



Will Wright: The Mayor of SimCity

The innovative computer game SimCity has been overhauled. Now it's called SimCity 2000.

By Kevin Kelly

Wired:

I gather that many fans of SimCity are fanatical players who know more about its population of sims than you, its designer, do.

Wright:

Yeah, a lot of people like the control aspect. To them it's sort of "I'm a god, you're my sim, obey me." But the sims don't obey. That's what makes it fun. If they obeyed you, what fun would that be? You're trying to keep this city together, but it keeps falling apart. That's what makes most really good games fun: When you have a certain amount of control, but then there's a certain amount of entropy in the system, and it's balanced just right between the two. It's life at the edge of chaos. Shit happens.

Wired:

Does your new version, SimCity 2000, have that on-the-edge quality as well?

Wright:

I sure hope so. But of course I don't have a variable in there called "the chaos variable." So, to tune it I have to engineer a lot of little low-level variables to try and get the emergent behavior that will give me that edge of chaos to keep it from getting boring.

Wired:

Why go through all the trouble of another version? What's new in SimCity 2000 besides cooler visuals?

Wright:

In the old SimCity, you started with all the technology at once, but in this one you have to wait for things to become invented. In other words, technology expands as you play the game. For instance, you start out with coal, oil, and hydroelectric, but as time goes by solar and nuclear are invented. We also tried to make the learning feedback loops more realistic. In SimCity 2000 a lot of the feedback comes through reading the sim's newspaper.

Wired:

What's next? "SimState"? "SimNation"?

Wright:

Not by me. No sirree. I'm getting a little tired of the Sim line, to tell you the truth. In the first couple months after SimCity appeared, we were approached by a number of companies saying, "Hey that's great! If you can do a city like that, we want you to do "SimPizzaHut," or "SimWhatever." We thought these things were so weird that we said no, but they kept coming in. So at some point, as we got big enough, we decided to give it a go. Our first one was a prototype for Chevron. It was SimRefinery - a simulation of their refinery operation, for orienting people in the company as to how a refinery works. It wasn't so much for the engineers as it was for the accountants and managers who walked through this refinery every day and didn't know what these pipes were carrying.

Wired:

What will games be like in fifteen years?

Wright:

By then online gaming will probably be the norm rather than the exception. MUDS, cyberspace, and all that. I can design a fun house that's so much fun that I can charge people to visit it online, and I'll make my living by sitting there and elaborating on it everyday.

Wired:

Does any of this new game hardware excite you?

Wright:

Static storage - CD-ROM or whatever - is nice, but to me that was never the problem. I'd rather have more processors and more active memory. A lot of the new games from Hollywood come on ten discs and take up 25 megs of hard disk storage. Most of that data is graphic sequences that will be the same over and over and over again. The kind of games we do generate most of their own data. I'd like the user to be able to input a lot more creativity, and I'd like the computer to be able to calculate a much more elaborate system, rather than just have piles and piles of graphics that giant sweatshops full of artists produce. So my ultimate game platform has mass user-savable storage. Right now if you create an elaborate world in a game there's nowhere to save it. User storage in games is a very unpopular belief right now.

Wired:

You've had a string of successes, so you must be doing something right. What kind of advice would you give to a 17-year-old who wants to write games today?

Wright:

If I were now 17 and wanted to get into the game industry, I imagine I would have a very hard time of it. Back when I started, about '81 or '82, almost every game was made by one person, and in only six to twelve months. It's not like that any more. A lot of people would tell that kid to get a job in a games company and work his way up. Honestly, I'm not sure that's the way to go. If you're really good at programming and could develop a good concept, then you might present that to a publisher, who might assemble a team for you.

Wired:

Lots of schools use SimCity, SimEarth, and SimLife. Would you send your kid to a school where there were mostly computers?

Wright:

I've always been somewhat disillusioned with the educational system. Some people have said it was originally based on the idea that we're training factory workers, so it was very important to teach them to do some repetitive task for eight hours a day. What's going to be really exciting is when this Nintendo generation gets a little bit older and starts becoming teachers in schools. I think that's going to make a bigger difference than any kind of educational reform ever will. In the future a lot more learning will happen in the home.

Wired:

So what will you be working on next?

Wright:

I'm hoping to strike out in a slightly different direction. I'm interested in the process and strategies for design. The architect Christopher Alexander, in his book Pattern Language formalized a lot of spatial relationships into a grammar for design. I'd really like to work toward a grammar for complex systems and pre-sent someone with tools for designing complex things. I have in mind a game I want to call "Doll House." It gives grown-ups some tools to design what is basically a doll house. But a doll house for adults may not be very marketable.

Will Wright: willw@aol.com.

[Copyright](#) © 1993-2004 The Condé Nast Publications Inc. All rights reserved.

[Copyright](#) © 1994-2003 Wired Digital, Inc. All rights reserved.