

A big interview with Chris Sawyer, the creator of RollerCoaster Tycoon

"The world of games moved on and I didn't."



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These days Scottish video game programmer and designer Chris Sawyer flies under the radar. The inventor of RollerCoaster Tycoon seems happy to let Atari build new games in the much-loved strategy series while he gets on with other, pressing matters, such as riding real-life roller coasters and helping out at his local school. And yet, despite this radio silence, Sawyer's games are as fondly remembered now, over 20 years later, than they ever were.

In the early 1990s, while converting Amiga games such as Elite Plus, Frontier Elite 2, Birds of Prey and Dino Dini's Goal to the PC, Sawyer created his first management simulation game, Transport Tycoon. His idea was to take Sid Meier's Railroad Tycoon further by combining its gameplay elements with his isometric code to create a new kind of map. MicroPose picked up Transport Tycoon, released it in 1994, and scored a hit. An expanded and improved version, Transport Tycoon Deluxe, launched just a year later.

While plotting a Transport Tycoon sequel, Sawyer fell in love with roller coasters. And so his next project became RollerCoaster Tycoon, which released in 1999. It was a hit. RollerCoaster Tycoon 2 followed in 2002. It was an even bigger hit. Despite partnering with publishers such as Hasbro, Sawyer retained ownership of the RollerCoaster Tycoon franchise, and, reportedly, made a killing as its success grew.

It's at this point that Sawyer let go of RollerCoaster Tycoon's development reins and allowed others to have a go at steering the carriage. 2004's RollerCoaster Tycoon 3 was the work of Elite: Dangerous maker Frontier. That same year, Sawyer released Locomotion, which he called the spiritual successor to Transport Tycoon.

And then... nothing. Sawyer went dark for a decade, resurfacing in 2013 to release a mobile version of Transport Tycoon alongside a small development team called Origin8. And what of RollerCoaster Tycoon? Atari, which was once embroiled in a legal battle with Sawyer over unpaid royalties, currently licenses RollerCoaster Tycoon from Sawyer in order to make new games in the series. But these games have, so far, been poorly received.

Atari's RollerCoaster Tycoon 4 Mobile game was a micro-transaction-riddled disappointment. It was so bad, we awarded the game 1/10 in our [review](#). And the in-development RollerCoaster Tycoon World has suffered what looks like a troubled development, with [negativity surrounding the quality of the game](#), [delays](#), and a new studio at the helm. Again.

All this as Frontier works on Planet Coaster, a promising-looking rollercoaster management simulation many RollerCoaster Tycoon fans have pinned their hopes on.

So, it's an interesting time, I think, to interview Chris Sawyer. What's he up to these days, I wonder? How hands-on - if at all - is he in development? Why do his games

continue to enjoy such a passionate following, so many years after release? And, what does he think of what Atari's doing with RollerCoaster Tycoon?

In the process of setting this interview up, Sawyer is described to me as a "very private person". It's not that he doesn't do interviews, I'm told, it's just that he'd prefer to answer questions over email, via an intermediary. I don't normally go for email interviews, but it seems this is our only option, so I agree.

Here's the result: a chat with Chris Sawyer, the creator of RollerCoaster Tycoon, about pretty much everything.



Chris Sawyer.

Thanks for agreeing to answer our questions. First up, what are you working on right now?

Chris Sawyer: My "pet project" at the moment is an ambition to bring my old PC game RollerCoaster Tycoon 2 to modern mobile and tablet platforms - not an easy task given that the original game was written in low-level x86 assembler code which only works on the PC. But with the success of Transport Tycoon on mobile and with the experience and willingness of the small team from Origin8 to continue working for me it was looking a lot more feasible, so they're working with me to create a very faithful conversion of the original PC game.

I think as the newer versions of RollerCoaster Tycoon have moved on in terms of style and gameplay there's now a gap in the market for the original "classic" version of the game with its unique graphical style and more simplistic gameplay, and the success of Transport Tycoon has shown how well the mobile and tablet touch-screen interface suits this style of game. For me personally it's a very exciting project and I'm very much looking forward to getting it finished and seeing it published.

What's your day to day look like?

Chris Sawyer: Day-to-day activity varies quite a bit here. Right now I'm spending quite a bit of time each day working with the team from Origin8 while they try to make sense of my old RollerCoaster Tycoon 2 sourcecode files, but it's only when needed. These days I give more priority to things outside work - personal life, voluntary work in the community, and hobbies (including riding roller coasters - my "coaster count" is 657!) I hope I never have to go back to the old days of working 16 hours a day, seven days a week, though at the time I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it.

You mention you do voluntary work in the community. Can you elaborate?

Chris Sawyer: Amongst other things I go into one of the local primary schools one afternoon a week to help with their media team. Great fun and I think I learn just as much from the children as they learn from me.

What's the next real-life roller coaster on your list?

Chris Sawyer: Having been on so many roller coasters now it takes something really special to get me excited, something that looks fun rather than just fast, tall, most inversions or whatever. I like the look of Taron, currently under construction at Phantasialand in Germany. Lots of twisty track packed into a small area and well-themed with rocks and scenery. That'll definitely be on my list to do when it's complete.

Also a new roller coaster under construction at Kolmården in Sweden called Wildfire. This looks like it'll be fast and smooth with tall drops and loads of air time, and well-situated in a forested area of their safari-park.

You're perhaps best-known for creating the Tycoon series of games. When you look back at your body of work, which game are you most proud of, and why?

Chris Sawyer: In terms of success and its game design there's no doubt that RollerCoaster Tycoon 2 takes pride of place. I still love that game and everything about it, and it's amazing to know so many people have played and enjoyed it over the years. However as a programmer I think I'm most proud of Chris Sawyer's Locomotion as I feel it was the best-written piece of programming I've ever done. It was a whole load more complex than RollerCoaster Tycoon but the coding was structured much better and I got a big buzz out of writing code to handle the competing company AI, the plug-in data system (which a vast online community now supports), and getting the networked multiplayer system working reliably.

Is there a design philosophy that underpins all of your games?

Chris Sawyer: I never really had a design philosophy while writing the games, I just kind of worked on ideas which I thought were fun at the time. Looking back now though perhaps there's a Lego-like philosophy to my games. They're games where you build things block-by-block in a rather simplistic and restrictive environment, and then interact with those models to keep things working well, improving and re-building things when needed and being rewarded for constructive skills and good management.

Perhaps my Lego-like philosophy explains why I let Frontier and Atari take the reins for creating RollerCoaster Tycoon 3 and beyond? I knew the logical way to take the game forward was to add more detail using a projected 3D viewpoint and remove some of the block-like construction restrictions but I just couldn't get all that excited about taking the game in that direction for some reason, so the right thing to do was to hand the game over to others who were excited and inspired enough to take the game forward.

You've been a part of the game industry for over 30 years. What would you say are the most important changes you've witnessed?

Chris Sawyer: From the development point of view the biggest change has been the size and scale of development teams; from single-person lone developers in the old days to vast teams of programmers, artists, writers, and producers we now have. The downside of big teams is the vast cost. Nobody is willing to risk such enormous costs developing an original (i.e. risky) game, so although the games get bigger and better there's no diversity.

In some ways things are coming full-circle now because it's now easier than ever to create simple mobile games with small budgets and tiny teams but then they often struggle because of another more recent big change in the games industry: it's so easy to create games for mobiles there are now so many games available that it's quite a challenge to make any profit at all from them. The traditional game purchasing model rarely works on mobiles as players swarm towards free games, and using other methods of generating income within the game using advertising or in-app purchases can frustrate or warp the game playing experience.

I have a personal disgust for any game which deliberately tries to "hook" players into feeling they have to pay something extra to continue playing or to take short-cuts but it's a proven and successful income model.

Are you playing any games at the moment? Do you play modern games? Are you a fan of any particular genres, or game developers?

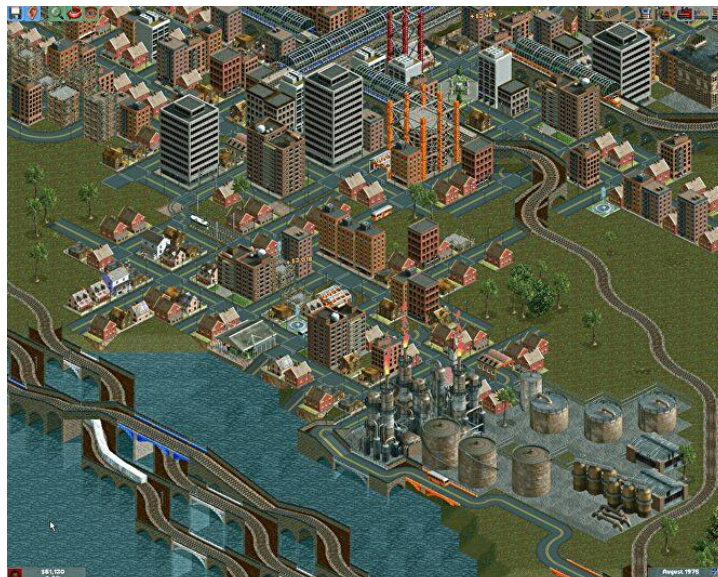
Chris Sawyer: To be honest I rarely play games these days. The world of games moved on and I didn't, and I miss the flawed style and clunky simplicity of games from 20 years ago. I admire the amazing graphics and awesome size and realism of many modern games but for some reason can't summon much enthusiasm to play them. Perhaps some are too realistic? I don't know, but bringing a game too close to realism doesn't work for me. I have a subscription to only one games magazine: Retro Gamer!

You own the RollerCoaster Tycoon IP and trademark. I understand it's very difficult for developers to retain the rights to their games when it comes to publisher funding and distribution. How did you come to own the RCT IP in the first place, and how have you managed to hold on to it for so long?

Chris Sawyer: Back in the late 1990s I created the first RollerCoaster Tycoon game completely independently, so it was almost complete before any publishers even saw it. That possibly made it easier to hold on to the IP as there was no doubt that it was my game rather than being funded or instigated by a publisher.

I was also fortunate that negotiations for publication were handled by my business agent Jacqui Lyons at Marjacq, who has always worked hard to ensure her clients keep control of as many rights as possible rather than just "selling out". I've no doubt that without her care and commitment over the years I would not have ended up in the remarkable position I'm in now, and I'm also sure the games wouldn't have been anything like as successful.

Perhaps also, the chosen publisher (Hasbro Interactive) didn't realise the potential long-term value of the IP at the time, in fact none of us did - It seemed like a risky game with a niche audience which was going to be challenging to market.



Sawyer's last brand new game was Locomotion, released in 2004.

You appeared to take a step back from game development after Locomotion came out in 2004. Why? And what were you up to in the gap between that game's release and starting up 31X Ltd in 2010?

Chris Sawyer: By the end of 2004 I'd been living/breathing and working on nothing but games for nearly 20 years and it was time to change priorities, take a break, reduce the workload and put a bit more time and effort into my personal life and other interests rather than spending 16 hours a day in front of the computer. I also felt I'd done what I wanted to achieve at the time and lacked inspiration for either taking the old games forward or creating new ones.

I was especially turned-off by the trend for games becoming more violent and destructive. The games industry was also moving on and games were becoming bigger and more complex and I just had no enthusiasm for those types of games, or for working with the larger-sized team needed for developing such games. The dispute with Atari over royalty accounting didn't help either. That took several years of lawyers and distractions and costs before we reached a settlement, and soured my view of the whole games industry.

I've read you described as a "mad genius". How would you describe yourself?

Chris Sawyer: Maybe the "mad" bit I'd agree with! Not sure how I'd describe myself - perhaps narrow-minded, self-motivated, obsessed with details, sometimes stubborn, often persistent, and usually playful.

You've been described as a "very private person". You rarely speak with the press or communicate with your fans. Why?

Chris Sawyer: In the mid-1990s I used to be very active on the social side with players and fans on the internet but with the success of Transport Tycoon it began to take over and ultimately got in the way of doing what I wanted to do, which was to create games with a free hand. Not only was it taking far too much time but it became difficult to keep focus on what was best for my games when everyone has their own very different personal opinions on how games should work or what features to include.

It would have been all too easy to create a "designed by committee" game so watered-down that it contained no character and just a lot of disjointed features bolted together. So since then I've kept my head down a lot more and just got on with creating my own vision of whatever game I was working on, even if that meant the game was flawed - at least it would have character and would stand out as being a bit different, and hopefully it would be a cohesive design. I never completely stopped reading fan forums and I have a great deal of respect for the fans and their views, but I rarely get personally involved in discussions.

As for the press, I've done quite a few interviews over the years and rarely turn them down, but I'm really not into self-promotion and not sure I can actually live up to the mythical character the online community sometimes perceive me as. I think ever since the original Transport Tycoon and certainly since the success of RollerCoaster Tycoon I feel the games have become much bigger than I am and I prefer to let the games do the talking.

Your games were incredibly influential to a generation of game designers, and are still loved by a loyal army of gamers. Why do your games enjoy such an enduring appeal?

Chris Sawyer: Maybe it's a blend of several things. They're very positive games which are all about construction, good design and management, and nurturing things, they allow players to be "creative", and I think they have an individual "character" to them in terms of how they look and feel.



Sawyer resurfaced in 2013 with a mobile version of Transport Tycoon.

In 2013 you released Transport Tycoon on mobile devices after a decade away from game development. What prompted the return? How did the game do?

Chris Sawyer: My business agent Jacqui Lyons was the driving force behind this. She could foresee how Transport Tycoon might suit modern touch-screen mobile devices so well and eventually we started the company 31X Ltd together to create new versions of Transport Tycoon. Initially we had a few false-starts and setbacks, mainly due to the difficulties of converting my old x86 assembler sourcecode and my reluctance to take shortcuts or "water down" the original game, but eventually we ended up with a finished game which looked and played really well on touch-screen devices.

Sales of the game have been healthy and it continues to sell well even several years after originally published and the feedback has generally been very positive.

You have a long-standing working relationship with Atari, that from what I can tell [has had its ups and downs](#). How would you describe this relationship?

Chris Sawyer: Yes it's been a bit of a roller coaster ride hasn't it! I don't bear grudges and I think we all learnt from the past, and my relationship with Atari is a healthy one right now.

Atari has a subsidiary called RCTO Productions, LLC, which appears to manage the RollerCoaster Tycoon games. I understand you own the trademark, but can you explain the ownership of the series in relation to Atari? What, exactly, does Atari have control of?

Chris Sawyer: I own the RollerCoaster Tycoon IP and Trademarks, and the rights to create and market new RollerCoaster Tycoon games are licensed to Atari Interactive.

How does the relationship work? When Atari licenses your RollerCoaster Tycoon trademark for a new game, do you have any say in quality control?

Chris Sawyer: I keep a very hands-off approach to Atari's new games in the series. I never wanted to be involved in their design or development, and given the value of the franchise to Atari I would expect that their own quality control would ensure the quality of the finished products.

You mention you prefer to keep a very hands-off approach to Atari's new games in the RCT series. Why?

Chris Sawyer: I think you have to understand that my personal vision for RollerCoaster Tycoon was fulfilled with the last version I created myself, RollerCoaster Tycoon 2, and I had no interest in working on someone else's vision for future versions of the game. Much better to let those who do have the inspiration fulfil their own vision of the next iteration of the game and not to interfere.

RollerCoaster Tycoon has moved on a long way since its early days as RCT1 and RCT2 and while I'm intrigued to see how the newer games evolve and expand I'm not the right person to guide or restrict the design and development of games so different to my own.

What did you think of RollerCoaster Tycoon 4 Mobile? Did you have any involvement with the development?

Chris Sawyer: Atari had a free hand in how they designed/created and marketed RCT4Mobile - I had no involvement other than seeing a few builds during development. I know there's been a lot of controversy over the marketing model and the game design but there's no doubt it's been a success for Atari.

What's your involvement with Atari's RollerCoaster Tycoon World? Are you working with the developers in any capacity?

Chris Sawyer: I hear from the developers occasionally and I've seen a few builds but other than that I'm completely hands-off. This is very much Atari's project and I'm not involved in the design or development.

We've reported a number of times on what looks like the troubled development of RollerCoaster Tycoon World. What's your view on the quality of the product and its management from Atari?

Chris Sawyer: In some ways I'm not surprised that development has been so troublesome - it's aiming to be a very big game with high ambitions and I know how complex even the earlier/simpler games RollerCoaster Tycoon 1 and 2 were. I suppose it's good that Atari recognised things were going wrong and were willing to delay the game and go back to the drawing board with a new team, and hopefully they will now ensure the game gets properly finished and achieves the ambitions they're aiming for.

Are you worried that Atari is harming the reputation of the series you created and the trademark you own with the release of RollerCoaster Tycoon 4 Mobile and RollerCoaster Tycoon World?

Chris Sawyer: To a certain extent I have to trust that they will build the RollerCoaster Tycoon franchise positively. They know what they're doing and they certainly wouldn't want to devalue such an important part of their portfolio of games franchises.

You say you have to trust that Atari will build the RCT franchise positively, and I think all your fans hope this is the case, but so many of their recent games have disappointed. Minimum, for example, Atari's recent shooter, has been unplayable for five months. Is there a scenario where Atari creates a RCT game so poorly received that you revoke the license? Is that something you'd be willing to do?

Chris Sawyer: Atari have a limited licence, so it's in their own interest to ensure the new RollerCoaster Tycoon games are high enough quality to build the franchise over the coming years and I'm sure they want to ensure the continued success of the games.

Do you have a working relationship with Frontier Developments? Were you involved in any way with the mobile port of RollerCoaster Tycoon 3?

Chris Sawyer: I was a consultant on the game during development of RollerCoaster Tycoon 3 for the PC in 2003/2004, but wasn't involved in their recent conversion of the game.

Frontier Developments is working on Planet Coaster, which many consider to be the spiritual successor to RollerCoaster Tycoon. Have you considered licensing the RollerCoaster Tycoon mark to Frontier and working with them on a new game in the series? I imagine fans of your work would be delighted by the prospect!

Chris Sawyer: The rights for developing new RollerCoaster Tycoon games have been licensed to Atari for a number of years now so it would have been up to Atari whether they wanted to sub-license the rights to Frontier Developments or use Frontier to develop the new game, so it's a question I can't really answer.

How would you describe your relationship with David Braben?

Chris Sawyer: I first met David in 1988 I think, while I was doing the PC conversion of his game "Zarch" (published as "Virus" for the PC), and we've kept in touch and crossed paths many times over the years since, not least because Frontier created expansion packs for RollerCoaster Tycoon 2 and went on to create RollerCoaster Tycoon 3.

I admire David's ongoing ambitions with the Elite series of games and his continuing enthusiasm for games in general, and for turning his games programming career into a large and very successful company with vast teams and resources to bring his projects to fruition.

What's next for you? Are you considering making a new game?

Chris Sawyer: At the moment I'm only looking as far ahead as seeing RollerCoaster Tycoon 2 finished and published on mobile platforms. Beyond that I have no idea. I'd never rule out creating a new original game but I think it's unlikely. I feel like I'm getting on a bit now age-wise and want to take things a bit easier!