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Chris Sawyer, Chris Sawyer Software Development

Simulation Tycoon Speaks

We sit down with the man behind the hugely popular Roller Coaster Tycoon series to discuss the sim genre, online gaming, and where his inspiration comes from.

GameDAILY BIZ: Where do you find inspiration for your games and what draws you toward micromanagement simulators?

Chris Sawyer: From my personal interests mostly - I tend to create games about subjects which really appeal to me like transport systems and roller coasters. The style of games I create is also down to what I enjoy doing - I like building things, fine-tuning things, and then watching the results in action.

BIZ: If you were to guess, what would you say it is about your titles that draws in fans and creates such a lasting impression?

CS: I think it might be that people generally like to "build and nurture" things, and become personally attached to their handiwork. I think it's in our nature as humans that we get satisfaction from building things and then looking after them, and that's exactly what you're doing in most of my games - You build the roller coasters and design the park, then get satisfaction from keeping things running smoothly and watching the people enjoying your park.

BIZ: How have things changed for you as a designer from Transport Tycoon to RollerCoaster Tycoon 3?

CS: The biggest change is the vastly increased scale of projects these days. Transport Tycoon, and even RollerCoaster Tycoon 1 and 2 were easily created by my own small team, Locomotion was a struggle to achieve in the same way, and RollerCoaster Tycoon 3 was created using a vast team at Frontier Developments.

BIZ: Have the advances in computer technology helped you in any way to better realizing your vision when designing a title?

CS: The increase in processor power over the years is fantastic from my point of view. Back in the days of Transport Tycoon I had to limit the size and complexity of the game and use very simple algorithms to handle AI, whereas nowadays I can use the extra power to handle much more detail and build much more effective and characterful AI.

BIZ: What were some of the most exciting or thrilling aspects of working on / designing RollerCoaster Tycoon 3?

CS: In my role as executive producer I really only got involved with small bits of the design which I felt strongly about, things like the look and feel of roller coasters and making sure they still had that same authenticity and visual solidity they had in the previous games. Most fascinating for me was finally seeing the roller coasters I had designed for the previous games displayed in full 3D and even being able to 'ride' them. It was a big thrill to see the rides from a completely new perspective.

BIZ: About how long does it take to research a title like RollerCoaster Tycoon? What are some of the things involved?

CS: It's really hard work. You have to go to lots of theme parks, ride roller coasters, take photos, and watch what goes on! In fact I didn't do as much "research" as I wanted, and ended up using information from books, web sites, roller coaster clubs, and contacts in the theme park industry, and only visited a few parks during development of the games. If I'd done as much "research" as I wanted I would never have got the games finished!

BIZ: What are some of the unique challenges you face as developer who prefers small teams as opposed to large ones?

CS: My biggest challenge is to find a new role within a team that I am both comfortable with and effective with. Up until recently I have been working with only a graphic artist and sound artist, and handled all the design, programming, and management myself, and I really enjoyed working like that. In a larger team I have to have a more limited role, and I find that difficult - I like to get involved with all aspects of a game's creation, right from the low level programming to the top level design and management of the project.

BIZ: A growing trend in the gaming community is for games to be played online, reaching out to a global community. Do you see the RollerCoaster Tycoon franchise eventually following this trend?

CS: Yes, I'm sure it's a possibility, but it will also be a big challenge as well. RollerCoaster Tycoon was designed around a certain style of single-player gameplay, and an online or multiplayer version would need to be re-designed from the ground up for a different style of gameplay. The challenge will be to re-design the game in such a way that it works and plays well as a multiplayer game but still has the essential RollerCoaster Tycoon elements and character.

BIZ: Thanks for your time Chris.