eview: SimTower

by Dan Radmacher

Type: Tower Building Simulation
Publisher: Maxis (800/336-2947)
Retail Price: $59.95
Street Price: $35.00
Requires: 68030 (040 recommended, and for good reason), 4 MB available RAM
Protection: None

 thought SimTower would let me try my hand at playing Donald Trump, managing a huge, complex tower brimming with offices, hotel rooms, restaurants and retail shops.

No wonder The Donald is so boring. It turns out, according to Maxis, anyway, that the main trick to a successful skyscraper is fiddling with elevators. Maxis may be right, but that doesn't make for a real exciting simulation. Oh, there are other thrills, such as remembering to change the movie every so often, and keeping up with tentant demands for parking, medical centers, recycling facilities and the like. Hardly the stuff that bestselling games are made of.

Surprisingly, and unaccountably, SimTower holds your interest, though the difficulties with the game raise your frustration and stress level at the same time your trying to lower the frustration and stress of your simtenants.

The Mechanics. When you open a new tower, you see three windows: the map window, which will give you an overview of your creation once you begin construction; the info window, which tells you how much money and how many tenants you have, as well as giving you the time of day and the fiscal year; and the edit window, which gives you a closeup view of what's happening in the tower.

In addition, there is the tool bar, which gives you the items, such as offices, fast food restaurants and lobbies, that will serve as tenant bait.

The ground floor has to be a lobby. You can make the lobby as wide as the entire map window, but it's best to start out small. You can add on to the ground floor on either side as

necessary. After the lobby, you can add a second floor of fast food joints and then top that with some office space.

But nothing will happen until you add stairs or an elevator. Once you do that (and you might as well start with an elevator — that is what the game's all about), you will hear a satisfying ring of a cash register as your first tenant moves into an office.

The goal in SimTower is to build the biggest, best tower money can buy. You earn money from charging rent for offices and shops, selling condominium space, managing fast food joints and fancier restaurants and running a hotel.

hree-Star Facility. As you add more to your tower and attract more tenants, you move up in the star rating. You start at one star, and move up to two stars with 300 tenants. A thousand tenants will get you three stars. I can't tell you when you earn your fourth star, though I know it takes more than 5,000 tenants.

The more stars you earn, the more items you can place. With a one star tower, you're limited basically to offices, condominiums, fast food places and lobbies. At two stars, you add escalators, restaurants and single hotel rooms. At three stars, you get express elevators, which carry more people than the regular elevators but only stop at every 15th floor, double hotel rooms and suites, parking spaces, recycling centers and a movie theater.

The challenges to success include managing elevator traffic during various times of the day, supplying enough housekeepers to keep all your hotel rooms clean (failure to do this results in a cockroach infestation — gross), and generally keeping your tenants happy. Unhappy

tenants show up in red. You can also check on the overall level of contentment in your tower by clicking the "Eval" button in the map window. Blue means they're happy, yellow means they're satisfied, red means they're pissed.

Once you reach a hundred floors and a five star rating, you can add a nondenominational cathedral to top off your edifice. That also marks your ascension to the Tower level, which I suppose could end the game for some who don't want to continue fiddling.

Turning Red. SimTower has the potential to be a very engaging simulation. It's like watching a giant ant farm as your tenants swarm around in a huge tower. But the game needs a lot of polishing before players find themselves less frustrated than their reddest-faced tenants.

For starters, the game absolutely crawled along on my LC III. Performance may be better on an 040 or a PowerMac (though SimTower is not a native application), but I saw complaints from Quadra owners on online services about the speed. The speed the simulation runs at is important, because time is money. You only get income from the offices every fiscal quarter (which in SimTower is two weekdays and one weekend), and at higher levels, a quarter can take more than an hour to go by.

everal times, I left the simulation running overnight, just so I'd have enough money to do something. The second morning, I had a pleasant surprise — $15 million waiting for me. But if you can be that successful doing nothing, what's the point of playing (though this explains a lot   about Donald Trump's success).

There are also a number of little quirks that would be easy for Maxis to fix with an update. For starters, the game doesn't save your preferences. Every time you start up, you have to

turn off the elevator noise (believe me, you'll want to turn it off — unless your tower includes a padded room), the background noise (ditto) and the animation (unless you want the simulation to crawl along at even more glacial pace).

Also, there's no way to adjust the rent you plan to charge on an office or the price you want to charge for a condo before you place it. Everything goes in at the default price. If you want to charge extra, you have to click on each office or condo and raise the rent manually. Not only is this a pain if you're placing 20 or 30 offices, but it can be downright impossible to click on the office in the short time before it's rented. This just means the loss of a quarter of higher rent with an office, but if you wanted to charge $200,000 for the condo instead of $150,000, you're out of luck until the tenants get angry and move out.

Another extremely aggravating bug is the tendency of the magnifying glass tool (which lets you examine an office or a tenant in closer detail) to pick up stairs or escalators when you're in the Evaluation mode. In that mode, stairs and escalators disappear, yet when you try to click on an office to find out why the tenants aren't happy, you keep getting a report on the stairs. By the third time, you're seeing red yourself.

The most frustrating thing, though, is the stupidity of the tenants. Some will stand and wait for a regular elevator, getting steamed while they wait, when there's an express elevator waiting just on the other side.

In addition, the tenants give you very little feedback about why they might be upset. Sometimes you'll have an extremely PO'd condominium right next to a very happy one. Why is one mad and the other glad? You have no idea. It makes it very hard to make things better. Sometimes the evaluation window will tell you "Condition are very poor" with no other explanation.

Conclusion. Despite the frustrations involved, I found myself fiddling endlessly with this program. It is great fun to watch everything go, from the elevators to the trash collecting in the recycling center. This is a good program to have on in the background while you do other work (my three-star tower just went over the 5,500 tenant mark as we speak).

If Maxis fixes some of the bugs, and tries to give landlords a little more information, this could be as big a winner as SimCity 2000 — even without earthquakes, hurricanes and other disasters.

Pros
• Fun to watch
• Good graphics
• Addictive for fiddlers

Cons
• Very s-l-o-w
• No default settings, i.e. animation, sound
• Not enough information from tenants
• Is adjusting elevator schedules really your idea of fun?