A lost Maxis “Sim” game has been discovered by an Ars reader, uploaded for all

Wow. It may only be an incomplete prototype, but in a breathtaking span of time, *SimRefinery* has gone from a seemingly lost legend to a playable, downloadable video game. (That’s its real, full-resolution opening screen, as captured using a DOSBox emulator.) And it’s all thanks to an Ars Technica commenter.
archive.org / Maxis / Chevron

reader comments

51 with 40 posters participating, including story author

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We at Ars Technica are proud to be members of video game archiving history today. *SimRefinery*, one of PC gaming’s most notoriously “lost” video games, now exists—as a fully playable game, albeit an unfinished one—thanks to an Ars Technica reader commenting on the story of its legend.

Two weeks ago, I reported on a story about Maxis Business Solutions, a subdivision of the game developer Maxis created in the wake of *SimCity*’s booming success. Librarian and archivist Phil Salvador published an epic, interview-filled history of one of the game industry’s earliest examples of a “serious” gaming division, which was formed as a way to cash in on major businesses’ interest in using video games as work-training simulators.

As Salvador wrote in May:

> *Oil refineries are really, really complicated. That's why Chevron wanted Maxis to make them a game like SimCity, to teach the employees at their oil refinery in Richmond, California how it all worked.*
>
> *To be clear, they didn't want a game that was supposed to accurately train people how to run an oil refinery or replace an education in chemical engineering. That would've been incredibly dangerous. What they wanted instead was something that showed you how the dynamics of the refinery worked, how all the different pieces invisibly fit together, like SimCity did for cities.*

But while Salvador gathered a lot of information about how the resulting game *SimRefinery* worked—and how it let users recreate *SimCity*-caliber disasters within its refinery simulation—he was unable to turn up any working copies. "Nobody held onto *SimRefinery* because it didn't seem important," he wrote. "It was a one-off, somewhat unsuccessful training program for an oil refinery in California. In the grand scheme of Maxis, it was one of their least important titles, which has only now become an object of interest in the video game community because of its unavailability."

Challenge accepted

Unsurprisingly, the savvy, computer history-minded readers of Ars Technica took this proclaimed rarity as a challenge, and a new user signed up to comment on the article with an intriguing image upload: an apparent copy of *SimRefinery* on a single 3.5-inch disk, labeled only with the game's title in Times New Roman and a black-and-white Maxis logo. The anonymous user, who goes by the username "postbebop" and has so far not replied to our requests for comment, credited the disk to a "retired chemical engineering friend" who had work experience at Chevron in the early '90s.

After teasing a plan to recover the disk's contents and upload them to archive.org, postbebop went silent. Until today!

- "Not all parts are complete" is the operative phrase of the day. Though, really, Ars Technica could use help from legitimate chemical engineers to make sense of what in this game *does* function properly.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- Like other Maxis "Sim" games, *SimRefinery* includes a separate mini-map interface. Grab its highlighted square to move the visible boundaries of the gameplay window.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- See that barn at the top-right? That sure looks like a *SimFarm* barn, doesn't it? Maxis Business Simulations was known for lifting art assets from other Maxis projects to get prototypes across the finish line, so that similarity isn't surprising.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- Lit up at the bottom.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- The recovered disk includes a "demo" sequence, and this functions as a predetermined gameplay demo with particularly long pauses. It's likely that this prototype was shown off in a live demo, with a speaker explaining during the pauses how the game would function as a training tool.
  archive.org / Maxis / Chevron
- The demo reel proceeds to open and click through various interfaces.
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- I won't lie: I have no idea what these mean. I'm hopeful smarter Ars readers might share some insights.
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- Well, *that* explains everything.
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- Buy! Sell!

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- Time to build a plant. (Most of the interface's buttons don't work, but if you click the buttons on the wide-view window, it will toggle different options on the main window, which is how I got to this point.)
- Without any budgetary notice stopping me, I prep this plant for building.
- Boom! My very first alkylation plant!
- Just another day at work, drumming up non-toxic, abrasive catalysts.

The anonymous Ars user returned to our comments section on Thursday to confirm that they'd uploaded the disk's contents, after an apparently annoying extraction process, to archive.org for everyone in the world to download and play. The above gallery is a peek at how the incomplete prototype version of the game functions as emulated using DOSBox. While that archive.org link will let interested users play the prototype in any Web browser, the full game download also includes an intro.bat file; booting that with an application like DOSBox will play a pre-recorded demo of how the game is meant to function. This demo has a few explanatory prompts, but it also has long, unexplained pauses, perhaps meant for a live demonstration by MBS staffers to interested Chevron managers.

Since many of the on-screen buttons don't function properly, and the disk doesn't include anything in the way of instructions or documentation, understanding exactly what works in this incomplete build of *SimRefinery* is still quite vague. For now, we know that you can use the game's menus to mix "recipes" that include potentially explosive compounds like C4 and MTBE. A peek at Salvador's Twitch stream of the game revealed at least one apparent fire, along with calamities like "regenerator upsets," which he created with help from his most engineering-minded chat members.

So, yes, chaos is certainly possible within this incomplete

version of *SimRefinery*, which Salvador's article would remind you was a major point of the software: "If you start breaking the refinery, you can see how ruining one part of the plant will affect the other parts of the plant," he wrote. We heartily invite all of you to fiddle with the prototype and cause as much intentional—and absolutely educational—refinery destruction as possible. https://arstechnica.com/?p=1681508