCity 2000 was complete.

Wright's sequel was a definite advancement. Though the fundamental aspects of the original simulator remained, SimCity 2000 improved on almost every aspect of the classic version. 2000's updated graphics, including SVGA and an isometric perspective, were the most apparent enhancements, but the simulator was more complex, too. More zone types, power plants, and tax options allowed for greater flexibility in city design. Schools, libraries, and hospitals added new dimensions to city demographics. A newspaper presented feedback to the player through clever mad libs. And the ability to add signs made each city customizable. Unlike later sequels to the game, which focused mostly on delivering graphics, SimCity 2000 improved on both the simulator *and* the visuals.

Metropolis: Maxis Goes Public

The market's reaction to SimCity 2000 reflected the game's merits. SimCity 2000—finally released in January of 1994—received rave reviews and sold more copies in three months than the original version did in its first two years (Perkins 4). Within six months it was clear that SimCity 2000 would become the top-selling game of the year. It went on to ship over 3.4 million copies, and Maxis projected revenues of thirty-five million dollars for 1995. Management felt that the company was ready to handle Wall Street.

Going public marked a major metamorphosis for Maxis. After an initial public offering that exceeded thirty-five million dollars, the company relocated its headquarters. But along with a new office came a new attitude. "The ubiquitous casual comfort associated with the small company would give way to a stancher corporate feel," Geoff Keighley writes (4). SimCity 2000's sales broke records and exceeded everyone's expectations, but management continued to insist on producing a large volume of new titles. This philosophy began to worry company veterans such as Wright and Braun, who were both gradually relinquishing

their managerial duties. As new products began to sell poorly and earnings from SimCity 2000 started to decline, Maxis's prospects began to look dismal. "There was a feeling of frantic desperation at the highest level of the company," recalled one former manager (Keighley 5).

Finally, in 1997, management decided to play its last card and try to produce a fully three-dimensional version of SimCity. The programmers reacted with shock. Presenting the innumerable objects that a SimCity game involved in three dimensions was not only a daunting task for game



Figure 3: A screenshot of the original, 3D SimCity 3000.

designers, but also one that most home computers could not handle. But, as Keighley put it, "Maxis management wasn't interested in this analysis. 3D was the new buzzword of the industry, and the next SimCity had to have it, period" (6). Soon enough, the 3D SimCity 3000 project was underway.

It was a failure. Three-dimensional graphics ended up detracting from SimCity 3000's game play, and designers still had no guarantees that the game would work on the average desktop computer. After a year of drudging development, Maxis offered a preview of the game at the E3 convention in 1997 (Keighley 7). The screening turned out to be a complete embarrassment, and the audience's reception was far from positive (6). Wright even feared that SimCity 3000, in its current condition, would destroy the reputation of the whole series. "My stress level was increasing exponentially," he remembers (8).

Fortunately, Wright's would not be stressed out for long.

Becoming a Suburb

Into the picture entered a bigger fish, the giant video game conglomerate Electronic Arts. Also based in the San Francisco Bay Area, EA had long sought to acquire Maxis, a move that the creators of SimCity had initially resisted. “[Then] all of the sudden, in the middle of 1997, Maxis was very interested in talking to us,” recounts Luc Barthelet, a former EA employee who now serves as Maxis’s general manager (Keighley 8). With both parties interested, Electronic Arts soon took control of the company through a \$125 million stock transaction (8).

With new management came a new attitude towards SimCity 3000. The executives at EA appointed Lucy Bradshaw to lead the game’s development, and she quickly noticed that SimCity games didn’t need to be three-dimensional: “Frankly, Will did it right the first time around,” she said (Keighley 9). City simulation, not mind-blowing graphics, had always been responsible for the series’ success, and Bradshaw firmly decided that SimCity 3000 should fall in line with its precursors. The game was ready by 1999.



Figure 4: SimCity 3000 after Bradshaw.

Once again, Maxis got it right on the second try. Bradshaw stood by her motto of sticking to what had worked in the past, and as a result SimCity 3000 was a refinement, not a reformation. The game vastly expanded on the number of zones, transportation options, and buildings available and represented a huge improvement in visual detail from SimCity 2000, but its essence remained the same. The

terrain map was four times larger than before and little animated “sim citizens” no roamed the streets, but from its similar isometric perspective to its slightly sleeker user interface, SimCity 3000 was really just an update of SimCity 2000. Almost all of the improvements were visual in nature.

But this, apparently, was exactly what consumers wanted. SimCity 3000 quickly topped the charts, and the market eventually snapped up 4.6 million copies (Bradshaw). Like its prequel in 1994, SimCity 3000 was the best selling title of its year. With the success of SimCity 3000, Maxis rose out of ruin “like a phoenix from the ashes” (Keighley 1).

Conclusion: SimCity After *The Sims*

SimCity 3000’s strong sales put Maxis in an ideal position to release *The Sims*, and that game owes more than a part of its unparalleled popularity to the SimCity line. The reputation of the *Sim* brand, which of course began with Will Wright’s city simulators, gave *The Sims* instant credibility and name recognition. SimCity’s fan base has perhaps been even more vital to *The Sims*’s success: Maxis’s statistics indicate that seventy-five percent of people who

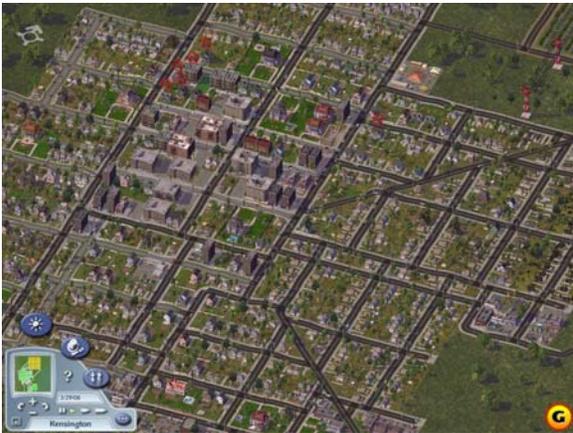


Figure 4: SimCity 4.

own *The Sims* used to play SimCity (Bradshaw). Will Wright knew, before he released the game, that it would be either a grand flop or a grand victory. It is possible that, without SimCity, *The Sims* would have foundered.

The triumph of *The Sims*, however, is undeniable, and the game has heavily influenced SimCity 4. In the three years since the game entered the market, *The Sims* and its five expansions have sold over twenty million units

worldwide (XboxAddict.com). In light of the franchise's success, Maxis has incorporated many aspects of *The Sims* into SimCity 4. The old left-hand bar interface of the first three games has given way to *The Sims*'s colorful control console. Additionally, the game now depicts each city's residents on a more personal level. Players who own *The Sims* can even download their families from that game into their cities. Finally, following in line with *The Sims*'s more visual approach to game play, many of the graphs and data charts that were so important in the original SimCity games have stepped aside in favor of more visual feedback in SimCity 4. Clouds of smog in the sky alert of increased pollution, graffiti on buildings illustrate crime, and parades thrown in the mayor's honor indicate a happy population.

But do consumers really want SimCity to resemble the Sims? Some players—especially fans of the original SimCity and SimCity 2000—prefer the clean, scientific feel of the older games. However, SimCity 4's sales so far indicate that the majority of customers feel Maxis is taking the series in the right direction. Nearly all of the SimCity 4's reviews have been positive, and the game has remained in the top ten weekly sales charts for over two months. SimCity 4, like all three of its predecessors, turned out to be a success. But what is the future of the series? Judging from its history, we will have to wait for the next sequel to find out. It is likely that as long as the computer simulation genre survives, SimCity will be there.

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