Chris Sawyer's Locomotion Interview

OVERVIEW

by Pat McMasters on 10/06/2004
We sit down and talk to Chris Sawyer about his upcoming game, Locomotion.

GAME DETAILS

Chris Sawyer's Locomotion
Genre: Driving Simulators
Publisher: Atari, Inc
Developer: Chris Sawyer

More From The Transportation Genre

Q: What was the deciding factor behind creating Locomotion?

A: Ever since I create Transport Tycoon back in 1994/95 I've wanted to create a sequel, something bigger, better, and more detailed than the original was, but with the same gameplay which everyone enjoyed so much. I've always been very interested in transport, particularly railways, so it was inevitable that I'd eventually return to the subject after spending so long working on RollerCoaster Tycoon and its sequels. I also saw that although there are a few other similar types of game available, none quite had the same emphasis on construction and depth of gameplay as I envisaged, so there was an opportunity for a new game to provide this.

Q: With all the new and graphically enhanced transportation games out, who decided to build the game off an earlier engine?

A: I've only seen a handful of new transport games and personally I prefer the graphical style of Locomotion, but then I am a bit biased. The game engine was specifically designed for Locomotion quite a few years ago and then used in a modified form for RollerCoaster Tycoon 2, so yes it's old but it is being used for exactly what it was designed for. My games have always been gameplay-led, with the visual presentation and graphical style being designed to suit the gameplay. Choosing an isometric viewpoint with pre-rendered graphics over a projected polygonal view was a very positive decision from me. Isometric views have so many advantages in terms of the gameplay experience – They have a fixed level of detail so you can't feel short-changed when you zoom right in only to find the limit of detail in 3D, the semi-overhead view gives you the best 'world building' viewpoint, the lack of projection (objects not getting smaller the further they are away) means less scrolling around the map when you want to see what's going on, and the pre-rendered graphics are better than anything which could be rendered in-game at the same resolution.

Q: With dated graphics and an older engine, was it easy to avoid problems during development or did you run into any unexpected difficulties?

A: Using older technology doesn't necessarily make things easier; the pre-rendered graphics in particular took an immense amount of effort to get looking 'right'. I always had a particular look and feel I wanted to create for the game and trying to make that work consistently over all the objects was a struggle. Other areas of the game which were a struggle were to do with the size and scale of the game world – The computer-simulated competitors were particularly difficult to get right, and right up until late in development I didn't know whether it was going to be possible to get them playing well enough.

Q: With the new Rollercoaster Tycoon being released soon, is there any possibility of Locomotion getting ported to the new engine? If so, will any new elements be implemented into gameplay?

A: There are pros and cons of switching to a projected 3D view and many of the 'cons' could actually damage the gameplay of a game like Locomotion. Yes I think that a new projected 3D transport game is possible, but I think it would need to be designed from the ground up with projected 3D in mind. This could mean that the whole style of gameplay could change, in fact it could be a very different game, losing out on some of what makes Locomotion fun to play. I think there's a common misconception that slapping a projected 3D view on a map-based 2D style game automatically improves the gameplay, but it doesn't, and even the graphical style itself can suffer in the transition. What's needed is a complete re-design from the ground up with projected 3D in mind, which means designing the new game to take advantage of the benefits of 3D while not exposing the downsides of a projected view. Personally I'm not sure that's possible with Locomotion without losing its character and gameplay style – I've seen other world-building projected

3D games and while they can be a good 'visual experience' I just don't find them particularly fun to play for any length of time.

Q: After the release of the demo, many gamers have complained about the road & track building tools, which is very reminiscent of the RollerCoaster Tycoon layout, is there any possibility of the common "Drag and Drop" method to easily build roads and rails?

A: This is something which I had been looking into right from the start of development, but couldn't find a satisfactory solution. There are so many elements to the problem of 'drag and drop' – The exact routing of rails and roads is very critical to both the efficiency of the services and the costs of construction, and every little curve, bend, straight and incline can be very important to the player. Simple drag and drop style construction just wouldn't give the control needed to build the best route as the game just wouldn't be able to predict what the player's priorities are – For example, should the route avoid a group of buildings because the player wants to avoid the costs of demolition, or go straight through them to give a faster route, or build a bridge or tunnel above or below them? These kinds of decisions are crucial to the gameplay and taking them away from the player would mean losing a major part of the game. Ideally I wanted to come up with a compromise that involved less clicks but just as much control but it just proved impossible.

Q: Can we expect to see any expansions of Locomotion?

A: The game is designed for expansion and there are various ideas being floated, but I think it depends on how successful the game is and whether we could come up with an expansion that players actually appreciate.

Q: One of the strongest aspects of this game that many have noticed is the AI. Can you tell us is it brand new code for the AI or if you used any previous builds?

A: I'm certainly far happier with the AI in Locomotion than in my old game Transport Tycoon. It's probably the most complex code I've ever written and it was very satisfying seeing the results once everything was fine-tuned. The thing with the AI in a game like Locomotion is that it has to deal with a completely unpredictable world and be able to make decisions instantaneously depending on only the conditions at that particular time – You can't pre-script anything because each world is different and each player plays in different ways.

Q: Where do you expect the transportation genre of gaming to go? Do you see a large fanbase for future releases?

A: I think there's a strong interest in this kind of game and I'm sure that will continue. While I'm uncertain about the benefits of this kind of game moving to a projected 3D view, there are plenty of other logical areas to expand to, like even larger world sizes, linked worlds, or multiplayer online gameplay where dozens of players all play within the same world.

Q: Is there any possibility of changing the time period in which the game is set? For instance a "near-future" time period with innovative new technologies? If not, why?

A: This is definitely one area of the game which could be expanded, along with perhaps going back further into the past with horse-drawn vehicles and primitive railways.