

SimEarth

Becoming Your Favorite Diet

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Introduction

Busy as I am I still like to sit back once in awhile and play a good computer game for the pure joy. When I heard Maxis Software had a near-sequel to SimCity I had to have a copy. SimCity was addictive, not only for me, but my wife couldn't get enough. We found ourselves designing cities during dinner and racing to the computer to set up our latest design. Sigh! As much as we played, we never made that winning megapolis level.

SimEarth, The Living Planet is similar in concept but operates on a vastly greater scale. As the mayor of SimCity you controlled the growth of a village into a megapolis over a couple hundred years. SimEarth does the same thing for an entire planet over billions of years! Now this was something a successful mayor could really sink teeth into.

Installation

Installing SimEarth is easy. Simply create a new folder and copy SimEarth to your hard disk. Two disks are included with the package, one contains the color version and one for the black and white version. Both are identical in features and execution except for the lack of color pictures in the black and white version.

You will need the manual nearby when you startup SimEarth. Maxis has included a simple form of copy protection in SimEarth that requires you to look up specific planet information each time you run the program. This form of copy protection is pretty benign and unobtrusive, not an obstacle to the game itself. For instead, before creating a new planet or opening a saved planet file, SimEarth might ask "What is the diameter of Mars?". A handy chart in the manual provides the needed answer.

If you have a choice, let me suggest that you use the color version. I use both and can say from experience that the amount of detail is greater when displayed in 16-colors than at 2-colors. Oceans blend into land which blend into mountains. Then when you attempt to superimpose various status indicators like heat or humidity over this blended area you could have a slight problem discerning between two items.

Appearance

The number of dialog windows is astounding. Take for example, one of the four dialogs associated with the

planet. The atmosphere deals with solar energy input, the Greenhouse effect, rainfall, cloud and surface albedo (reflection), and others. Next, the biosphere concerns itself with animals, their mutation rate, thermal tolerance and others. Next is the civilization dialog that deals with energy invested by and allotted to the thriving sentients of the planet. Finally, we have the geosphere, which deals with the planet itself, the number of meteor impacts, axial tilt, continental drift, among other things (see Figure 1).

All of these parameters use a sliding scale to the right of the dialog that determines the value of each parameter. When heaped together they form a very complex and changing calculation that determines the success or failure of your job as a planet and civilization builder.

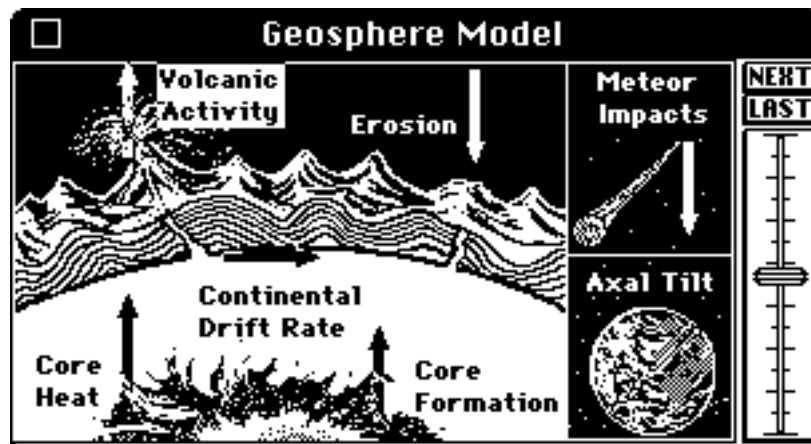


Figure 1. Geosphere dialog window.

Other dialogs let you keep track of your species phylum, how many species are in each phylum, their relative numbers compared to other phylum. An atmosphere report, an historic report, a technology report, and many others provide other required bits of information. Between them all, they will definitely keep you on your toes and moving around.

How to Play

In the beginning is empty lifeless hunk of planet. Billions of years pass and then, SimEarth proclaims life, see Figure 2.



Figure 2. The announcement of life on your planet.

Soon the little beastie's grow, multiply, and fill the vast oceans. Eventually a few get together and evolve, see Figure 3. Eventually they evolve far enough to conquer the land masses you have thoughtfully scattered around the planet. Eons pass and if you haven't destroyed them inadvertently, intelligence arrives and the first steps of civilization taken. Tottering through the stone, bronze, iron, agricultural, and iron ages, your civilization attempts to grow and expand. Finally, atomic and information societies evolve and if all your work has been successful, nanotechnology and migration to other planets begin.



Figure 3. Species grow and evolve.

From there it's simply a matter of watching and manipulating life, the land, the very heart of the planet itself to encourage evolution to a sentient species and eventual off-world star exploration. Along the way are earthquakes, tidal waves, ice meteors, raising solar heat, global cooling, plagues, lack of resources, wars, and a whole gamut of disasters and challenges, each threatening your fragile biosphere. Every action you take to improve the situation creates rippling effects that create other challenges you must meet in order to be successful. You can't be a benign observer, you must step in occasionally to nudge evolution, store energy for future generations, and many other tasks if your planet is to grow successfully.

Action is fast and furious. You'll find yourself tinkering with controls trying to improve the life of your evolving planet. Once you have successfully seeded other planets with life from you planet you will start another. If mammals can be this successful, how about dinosaurs, or fish, reptiles, et cetera. All of the species in SimEarth are

capable of achieving intelligence.

This enables you to explore strange “what if...” situations like, what if dinosaurs hadn’t died out? This one is very popular. So popular in fact that a world with sentient dinosaurs is already included with the SimEarth package.

Conclusion

Before you think I am panning this completely, I do have a few of complaints. First, while it is benign, I abhor any form of copy protection. Especially if I have to carry the manual around all the time to answer questions. Sure, I could copy the important pages and carry them, but why should I have to?

Second, while I have no inside knowledge on its development, I feel short changed by the graphics. In appearance they make me think they were drawn for another computer version of SimEarth and transferred to the Macintosh unchanged (see Figure 1). Also, the black and white ones are just too busy to be really readable. Its hard to do a work of art in a 32 pixel square but simplicity might have worked better here.

Finally, even at its slowest speed, there is just so much going on that I often felt overwhelmed with the complexity and boundless activity occurring on the screen. A “Time Crawls” menu item would have been appreciated.

On the other side, there are some neat features included. Just as SimCity had a Godzilla-like creature to rampage through your cities, SimEarth has the Monolith, straight out of Arthur C. Clarke’s epoch “2001: A Space Odyssey.” With the Monolith you can spark the intelligence of one phylum species over another. Want fish to become sentient? Give the Monolith a try.

There are two layers to this SimEarth program. At the topmost layer, it can be viewed strictly as a game where you win if your sentient species migrate to other planets. It can be enjoyed and played at that level exclusively. But, on a deeper level, SimEarth provides a textbook on evolution, on geology and tectonic plate movement, biology, solar activity, volcanic activity, ocean and wind current, and all the others act with each other. None of the are distinct from another. Instead they all work together to create a whole that we live on. SimEarth is a textbook on life on this planet and the effects even a small change in environment can have on our fragile biosphere. In a nutshell, SimEarth can show us the effects that global warming, over population, or the depletion of natural resources can have on our world. It is a sobering view.

In conclusion, SimEarth is a vast improvement over SimCity. The amount of activity and interaction that goes on within a single game is simply incredible. If anything, the shear vastness of the time scale can overwhelm you during initial games. But a few games will find you building civilizations with the best of them, exploring the various controls to make this world unique, and enjoying yourself immensely in the bargain.