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GAME THEORY

GAME THEORY; Playing Big Brother at the Amusement Park

By J. C. Herz

SURE, you've built 19th-century railroad monopolies on your computer screen. You've been a 20th-century Sim City mayor. You've run your competitors into the ground. You've come out miles ahead in the polls. What are you going to do now?

You can't go to Disneyland. But you can build something that looks a lot like it in Roller Coaster Tycoon, a strategy simulation that puts you at the helm of a virtual amusement park. You're still laying track and regulating traffic. But this time you're an entertainer, and you have to give hundreds of Lilliputian visitors all the rides, theme scenery, junk food, soft drinks and souvenirs they can enjoy and afford.

Instead of locomotives or light manufacturing, your economy is based on entertainment architecture, instant gratification and throwaway consumption. Novelty attracts new visitors. New visitors pay for the next round of construction. It costs money to fill an amusement park with people-moving machines. But the amusement park you build is itself a kind of machine -- a refinery that separates a slurry of human beings from their disposable incomes.

This is a game about engineering, starting with the rides. Amusement parks have a long lineage, and Roller Coaster Tycoon allows you to build old-fashioned wooden roller coasters and turn-of-the-century carousels. But the game also embraces modern materials and engineering, in the form of steel coasters that turn corkscrews or hang upside down or drop for hundreds of feet. You can spend countless hours just designing new and bizarre rides with the custom roller coaster construction kit.

But as with any toy train set, the soul of the experience is the world you build around it. "A roller coaster isn't just fun because it goes upside down or moves very fast or because it's got a tall drop," said Chris Sawyer, who produced the game from his one-man studio in Scotland. "It's the whole balance of many things that makes the ride fun and makes you want to go back and go on it again. What you go past when you're on it. What it looks like when you're approaching it. Things like theme and scenery."

Landscape design is more significant than it first appears. Well-placed footpaths can make the difference between a profitable park and one that operates in the red. And public transportation, in the guise of themed choo-choo trains, becomes an important way of ferrying customers between clustered spending opportunities, which substitute for neighborhoods in the urban scheme of an amusement

park.

There's a lot of urban planning in Roller Coaster Tycoon. But it's the kind of urban planning you find in a shopping mall or any other large, enclosed retail environment. Thoroughfares are arranged to maximize spending opportunities. Showcase attractions are placed toward the back of the property to draw visitors through the park and past all the food kiosks and souvenir shops.

These are the principles you learn through trial, error and deduction as you play the game. But they will be familiar to anyone who's ever navigated the labyrinth of Ikea, spent an afternoon cocooned in the comfy chairs of Barnes & Noble or gasped at a cash register receipt at Bed, Bath and Beyond. In these self-contained spaces, architecture revolves around the pleasures of consumption.

A theme park takes this architecture to its logical extreme. A virtual theme park playfully vaults over the logical extreme, past a waterfall, through a tunnel and into the realm of the absurd. Because in a computer game, you can do market research that would otherwise qualify as a violation of human rights.

Click on the Guest Info icon in Roller Coaster Tycoon, and you get a roster of every visitor in the park and his or her current thought and action. (Guest #571. Getting off the Arachnophobia ride. "I'm thirsty.") Another chart summarizes the actions and thoughts of every guest and presents them in descending order of frequency (if 15 percent of the people in your park are disgusted by the litter, it's time to plant some more trash bins and hire another maintenance worker).

From the Guest Info roster, you can also view guests individually. You can pinpoint their whereabouts (there are cameras in every nook and cranny of the park). A pop-up window indicates how long they've been in the park, how much they've spent (and on what), what they're carrying, how they're feeling. A bar graph measures happiness, energy, hunger, thirst, nausea and need to use a bathroom.

Most theme parks, shopping malls and megastores maintain a system of surreptitious panoptic surveillance. This one just takes the concept to Orwellian extremes -- or rather, Huxleyan extremes, since you're only collecting information to make the park more fun. Your visitors have no privacy. That's only so they can have a more enjoyable and satisfying experience. So you can provide better customer service. So they will stay longer and buy more.

It's fun to look down at those tiny people from high above, tracking their every move, their comments, experiences and spending habits. It gives you a sense of omniscience and control, the hallmark of any god game. But unlike the denizens of Sim City, the human goldfish in Roller Coaster Tycoon have individual identities (they're listed by number, but you can name them if you like). Each of them has discrete preferences, a limited amount of cash and a different degree of nausea tolerance.

So you identify with them. And perhaps, after a while, you wonder what it would be like to experience your own park as a visitor and to know that you were under constant surveillance and that every merry-go-round ticket and ice-cream cone you bought was duly noted and compiled into a database for the benefit of park management. Would that influence your opinion of the park or your level of amusement while you were there? Would it improve your customer satisfaction to be tagged and tracked in the name of customer satisfaction? Or would it bother you?

On the World Wide Web, if the information architects have done their job, we take the pathways that maximize our exposure to advertisements and E-commerce opportunities. On-line merchants have an increasingly good idea where we have been, how much time we spent there and what we bought along the way. As a virtual customer, you have predictable preferences. You have observable spending patterns.

What's your nausea tolerance?

Roller Coaster Tycoon, by Hasbro Interactive; CD-ROM for Windows 95 and 98; \$29.95; for all ages.

Photo: Roller Coaster Tycoon players try to build the best park.

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