GAMESPOT NEWS
news.gamespot.com

Search: search for news by keyword or title   FIND IT!   Wednesday, April 7, 2004

Sidebar

RollerCoaster Tycoon designer offers first details on new title

Chris Sawyer reveals what's behind Locomotion. He speaks with GameSpot--and shows the first screens ever--in this exclusive interview.

more screens (3)
View the slideshow »
Screenshot Index »

Designer Chris Sawyer has been working on strategy games for years. In 1999, he quietly released a game called RollerCoaster Tycoon (RCT), which went on to become an incredible success. All told, the RollerCoaster Tycoon franchise, which includes the original RCT, its expansion packs, RCT2, and that game's expansion packs, has collectively sold 7 million units.

But that original RollerCoaster Tycoon was by no means Sawyer's first game. He had previously worked on other titles, including one called Transport Tycoon, a game that let you build your own travel company that competed with rival outfits in the business of whisking happy passengers from point A to point B.

Today, Sawyer is lending his input for the development of RollerCoaster Tycoon 3, but his primary focus is on Locomotion, the spiritual successor to Transport Tycoon.

GameSpot has the first details on this new game, from Sawyer himself.

GameSpot: Thanks for taking the time out for this interview, Chris. Can you give us a brief overview of this next project?

Chris Sawyer: I'm working on a new management strategy game where you construct and run transport networks, very much in the mold of Transport Tycoon. Internally we're calling it Locomotion.

GS: After the considerable success of the RollerCoaster Tycoon series, why did you decide to revisit Transport Tycoon?

CS: Ever since the original, I've wanted to create a new version of Transport Tycoon. In fact, I've been working on new versions on and off since 1996. However, these projects were either abandoned or postponed while I concentrated on RollerCoaster Tycoon and RollerCoaster Tycoon 2. In fact, both [of these games] grew out of code written specifically for a new version of Transport Tycoon. Once RollerCoaster Tycoon 2 was finished, I decided to concentrate fully on creating a new transport game, using all the ideas and experience from the previous attempts and from the original game.

GS: How is this project going to be at least as engaging as both the original Transport Tycoon and RollerCoaster Tycoon? What features or themes are you planning to emphasize?

CS: I think the fun in both Transport Tycoon and RollerCoaster Tycoon is 50 percent in the construction process and 50 percent in world-watching. Of course, there are other things people enjoy in these games, like making a profit and beating other companies, but the main enjoyment comes from building things and watching the world in action. This is also my goal for the new game--to ensure that the construction process is inspiring and the world-watching process is fun and rewarding.

GS: The RollerCoaster Tycoon series is known not only for its family-friendly gameplay, but also for just how easy it is to pick up and play. Will Locomotion be as accessible? How are you making sure that the game has enough depth while making sure it isn't too complicated?

CS: I think that, if anything, Locomotion will be simpler to play than Transport Tycoon. Over the years I've learned that adding complexity doesn't necessarily mean a game is more fun to play. Of course some people like complexity, but most people just want to have fun. In many ways, playing Locomotion will only need similar skills to playing RollerCoaster Tycoon: If you can master roller coaster construction in RollerCoaster Tycoon, then you'll be adept at building transport routes in Locomotion. The depth of the new game comes from the interaction with the landscape and the activities of competing companies. There's always something interesting going on in the game, and much of what goes on depends on how you play the game.

GS: Obviously, things have changed a bit since 1994, when Transport Tycoon was first released. There's more advanced technology available to craft graphics, sound, and additional features like online support.

We've seen that RollerCoaster Tycoon 3 will attempt to take advantage of some of these new developments. How are you approaching the development of Locomotion, and what are you doing differently than you did with Transport Tycoon?

CS: To me, the most useful advance in technology since Transport Tycoon is the amount of processing power and memory available to the new game. I was never happy with the AI of competing transport companies in Transport Tycoon, but with around a hundredfold increase in processor power, I've been able to create much more effective and challenging opponents for players in the new game. It also meant [the new game] could handle many more transport vehicles, larger maps, and multiple-level bridges and tunnels instead of just land-based construction.

GS: Can you address your approach to gameplay with Locomotion?

CS: Getting the gameplay right in Locomotion was always the top priority, and other aspects of the game, like the graphical style, were designed specifically to work well with the gameplay. Given that the gameplay mostly involves construction and world-watching, two things become a priority--firstly, that the player can see everything on the screen at the maximum level of detail so they can always see what's going on without having to constantly move, rotate, and zoom the view around to home in on individual objects, and secondly, that the construction process be presented in a clear and consistent way so that players can quickly get a feel for whether track or road sections will fit, without having to worry about the perspective making things different sizes depending on [distance]. The isometric viewpoint suits both these issues perfectly. It gives maximum detail regardless of how near or far objects are from the screen, and it gives a very consistent view for the construction process. It also allows much more to be seen onscreen at any one time and makes the game feel like it's your own toy world you're playing in, a bit like looking down at a tabletop train set.

GS: We understand that you've essentially been developing the game in isolation, without any input from publisher Atari or from many other sources, for that matter. Why did you choose this approach, and how has it affected development?

CS: I've always had a clear idea of what I wanted to achieve in the new game but until recently wasn't sure whether I could achieve it or how long it would take. Developing the game independently meant I could take the risk without having to commit to a particular design and a completion date, neither of which were certain until very recently. It also meant I was free to shift focus and experiment with other ideas along the way, either in terms of completely new games or in terms of changing the game design depending on what did or didn't work well. RollerCoaster Tycoon started off as just an experiment using Transport Tycoon 2 game code in 1996/97.

GS: As the creator of one of the most popular management strategy games in recent years, what are your thoughts on the state of such games? Are management games due for a comeback?

CS: There have been some great management strategy games on the PC in the last few years, and I'm sure we'll continue to see a steady supply of new ones, albeit mainly based on the current genres of successful management games.

GS: What are your thoughts on how the rise of consoles has factored into the development of management games, if at all--and can both PC and console audiences support such games in the future?

CS: The PC is ideal for this kind of game. High-resolution graphics for maximum detail on screen, mouse control for easy point-and-click construction, and massive memory and hard disks for maximum simulation detail and world size. Consoles are another matter. Apart from the differences in screen detail and interface style, players tend to want a much quicker fix of entertainment from a console, and this lends itself to a very different style of game. I'm sure management strategy games can be successful on a console, but the design needs to be very carefully adapted to suit both the console hardware and the type of player who plays on a console.

GS: Considering your background with strategy games like the Tycoon series, is it safe to assume that you'll continue to make such games in the future? Will we see a RollerCoaster Tycoon 4 and a Locomotion 2, or will we see completely different kinds of games from you?

CS: I expect I'll stick to the style of games I enjoy most--anything which focuses on construction and management--but who knows what might inspire me in the future? RollerCoaster Tycoon was born out of a sudden fascination with roller coasters, and if other new ideas come along which really inspire me, then I could end up creating something very different.

GS: Finally, is there anything else you'd like to add about Locomotion?

CS: Locomotion has been a long time in the making, but I'm sure that when it's finished players will appreciate that it's not just a nice-looking game; it's one of the best-playing games of its type. Watch out for the official announcement soon!

GS: Thanks, Chris.