eview: A-Train & Construction Set

Reviewed by Bart G. Farkas

Type: City/Train/Economy Simulation Game
Publisher: ArtDink/Maxis
Retail Price: $69.95
Mail Order: $ 39.00
Requires: All Macintosh models, 1 MB RAM, 2.5 MB for Color & Sys 7, hard drive
Protection: None
IMG Rating: √√√

Sim-ply Put. Ever since Sim City roared onto the Mac gaming scene a few years back, game companies have tried repeatedly (and all too often, unsuccessfully) to capitalize on "Sim" popularity. Maxis is the front-runner in this area and has produced simulation games based on everything from ant colonies to global ecosystems. There are even plans for a "SimFarm" in the near future. So why not have a simulation about trains?   Wait no more, A-Train is here. At first glance A-Train would seem to continue in the Sim mold. However, there are both dramatic and subtle differences that make A-Train a unique game...or is it a simulation?

Laying Track. The object of the game is to develop a successful city and financial empire built around a railroad network. A-Train can begin with any of six preset scenarios. The first scenario is wide open with only a small piece of track and a huge swath of land (and four million dollars) for you to build your empire on. You begin by deciding where to lay your first railroad track. Keep in mind that along this track you will have to build train stations, have area for material storage, and ultimately make it a good spot for developing (hopefully) a burgeoning metropolis! Laying the track can be tricky, but the tutorial in the manual is helpful in figuring out the interface.   Once the track is down and the stations built, you'll want to go to the "Rolling Stock Market" to pick out your trains. You have a large selection to choose from, but there are really only two basic types of trains (freight and passenger) to choose from. The variety comes in the speed, capacity, and price of the engines offered. Once you have purchased your trains and plopped them onto your new track you must make sure that they are not running into each other. A visit to the time schedule window and placement of a switch or two on your line will ensure smooth locomotive progress.

The game then becomes a study in economics. You are trying to develop a successful city and industry around the tracks.   Apartments, commercial buildings, hotels, golf courses, stadiums, factories and amusement parks are just part of what you can build around your train stations to encourage demographic and economic growth. Factories must be placed to employ the population and produce goods;   apartments have to be built to house the workers (and they should be built near stations), commercial properties have to be built for business; well, I think you get the idea. This aspect of A-Train is similar to SimCity.

ne aspect that is not similar, however, is the business side of the game. To lay the track for you trains you must buy the land. Similarly, when you want to build around your stations and tracks you must buy that land too. Indeed, real estate can be a hearty source of income for your empire if you choose to invest enough in the land on your map. On a similar note, there is a stock market you can invest in, and you can derive revenues from the workers that rent your apartments, lease your office space, and ride your trains. In fact, everything you build is part of your company and makes (or loses) money for you depending on how you manage your empire. The game continues in this way; you build more tracks and infrastructure and have more elaborate trains in an attempt to become the richest man or women ever to grace a locomotive.

Look and Feel. A-train has fine color and graphics (which are optimized for 16-colors) and employs an overhead 3-D perspective. There are some cool little subtleties in the graphics. For example: The game progresses hour by hour and the daylight changes from daytime to twilight to darkness,   and seasons also change as the game flows by. Another cool feature is that you actually see the freight going from the trains to the storage yards and vice versa!

The game can be completely run with the mouse and has a decent point-and-click interface. At first glance A-Train looks a lot like SimCity, but upon close inspection the buttons have a Windows/DOS sort of feel to them. When I first saw the screen I suspected that this game was a port from DOS. After reading the manual however, it appears the game was written for the Mac. This is surprising as there are some quirks in the interface that are not Mac-like. For example, most of the windows can't be opened simultaneously with another window. This is annoying if you have a large monitor and want to spread out all your windows to have a constant view of your developing empire (as you do in SimCity). Learning the game was not as simple as I would have expected, and the manual is a must in order to take advantage of the nuances. The manual itself is great and explains everything you need to know in tutorial form and has a reference section for every aspect of the game.

Faster Than A Speeding Locomotive?   One of my colleagues on GEnie complained to me that A-Train was a dog under System 7 and ran MUCH faster under System 6.x. I had been playing the game under System 7 with the game speed set to max and I found it to be a little slow. So I tried the game under System 6.0.7 and WOW —it really cooked!   I actually had to turn the speed down. This is disappointing, as no one should have to change systems just to get a game to run at adequate speeds. The above point is worth mentioning because A-Train moves along by the hour not the day or week or month. So to see progress in the game, that is, increased population, income changes, etc., you must wait for weeks or even months to pass. This requires setting up the game and just letting it run for a while, which isn't much fun for some people. Perhaps Maxis can release a patch that increases performance under System 7 to bring it up to the same speed that it runs under System 6.x.

Construction Set. The A-Train Construction Set, which you can buy seperately, enables you to modify the initial setup in any way you wish. For example, if you want to start the game with 10 parallel tracks and 34 separate train stations—you can! When you open the construction set up it looks like you've booted A-Train. All the icons and the screen look nearly identical; however, the difference is that when you click on the thing you want to build, you can put it anywhere free, modify the landscape, you name it. If you like A-Train as a game, the Construction Set is a must and will make the game infinitely playable. A-Train Construction Set comes with its own manual outlining the basics of changing the landscape and a few interesting tidbits such as "Stupid Water Tricks."

What's Good. This game is refreshing in the sense that it's not only a city/railroad building game, but is a serious financial empire-building game. Again the question arises, is it a game or a simulation? Maxis prefers to call it a software "toy." I think I agree with that assessment. Graphics are very good and the seasonal and daily changes to weather and lighting are refreshing. The manual is very good (as all Maxis manuals are) and the tutorial teaches the game well. If you enjoyed playing with trains as a child (or as an adult) you will like A-Train Construction Set's ability to let you design fantastic railroads complete with switches, stations, and more trains that you can shake a stick at. I must say that the ability to change the game and try different strategies makes the game playable over and over.

What's Not-So-Good.   The interface does not have an entirely Mac feel to it, and for me that detracted from the enjoyment. I suspect on slower machines running System 7 the time spent moving between windows that cannot be opened simultaneously and waiting for the game to chug by might deter some from playing A-Train. The pace of the game overall, whether on a fast machine or not, is not blazing (although this is partially due to the nature of the game).

Summary. The graphics in A-Train are very pleasing and fun, and the added aspect of building a financial empire through real estate, stocks, and manufacturing is both exciting and refreshing. The changing of day to night and seasonal variations add a certain pizazz

that other games in the Sim genre have lacked. However, there are some interface quirks and a slow game speed that detracted from the enjoyment of the game for me.   The game comes with only six scenarios so I highly recommend the Construction Set to ensure that A-Train remains fresh for a long time.

Pros

- Great graphics
- Nice touches like changing seasons
- Great manual (as always from Maxis)
- Construction Set gives you "god" control

Cons
- Slow under System 7
- No definite ending
- Interface quirky