

# What Went wrong with “Cities: Skylines II”, according to Players: A Qualitative Analysis of Player Perceptions of a Poor Digital Game Launch

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*Cities: Skylines* (Colossal Order, 2015) took the city-builder throne from Maxis’ *SimCity* series (1989–2014) after the disastrous launch of the fifth *SimCity* (Maxis Emeryville, 2013). But history may be repeating itself, as developers Colossal Order and publishers Paradox Interactive are facing a backlash to the launch of the hotly anticipated *Cities: Skylines II* (2023). Apologetic forum posts from CEO Mariina Hallikainen, promised features significantly delayed, a slew of poor reviews and a rapidly dwindling playerbase all plague a game which was meant to consolidate Colossal Order’s rule over the genre.

Digital games are a notoriously complex and opaque creative industry. Developers have complained that players are “disconnected ... from the realities of game development, and yet they speak with complete authority” (Pagliarulo, 2023) and others have observed tension between the mystification of games as an artistic practice on one hand and the slew of technical and financial restraints on the other (Bycer, 2019). Recent books such as Brendan Keogh’s show that we still struggle to grasp what game development entails and the “complex picture of numerous, diffuse sites of videogame production” (2023, p. 152). Players’ grasp of this is not helped by the industry’s “secretive and ... closed-source culture” (Politowski et al., 2021, p. 1), as anyone who has asked a game developer acquaintance what they are working on will attest.

The often-extensive cost of game development—both financial and temporal—means that a single failure can be catastrophic, sometimes leading to the closure of even well-established studios, such as Maxis Emeryville. No developer or publisher *aims* for a disastrous launch. But, lauded turnarounds like that of *No Man’s Sky* (Hello Games, 2016, 2018; see: Chien et al., 2020) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020; see: Siuda et al., 2023) suggest that this need not be the end of *Skylines II*. Community management could be crucial in recovering from a disappointing launch. As such, more research is needed into how players understand and respond to poor launches, which could inform how to better manage these unhappy occurrences.

To do this, I will scrape the comments of the top 50 posts from the game's dedicated Reddit forum, /r/CitiesSkylines2. A sample of the 100 longest comments, chosen on the basis that they are more likely to have a fleshed-out and coherent argument with necessary context, will be used to inductively develop open, preliminary codes (Auerbach C Silverstein, 2003). These codes will then be applied to the rest of the corpus, being modified as necessary. The codes will be developed on the basis of players' perceived reasons for *why* the launch of *Cities II* struggled. Analysis of the resulting dataset, aided by the qualitative analysis software 4CAT (Peeters C Hagen, 2022), will help to lay out and better understand the predominant strands of players' views of poor launches, and whether they align with the realities of game development and the perceptions of disgruntled developers.

Studies such as those cited of *No Man's Sky* and *Cyberpunk 2077* are important for analysing player receptions to 'salvaged' games. But, so far, little research has looked at the phenomenon of the poor launch itself and how players understand and respond to it. This research may also help to inform work on community churn (Bergstrom C Poor, 2021, 2022)—especially as the long, spirited discussions surrounding a poor launch may tie into an increased sense of community when a game is perceived to be in a state of crisis (cf. Xu, 2018)—and research on negative digital game community dynamics (Hodgdon, 2018). Better knowledge in this domain could also inform community management practices for game launches.

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