

Playdom Constructs Its Own Facebook City Builder: Social City

Christopher Mack, *Inside Social Games*
March 3, 2010

Not two days ago, we looked at social developer Digital Chocolate's social city builder, NanoTowns. At the time, it still wasn't clear as to whether or not these SimCity-like games would be the next big social genre — social game developers are betting yes, in any case, including Playdom. Here's a look its new title, Social City.

The game is familiar enough to anyone that has played SimCity or any of the growing number of social renditions of the classic title. Players are greeted by a cartoonish, and noseless, assistant who walks you through the basics of managing a city. Essentially, players have three things to worry about: Population, happiness, and money.

Each of these three statistics are paired with different sets of structures that you can build. For population, players build houses, apartments, and hotels, with each granting a set number of citizens. Interestingly enough, the game doesn't just grant that one number — each building will actually grant that much population every so often. For example, every eight minutes, the smallest house will produce 10 population. Of course, it's hard to explain why 10 people are living in a single person house and why 10 more come every eight minutes... but it's a game, so we'll let that one fly.

Now, in order to keep citizens, you have to make them happy. This is easy enough: players simply build what are called leisure buildings which grant X amount of happiness. This includes restaurants, stores, theaters, and even décor such as trees, flowers and statues.

Money, on the other hand is earned through factories; the number of which a user can have is limited by their population. These curious businesses can apparently make everything from potato chips to prom dresses, and for a small fee, will work on the contract for X amount of time (minutes to days) before it is shipped and a sizable income is earned.

Notice how the player is rewarded by population? This is actually one of the highlights to Social City. It seems that whenever the player makes a significant accomplishment they earn something beyond money, or purely aesthetic items. They actually earn unique buildings and rewards for both population and level — experience towards levels is earned through virtually every action the player takes. This includes, of course, cash (officially dubbed "Coins"), extra factories, special buildings for residential or leisure purposes, and even some of the virtual currency, City Bucks.

In regards to the virtual currency, it is used for a handful of buildings. These don't really do anything special, but are merely unique (i.e. a Chocolate Shop). The primary use seems to be the actual expansion of one's city limits. This leads to an interesting situation: players can either spend a nominal amount of virtual currency to expand, or they must have X amount of neighbors — Facebook friends who are playing—as well as a fair amount of the in-game Coins.

However, this seems to be the only significantly different usage of social features. Everything else is fairly standard, and consists of gifting, sharing accomplishments, leaderboards, and visiting each other's cities and helping out, sort of like in the farming genre.

Aesthetically, the game looks great, and as an added bonus, players start with a respectable amount of money to get their city started and looking very nice. Most games don't give the players enough, and it can be hard to keep them playing if they have to wait three days to make their virtual space look half decent. Social City, however, has immediate reward. Furthermore, this city actually feels alive. Sadly, there are no cars, but tiny residents actually walk about, hawk wares outside stores, mow lawns, and even work in the factories.

There is one really big complaint, though. You can't rotate any of your buildings! It seems small, but as a game that is partially revolving around aesthetics, it looks absolutely terrible to have a house, with its back to the road. Everything faces southwest, and makes it exceedingly difficult to make things look the way they should. This is likely a technical limitation, however.

On a more minor note, it does become obnoxious to have to click on each residence to increase your population when it's ready. Moreover, the doorbell noise it makes when ready gets very grating, very quick. Frankly, it would be better to just make it automatic and quieter (plus it keeps making the dog bark).

Overall, Social City is a fantastic game. Okay, so it isn't SimCity, but few games are. It does have a few nits and kinks to work out, but it is still a lot of fun, with some very quick user rewards for new players. Obviously, as a new title, the monthly active user count isn't high yet (only around 230), but this game comes highly recommended and will most certainly boom in population, soon enough.