

Chris Sawyer Interview

How Did it All Start?

It's safe to say that there was no story in 1999 quite like *RollerCoaster Tycoon*. It was initially regarded as a sort of cut-rate updating of Peter Molyneux and Bullfrog's 1994 title *Theme Park*. But it quickly became clear that the game was every bit as deep, colorful and ingenious as any other game out there. Although it didn't have the huge hype machine behind it that some games enjoy, what it did have was legs. *RCT* hammered down the pegs and pitched a tent on the game charts, and it has been camping there ever since.

Following the release of its first expansion pack, *Corkscrew Follies*, interest spiked again -- so there was naturally a second expansion, this time called *Loopy Landscapes*. Although *RCT* has never left our hard drives, we were glad to add something extra to it with *LL*, and decided it was a good time to talk to Chris Sawyer about the phenomenon that is *RollerCoaster Tycoon*.

Daily Radar: So, Chris, how long have you been in Scotland, and why did you choose to make it your base of operations?

Chris Sawyer: I've grown up here in Scotland, and at the moment I can't imagine living and working anywhere else. I like the peace and quiet here, the clean air and the relative lack of traffic on the roads. I could probably run my business from anywhere in the world now that communications are so good, but I'm quite happy staying here for the moment.

"I did run the idea past various people in the industry, but the response was so dismissive that I decided the only way forward was to create the entire game independently."

DR: What are some of the other games you have worked on prior to *RollerCoaster Tycoon*?

CS: *Transport Tycoon* was my previous game, and was another self-designed and managed project which was a tremendous success, especially in Europe and the Far East. Before that, I did conversion and enhancement work on a whole host of games, mostly converting from the Commodore Amiga to the PC. I did the PC versions of games like *Frontier Elite 2*, *Conqueror*, *Campaign*, *Birds of Prey* and *Dino Dini's Goal*.

DR: Did you pitch the idea to publishers before you started on it, or did you develop a working demo and then show that around? What was the general reaction to a rollercoaster sim game?

CD: When I was starting to think about doing a rollercoaster sim game, I did run the idea past various people in the industry, but the response was so dismissive that I decided the only way forward was to create the entire game independently. I had a very good feel for what I wanted to create, and didn't want anyone else taking control or changing the game into what they thought it should be.

I had worked on the game for nearly a year and a half before even approaching publishers, by which time I had much more than a little demo to show -- I could show much of the game already finished and working, so publishers could see exactly what it was that made the game so much fun. The reaction from publishers still wasn't entirely positive, but Hasbro were one of the few companies who could understand the game for what it was, rather than for what they wanted it to be.

Perhaps because of their toy-based background, Hasbro could understand the toylike nature of the game and were prepared to let me finish the game the way I wanted to.

DR: *Honestly, did you think RCT would be as wildly successful as it has been?*

CS: Not at all! I continued creating the game because it was something which really interested me personally, something which I wanted to create for myself, but it was always in the back of my mind that I could be creating a game with very limited appeal. It was only really towards the end of the project, when I was letting some of my friends and neighbors playtest the game, that I started to think this could be something *big*.

One of my neighbor's children came over to play the game one morning, and couldn't be persuaded to stop playing for lunch, tea or anything else and only left when her parents dragged her home late that evening. I knew at that point that there was at least a market for this kind of game, though I had no idea how wide that market would be.

"The success of *RollerCoaster Tycoon* has a positive and a negative side."

DR: *How has your life changed since that game has taken off? Have you enjoyed a can of Tennent's Super on The Govan Road?*

CS: I'm sure I've been up the Govan Road, but I'm afraid I've never tried Tennent's Super -- I don't drink at all! Seriously though, the success of *RollerCoaster Tycoon* has a positive and a negative side. On the negative side, it creates a tremendous amount of pressure to build on the success, to create another successful game, or create a sequel or other versions, and to live up to the reputation I seem to have.

On the other hand, I'm now in the position where I can fund the entire development of my next game myself and don't have to worry about relationships with publishers, deadlines or what other people think I should be doing. I can create my next game completely independently, take risks with its design and concentrate on what I feel is important in a game, rather than what a publisher's design or marketing department thinks will work.

DR: *What do you think has been the reason behind the amazing success of the game?*

CS: I think it taps into two basic human instincts. We all like building or constructing things, and we instinctively want to look after, or nurture, things. This is what *RollerCoaster Tycoon* is all about: You build the park up piece by piece, the way you want to, and then you want to keep the park running smoothly, because it's *your* park. When things go well in the park, you're happy and want to make things even better, and when things go badly in your park, you want to fix it and make all the little guests happy again. It also helps that the subject matter is so much fun as well -- a theme or amusement park is, after all, all about people having fun.

DR: *I think RCT made me a better capitalist than it did a rollercoaster designer -- after all, my first big insight was to double the price of the umbrellas when it started to rain. Do you think the emphasis is more on the rollercoaster or on the tycoon?*

CS: The emphasis is much more on the rollercoasters and park design, rather than the financial side. I didn't want players to be held back by the strategy side of the game. I wanted them to enjoy designing and building the park rather than getting frustrated because they couldn't master stocks and shares or staff disputes. The management and financial side is there of course, but it's a game about building a theme park rather than just managing it.

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A One-Man Show

DR: *If there is one thing park owners should concentrate on to make themselves better at the game, what would that be?*

CS: Listen to the guests! Success hinges on whether or not the guests are happy and enjoying your rides. You can't force the guests to go on rides they don't like or stay in a park full of vandalism or litter. Keep the guests happy, and they'll stay longer and spend more money, so keep checking what they're thinking and don't spend all your money on that one giant coaster you're building if everyone is looking for somewhere to eat or drink!

DR: *My girlfriend soon became an RCT junkie. For some reason, she would continue to develop maps long after she had met the goals of the scenario -- women are funny that way. Did you design the game to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, or did you simply make a game that you wanted to play and hope that other people would dig it?*

CS: I really just created the kind of game I personally wanted to play and hoped others would also enjoy it. I actually expected the game to have quite a narrow appeal and have been very surprised to hear so many different kinds of people enjoy it, including the very young, very old, women -- and even the "kill everything in sight" type of games player.

"I don't think any of the current consoles have the right kind of power to allow the kind of sequel I envisage."

DR: *In a recent interview, you indicated that you wouldn't think about doing RCT2 unless you had the technology to do it the way you wanted to. Given the power of the PS2 or Xbox, would you consider doing it for one of those platforms? Do you think RCT could be done well on a console?*

CS: I don't think any of the current consoles have the right kind of power to allow the kind of sequel I envisage. They are wonderful if you want to do certain things, mostly involving texture-mapped polygons, but that would be a backward step for *RollerCoaster Tycoon*. To keep the depth of detail and allow variable view angles and first-person perspective means using ray-traced pixel-based rendering rather than polygons, and no console (or PC graphics card) gives enough power to do this fast enough yet.

You could create a very good game similar to *RollerCoaster Tycoon* on a console, but it would have to be changed drastically to make up for the limitations of the display, power and RAM, and to make it accessible to the average console games player. But I think the game would have changed so much that it would no longer be *RollerCoaster Tycoon*, and it would be better to create something new just for the console market and make the most of what the consoles do well and the kind of market they appeal to.

DR: *Would you ever consider developing strictly for a console?*

CS: If the style and type of game I want to create will work best on a console, then I will certainly take that route. *RollerCoaster Tycoon* (and *Transport Tycoon*) were games which suited the PC platform particularly well, and so I concentrated on getting the most out of the game by focusing on just the PC. I'm no longer a follower of technology, rushing out to buy the latest PC add-on or console just

because I have to play with it and use it in my games. My focus is to create games which are fun to play, and the technology or the platform are secondary.

DR: *We know you do the majority of the work on RCT and its two expansions yourself, but surely you have some other people on your team. How do they help you?*

CS: Simon Foster, who creates all the graphics for my games, is really the only other full-time member of my team. I use a few other freelancers when I need them for particular tasks like creating music or sound effects or writing the installer, but everything else I do myself.

"I can't create giant cinematic sequences or ultrarealistic motion-captured 3D, but is that really what a game is all about?"

DR: *Given the technological sophistication of today's PCs and consoles, and the increasing costs of development, is it realistic that a small crew such as yours could continue to create software that competes with companies like id, EA, Blizzard, etc.?*

CS: I see no reason why I can't continue to create competitive games the way I do at the moment. I can't create giant cinematic sequences or ultrarealistic motion-captured 3D, but is that really what a game is all about? I think there's plenty of room for small developers like myself who can ignore the latest trends and just create something that's fun to play.

DR: What kind of games do you enjoy playing besides simulations? Has there been a game recently that you particularly enjoyed?

CS: I haven't had time to play anything recently! However, as well as simulation/construction type games, I do enjoy driving games and have played many racing and rally simulations.

DR: *Musicians and writers often steal from each other, lifting notes here, "borrowing" lines there. Does the same thing happen among developers? Do you ever play a game and think "man, that's cool. I gotta steal that!"?*

CS: It's a thin line between inspiration and plagiarism! I'm sure my games have been inspired and influenced by many other games I've seen and played, but that's as far as it goes. You can't use code or graphics from someone else's product. However, what you can do is think "Hey, I like this, but I can do it even better..." and work out your own way of doing something.

DR: *Finally, could you give us a hint about your supersecret next game?*

CS: I won't be discussing it until it's almost ready for publication. Things change, ideas change, technology changes, and although I'm working on something at the moment, there's no guarantee it will see publication in its current form. Better to get on with the work rather than to talk about it!

[Jim Preston](#)

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