

Enigmatic developer Chris Sawyer on remaking *Transport Tycoon* for mobile devices

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Chris Sawyer is one of gaming's greatest enigmas. In an industry that has taken to social media with great verve and fire, the creator of the classics *Transport Tycoon* and *RollerCoaster Tycoon* is a reclusive anachronism: no Twitter profile, no YouTube account. Sawyer's [unpretentious personal webpage](#) looks something fished out of a Geocities archive and hasn't been updated since February of 2007.

He was responsible for two legendary game franchises of the 1990s, but Sawyer didn't crave fame. After the release of *Locomotion* in 2004 (his fourth game as lead producer), he dropped the mic and retired in the way that Jay-Z has long threatened to but never has. Besides the odd infrequent update to his homepage (usually about trains), Sawyer had vanished. Now, almost ten years on from his last game, he's returned to the industry he left behind, making a new version of *Transport Tycoon* for mobile devices.

As his all-but-abandoned webpage and abstention from social media suggest, Chris Sawyer is a man who values his privacy. My requests to speak face-to-face or on the phone with Sawyer were denied ("that's the kind of thing Chris is adamant about not doing," his publicist told me), and even my emailed questions were passed onto him through an intermediary.

"I made a conscious decision to reduce the workload and give more priority to other aspects of my life after so many years focussed entirely on games development," Sawyer told me via email, of course. But where had he gone to for so many years?

In the late 1990s the Nintendo generation started getting drivers' licences and the Atari generation started making new generations. It would be another few years before anyone could credibly argue that videogames were mainstream, but in a couple of decades they had moved from a niche, Ham radio-style hobby into a significant part of pop culture's background noise.

1994 was a banner year for computer games. That year saw the release of *X-Com*, *System Shock*, and *Wing Commander III*: all hugely important games whose influence is still felt today. Alongside them came a game called *Transport Tycoon*, a sandbox business and transport network planning simulation from an unknown named Chris Sawyer.

The burgeoning video game hobby was a trampoline to fame for a certain kind of game developer in the 90s. Coders had started to become public personalities: *Populous* and *Fable* creator Peter Molyneux, the serial over-promiser whose products never quite lived up to his mind-bending hype; John Romero, the *Doom* developer referenced in this (in)famous ad for Daikatana; Richard Garriott, the Texas-raised creator of the Ultima RPGs who referred to himself as "Lord British" and took his holidays in [orbit whenever possible](#). The egos had landed.

Nestled in amongst these outsized personalities was Chris Sawyer, he of the rarely-updated home page. "I remember seeing *Transport Tycoon* at Microprose back [in 1994]", *X-Com* creator Julian Gollop told me. "But I never saw Chris Sawyer."

Sawyer might not have drawn much attention, but his games certainly did. *Transport Tycoon* is in many ways the precursor of world-building games like *Minecraft* that have conquered the gaming world in recent years. In Sawyer's game, the player is dropped into the middle of a randomly-generated world, and given free rein to unite its isolated cities with railways, bus services, and airlines.

The highway systems and rail networks of *Transport Tycoon* may seem like a drier subject matter than the fantasy-flavoured *Minecraft*, but Sawyer's game prefigured the appeal that an open sandbox world would have. "One of my fondest gaming memories started with me loading up *Transport Tycoon* one evening to show to a couple friends," game developer [Sarah Northway](#) recalls. "Eight hours later we were still gathered around my monitor, the sun was rising, and we had no idea where the time had gone."

The genius of *Transport Tycoon* was that it created complex systems and let the player loose to put them together as he or she willed. It was *Lego* in computer form.

It wasn't just the players who held Sawyer in a high regard his peers did as well. "One thing I do remember that particularly struck me about *Transport Tycoon* when I saw was just how awesomely sophisticated it seemed," said Julian Gollop. "Especially the interface, because he had essentially programmed his own Windows-style interface on top of DOS, which in itself must have been quite a lot of effort, let alone making the actual game. The *X-Com* interface was incredibly primitive by comparison."

After graduating from Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Sawyer got his start in the games development business in the 1980s working on porting Amiga games like *Elite* to the PC. Having his own computer at home, Sawyer was able to work remotely on projects for British game publishers, prefiguring the rise of telecommuting by a couple of decades. "The only other games developers I had contact with were probably the ones I worked with on conversions -- people like David Braben, Jonathan Griffiths, and Dino Dini," Sawyer told me. "Back then it was much easier to [work independently], to create something a little different, as the development time and costs of games were such that you could afford to experiment."

Like a frustrated novelist hired to do translations of other people's works, Sawyer itched to make a game of his own. Playing games by the developing giants of the time ("Sid Meier, Peter Molyneux, and Will Wright, and their games *Railroad Tycoon*, *Populous*, and *Sim City* were my biggest influences at the time," he recalls), Sawyer started sketching out prototypes. Sawyer's love of trains merged with the open-ended sandbox-style gameplay championed by his idols, and the game that would become *Transport Tycoon* started to come together. "I wanted to have a gameworld on the screen with little vehicles all going about their business," Sawyer says, "something that was fun to watch as well as rewarding to play."

After developing a relationship as a work-for-hire programmer with Microprose (one Britain's biggest publishers of computer games in the 1990s) Sawyer convinced them to take a chance on one of his designs, a game he called "*Interactive Transport Simulation*". A game about building highways and managing railroad timetables seemed as much a risk back then as it would today ("I was fully prepared to return to doing conversions if [*Transport Tycoon*] didn't work out," Sawyer says), but Microprose eventually came around to the idea of releasing the game with the decidedly more marketable moniker *Transport Tycoon* so called to slot into the Microprose catalog alongside Sid

Meier's *Railroad Tycoon*, the very game that had inspired Sawyer to begin with.

Despite the unlikely subject matter, *Transport Tycoon* was an immediate and unqualified success for Microprose. *Next Generation* called it "the best economic sim since *Civilization*". The normally reserved *PC Gamer* deemed it "as good as PC gaming gets". Sales were brisk, and Microprose immediately put Sawyer to work on an expanded "Deluxe" version of the game, and then commissioned a sequel. *RollerCoaster Tycoon*, a game that took the *Transport Tycoon* model and compressed it down to building theme parks and designing roller coasters (another passion of Sawyer's) was released in 1999, after Microprose had been purchased by American games company Hasbro. *RollerCoaster Tycoon* and its sequels were a breakthrough success, generating more than \$180 million in revenue it's still one of the best-selling PC games series of all time. Sawyer was a millionaire.

The French publisher Infogrames purchased the ailing Hasbro/Microprose in 2001 and rebranded it with the name of another corporate acquisition: Atari. Infogrames and Atari would go from one pratfall to another over the course of the 2000s, ending with the bankruptcy of both companies. In 2005, Sawyer sued Atari for breach of contract, claiming that he was owed almost \$5 million in unpaid royalties from sales of the *RollerCoaster Tycoon* games. Atari settled out of court in 2008 after paying Sawyer an undisclosed sum.

Sawyer wouldn't be drawn into discussion of the matter with me, but it seems as though the Atari episode cooled his passion for game development, or at least the game development industry. His final game (released in 2004 just prior to the beginning of the legal saga) was Chris Sawyer's *Locomotion*, a self-styled "spiritual successor" to *Transport Tycoon*. *Locomotion* drew a tepid reception from critics and fans alike, perhaps a sign that Sawyer's full attention couldn't be brought to bear on the project. Bitter lawsuits and global (albeit niche) stardom were a far cry from the days he had spent coding *Transport Tycoon* alone in his house in Scotland. Sawyer walked away.

It's been almost ten years since he last shipped a game with his name on it, and Chris Sawyer has returned, having enlisted a London studio called Origin8 to build a remake of *Transport Tycoon* for iPhones, iPads, and Android devices under his direction.

Having been made wealthy long ago by his games, Sawyer almost certainly isn't back for the money. From his emails, he seems most excited by the technical challenge of getting a complex tycoon-style sim to run on a mobile device. "Mobile platforms have begun to be powerful enough to run a complex game like *Transport Tycoon*," he writes, "the platforms themselves are becoming more and more popular, and the tactile nature of interactive isometric simulation/strategy games really suits the touch screen interface."

Sawyer might be keen to tackle the latest hardware, but his desire for privacy remains ironclad. You shouldn't expect to see him on Twitter alongside fellow game development legends Sid Meier, Julian Gollop, and Peter Molyneux, though. "[Social media] takes time away from what I need to concentrate on -- design, testing, management, programming or whatever," Sawyer told me. "It's very easy to get distracted and lose focus." He still hasn't updated his webpage.

Where was he for all those years in the wilderness? Sawyer was characteristically circumspect on the topic, but he did volunteer one detail: "I made a few trips to ride roller coasters around the world."