

**The Technological, and Business Tactics
That Lead to StarCraft's Success**

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STS145: Professor Henry Lowood
Winter Quarter 2001-2002

It's seen online, in cyber cafes, in the homes of your average citizen from South Korea, Norway, the United States and into other countries. In 1998, 2.1 million people in the United States alone, picked up the year's hottest Personal Computer game: StarCraft. What was it about a PC game that made the fictitious realm of StarCraft as interesting as the talk of the world surrounding the United States President's infidelity and scandal? StarCraft was the gamer's game. StarCraft is a combination of individual and strategy elements, storyline and history, and most importantly, a sense of complete society – community. This sense of community extends beyond the game realm and into the real world of the subculture of a gamer. In other words, while the audience for the Real Time Strategy games had already been established and the plot of StarCraft contributed to its success, the game play is what keeps StarCraft enthusiasts coming back for more.

The “gamer” mindset a complex definition, varying from person to person, but defines a subculture in itself. Through examination of the English modern music scene, Hebdige discusses subcultures as a societal phenomenon of youth. His strongest metaphor is the visually striking punks. Through their style of dress and mode of living they challenge the 'norms' of class, gender, and sexuality; they visually express their disdain for the dominant power. However, it occurred to me that there is a subculture of intellectually cohesive gamers that are not quite so eye-catching, yet no less strongly felt. Gamers are, just as are punks, dealing with popular sensibilities in their creation of a variant domain.

Gaming is not a visually cohesive subculture. There is no concept of 'style' (as Hebdige defines it) as a dramatized slap in the face of societal norms. Nevertheless, the

perception of gaming by mainstream culture is usually one of vague discomfort or disdain. As a subculture, gaming is a viable scapegoat for any perceived cultural ills, and the gamers are quite aware of this. It is not entirely clear why this is so, although there are several possible reasons. Gaming is a chance to try on a different persona or mask; to be someone you are not. Small groups of young people close themselves away from the dominant culture's sensibilities in order to play their games. Furthermore they do so by playing 'parts' or 'personas' other than their own, 'rightful' roles within mainstream culture. To the uninitiated individual attempting to understand a gamer in this "role-swapping" context may be confusing and disturbing - just who exactly is this person?

As with most subcultures, gaming is a mediated response by its members to the dullness of everyday life. It is far less visually dramatic than many, but still represents an "interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media (Hebdige 1987)." In its own, very small way, gaming is to culture "a metaphor for potential anarchy 'out there' ... a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation (Hebdige 1987)." By social story-telling within imaginative, created worlds, they refuse the mundane of capitalistic labor as a goal in and of itself. Instead of commodities, they reposition and recontextualize ideas; their "significant difference" is not visual but mental (Hebdige 1987). Inflections of power are not opposed directly, but rather resisted through a symbolically rich discourse of alternative social possibilities within each created game world and StarCraft provides all of these elements to make it the gamer's game.

StarCraft is a Real Time Strategy game. The player using war type strategy without a turn base is characteristic of Real Time Strategy games. The game seems more

realistic and “real time” because there are no turns. While you may be plotting and “strategizing” your next move, the other opponents can and will try to defeat you in your moment of weakness, making the development of strategy a must in order for the player to survive.

StarCraft can be played in a single player or multiplayer mode, each of which are well equipped to keep the player intrigued. “You can continually replay it, because each time is different. I don't really know how to explain that very well, there are different maps for custom games and you can make your own scenarios with the map editor...” claims Eric Kjono, my brother and casual StarCraft gamer. The single player mode features ten missions for each of the three races (Zerg, Terran and Protoss). This means that there are thirty possible missions, each of which are set up with equal amounts of difficulty, tiered so that the challenge is increased as the player moves up in the tiers. Despite the differences of each race, they are an equal match, so the replay value of the game is held high. The Zerg are considered “frightening” and insect-like, the Protoss are the intelligent and hi-tech race, while the Terran are considered the “space trailer trash”, as one player mentioned. But despite the seemingly socially tiered relationship within the game, none of the units in StarCraft are completely useless.

StarCraft’s story line is part of what made this Real Time Strategy game stand above the rest. The story line is a clash between three main races of the galaxy: Terran (humans), Protoss, and Zerg. The cultural diversity created by the balance of the three races’ complexities helps to move the game play into a social story-telling, one of the characteristics shared by StarCraft enthusiasts and the definition of a subculture. In the original game (there is an expansion, sort of a sequel but not quite) the main Terran

forces are known as the Confederacy. The Confederacy is a rebel group that left Earth long ago to colonize their own distant planets. The Confederacy is very oppressive of the colonies and people within the colonies begin to rebel. The most powerful rebellion is by the extremist group, The Sons of Korhal. The Sons of Korhal reveal the truth about the Confederacy by discovering that the Confederacy has developed methods to control the Zerg and use the race against the Terran people so that the Confederacy leaders can come to the "rescue" of their people.

The problem with the Confederate's plan is the effect it has on the Protoss. The Protoss (though they would never admit it) are terrified of the Zerg and the threat that they pose to their home planet, Aiur. Whenever there is a report of the Zerg on the planet, the Protoss come and eradicate all life on the "infested" planet. The Sons of Korhal attempt to utilize the Confederate method of controlling the Zerg, and sacrifice one of their own to the Zerg. The Zerg, which are pretty much insects under the control of the "Overmind", are attracted to the psychic powers of the Terran units called Ghosts. Ghosts are like Special Forces units. They're telepathic which makes them desirable to the Zerg due to fact that the Overmind wants a telepath. When the Sons of Korhal betray their own and abandon a Ghost to the Zerg, the Overmind begins mutating the Ghost into a Terran-Zerg creature, a sort of mixed breed. The hybrid's name is Kerrigan and she becomes the pride of the Overmind. The underlying storyline gives purpose to the races and something for the player to work against. Basically, the game is packed with deceit and betrayal

The game play of StarCraft is not without faults, though. Many gamers complain about StarCraft's selectable unit cap. For example, Ron Dulin of gamespot.com says,

“During battle, it can be an exercise in frustration.” Another complaint is that StarCraft requires the player to “micromanage” their units, which is also time consuming and not ideal for a Real Time Strategy game.

On the upside, StarCraft makes up for these small glitches and constraints by impressing the player with functional, two-dimensional graphics that are very detailed and imaginative. Another feature of StarCraft is that it plays music tailored to the mood of the situation the game is in. This adds to the feeling of StarCraft and is part of what makes it more popular than its predecessors, even four years after its release. The graphics and the sound bring the gamers into the world of StarCraft where others, virtual or real, join them in this subculture. StarCraft was the product of an evolution of RTS games that introduced the key features of StarCraft separately and was created by a company known for breaking the mold. The mastermind behind StarCraft was Blizzard Entertainment.

The company is known for its outstanding ability to improve and set the pace for the evolution of the gaming industry. Before StarCraft, Blizzard had been the company who brought WarCraft to the masses in 1994, catapulting them into the limelight.

WarCraft set the tone for the caliber of design that was to be expected from Blizzard Entertainment when they were in the pioneering phases of RTS games. As Blizzard’s Bill Roper told Computer Games Magazine, “We couldn’t believe that no one else, including Westwood, had ever done a game that had this real-time strategy element.”

Bill Roper and his colleagues saw the opportunity to develop a new genre of gaming and started it off with the extremely successful WarCraft, made possible with their award-winning work ethic.

As Blizzard's new venture, WarCraft was a gamble, but a well placed one. RTS gaming was a new genre, in fact, so new that it wasn't considered a genre yet. Before WarCraft there had only been two games, which hadn't really developed the idea of RTS gaming. The genre of RTS games was first witnessed on the Sega Genesis back in 1989. As Bruce Geryk said, "It may seem odd to start a history of a genre of PC games with a console title," but Herzog Zwei was the first game to come out with the idea of commanding individual units in real time. The idea of commanding units has evolved through the years to produce RTS games that have advanced way beyond what any gamer back in 1989, had envisioned for the future of RTS. Herzog Zwei and Dune II may have been the first indications of an evolving genre, but Blizzard Entertainment would surprise everyone in 1994. It turned out that WarCraft, capitalizing on the success of Herzog Zwei and Dune II, would take RTS to the next level.

WarCraft brought the worlds of building bases and commanding units into a more complete game, where science fiction was not the only influence and fantasy was creeping in. It was set on a planet much like earth with only two races: the Orcs and the Humans. Both sides had similar task forces with similar capabilities and, for the most part, a strategy that worked for the Humans, worked for the Orcs. In other words, the opportunity for a good mix of never-ending game play was not really there. Hand-to-hand combat was introduced into RTS games with WarCraft, keeping the generally accepted, characteristic, ranged attackers in play to inflict the most damage to opponents. The never-before seen hand-to-hand combat in RTS games was due largely to the fact that the game designers and programmers are gamers at heart. In fact, the heart of the company is held in the people who continue to create new ways of pioneering the

industry as a team. This team ethic is evident in the fact that the company does not advertise their games using the designer's names; only the company label is displayed to the general public.

Then the lead on the evolution of RTS games was taken by the competition. Before StarCraft's splash on RTS gaming, Blizzard, Westwood and Activision were in fierce competition for the title of the best RTS game on the market. Blizzard's WarCraft had brought the genre to life and WarCraft II, released in January of 1995 had brought about 640x480 hi-resolution graphics, a map editor, multiplayer support and humor and character to the cartoon-like units. Activision's Total Annihilation held the position for best strategy emphasis while Westwood's Command & Conquer was known for its story line. But Blizzard was not about to let the competition wipe them out. Their ability to know what it takes, be it long hours in the office or over time, shows their winning spirit and their quality-oriented work ethic. Who else would know what made a good game, but gamers themselves? Blizzard Entertainment's strong connection to the gaming mind contributed a lot to the success of StarCraft. The perseverance, patience and winning attitude gave them the idea to make a new RTS game – they decided to call it StarCraft.

StarCraft, like the rest of Blizzard's ventures, went through an evolution of its own. In the beginning, 1996, Blizzard had decided to try and outdo their success with WarCraft and WarCraft II, as well as the competition by turning WarCraft II into a space game. But StarCraft would soon change the world of RTS gaming. As Cavin Smith put it, "...the world of real-time strategy hasn't been the same since." After much ridicule and a lot of disappointment in the idea of just throwing Orcs in Space, the group decided

to scrap the idea. The result of Blizzard's employees recontextualizing their ideas created a new and symbolically rich disclosure of alternate social possibilities.

Published by Havas Interactive in 1998, StarCraft was created by lead designers James Phinney and Chris Metzen and lead programmer Bob Fitch. James Phinney has been credited for Diablo with Climax Graphics (under Blizzard) in 1997 as the Associate Producer and various other projects. Chris Metzen seems to have had his only shining moment in game design with StarCraft, while Bob Fitch had been a strong programmer for Blizzard previous to StarCraft. The team of three were able to come away from the initial plan and go for the challenge of integrating individual and strategy elements, storyline and history and a virtual community. And their hard work would pay off with the success of StarCraft when it was released in March of 1998. A mix of StarCraft's races and the many scenarios set it above the rest. Not only does it have excellent replay value, "The game always feels like an organic whole and makes you feel far more involved in the story than any other pure strategy game has in the past," says Bruce Geryk. The game engine created by Fitch and the game created by the Designers proved StarCraft to be a superior RTS game.

The game play, advanced graphics, story line and innovations made the game a huge success. One of the other innovations contributing to its popularity was the multiplayer option. If the single player mode is not exciting enough for the gamer they have the option to either create their own campaigns or delve into the multiplayer realm. StarCraft may be played with multiple players by going one-on-one or engaging in up to eight-player battles over LAN or Internet. By logging onto Battle.net, one of the homes of gaming subculture, people from all over the world play StarCraft together. The

multiplayer mode offers a wide range of game types and new opponents as well as a home for the subculture of StarCraft enthusiasts.

In one year, 185,000 units had been sold in the United States alone, mainly to men between the ages of 12 and 30, but the subculture of avid StarCraft gamers was not limited to only those demographics. The sales were astounding in the United States, but South Korea sales were over the top, with a population of about 40 million people, one million copies of StarCraft were sold in 1999. It should also be noted that the population of South Koreans buying so many copies of StarCraft is a huge accomplishment. Not only for the sheer magnitude of people purchasing it, but that in many Asian countries, pirated games are so prominent that many of the notable gaming industries do not market their games because they know about the black market's reputation for selling copies of the game. Winning many awards given in the industry was a result of their success in selling so many copies of the game and being noted by many respected gaming experts. In 1998, it was named Game of the Year by many credible sources, such as the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences and Computer Gaming World. Along with other accolades, StarCraft was recognized as the Number-one selling PC Game of 1998, mainly because of StarCraft's ability to incorporate the key elements of strategy, variation and narrative into the game play.

All of these qualities and accolades were made possible by a mix of technological advances as well as StarCraft's company's work ethic. StarCraft's company, Blizzard Entertainment, was not always such a success. Before making it big in the gaming industry, they had gone through many changes. Blizzard Entertainment started out as a small start-up company known as Silicon & Synapse. On February 8, 1991, three

entrepreneurs decided to strike out on their own and make a living off of their hobby – playing games. Allen Adham, President Michael Morhaime and Vice President Frank Pearce set the tone for a company that would blow away the competition in the art of making successful RTS games like StarCraft because of the strategy they would employ in their work ethic from the beginning.

In the beginning, Silicon & Synapse focused on working on mainly console games for other, larger, companies. Their first hit was RPM Racing, which was also the first American-developed game for Nintendo. Soon after that there were games such as Rock n’ Roll Racing and The Lost Vikings, both having nothing to do with RTS gaming and both made for other companies. But the connection of these early games to StarCraft’s success is the work ethic that Blizzard maintains today. Adham, Morhaime and Pearce all just wanted to make a living at making games because they simply wanted to have fun and make money doing what they loved: to make games that create an arena for other gamers to immerse themselves. For example, on the Blizzard Entertainment website, they claim, “...more that 150 designers, producers, programmers, artists and sound engineers. Each member of the Blizzard staff is a true game enthusiast...” This may seem a little cliché, but in the gaming business, the only way to make a hit game is to know what your players want, to know what it takes to make a game that your audience is as crazy about playing as the creator. And the company obviously had then what it does now: a crew of trained professionals who can tell when a game is ready to hit the market.

So when a larger company named Davidson & Associates tried to buy out their company in 1993, which was now called Chaos Studios, it was a tough decision for the

small, independent company to make. They ended up giving in, but the business relationship didn't last and before long, the company had morphed into Blizzard Entertainment. Blizzard's decision to take the chance of striking out on their own in order to preserve their "small business" atmosphere and their gamer's gaming company title exemplifies their dedication to holding true to the earlier goals of making incredible games when the three men in charge pioneered Silicon & Synapse. Their dedication to creating a true gamer's game is exemplified by the risks they took in making WarCraft and StarCraft. WarCraft was a game created in the infancy of a genre, and yet the company decided to sink money, time and effort into it. StarCraft was another risk: by pioneering the RTS game that combined individual play, strategy, storyline, three new, unique races, a new game engine and the multi-player mode. The combination of all of those elements is an example of the employees' exceptional work ethic.

The technological advances made possible with the help of the Lead Programmer Bob Fitch is a large part of StarCraft's success and a great example of Blizzard's work ethic. His ability to build a better game engine made the designers' ideas of putting all of the key elements of StarCraft a reality. In order to get away from the initial plan to simply put WarCraft in space; the Lead Designers had a vision for a totally new game that would keep players coming back for more. Their solution was to create three civilizations -- each of which are unique and where diversity is evident in their histories and weapons.

But the game engine and base code that had sufficed for WarCraft and WarCraft II simply could not handle all of the added innovation that the game designers envisioned. "All of the spell abilities, such as the burrowing, the cloaking, and having

interceptors on carriers, couldn't be done,” Fitch stated in an interview. His solution was to start from scratch. In the span of two months, Fitch was able to produce a game engine that could support complex additions. His work ethic exemplifies that of the accomplished Blizzard Entertainment employee. Through those two months of hard-core game engine design, Fitch had one thing in mind: reaching a goal – the goal of creating the best where only the absolute maximum effort would suffice. In two months he was able to create the game engine that the Lead Designers were able to bring their visions of complex interactions between races, different qualities and capabilities for each race and game situations to life. The team held true to their effort, to bring the best to the gaming masses, and after many sleepless nights, living in their offices while catching naps in intervals with a bite to eat, StarCraft was born. Without the support of those around them, their die-hard work ethic may not have been so evident in the end. With StarCraft’s success, their efforts did not go unrewarded.

the way that the game was marketed was one of the factors to contribute to StarCraft’s success. There tends to be a sort of sub-culture associated with gamers, as mentioned in the introduction. StarCraft definitely has a group of avid players, followers if you will, who follow the advances of not only their opponents, but of the companies who create RTS games. Blizzard Entertainment was aware of this fact and did not advertise their new game in what many would call a “conventional” manner. I do not remember any commercials advertising StarCraft’s debut, much like I don’t remember many commercials advertising anime or comics, other genres known to generate their own subcultures. There is a link between these examples, which lies in not only the marketing strategies used in their respective industries, but the people who follow their

developments. An example of this sort of “in-house” advertising is not only used for anime, RTS games, or comics, but many other types of products are sold and marketed within a closed group. For example, make-up, tupperware and arts and crafts trades such as scrapbook creations are all marketed person to person. Word of mouth is a very popular way of marketing an RTS game. Blizzard saw this, as many other game businesses have, and utilized the trusted gaming magazines and top game players to market StarCraft. The hype Blizzard was able to create for StarCraft is interesting in that their marketing strategies were unique to the product they were selling.

A game that can be played on the internet with as many as eight players at one time, creating a fictitious world where one may dominate other countries, other races when the person behind the alias who is winning the game may not have such success in real life is related to the way the game is marketed. A sense of community, another world, however fictitious and virtual it may be, is created when playing the game. This sense of belonging and inherent trust in others who play the game as avidly, other groupies, other game enthusiasts of the gaming “other world” give way to the new way of marketing. Blizzard’s success with WarCraft and WarCraft II built a basis for avid gamers across the globe to become familiar with Blizzard. Through this, Blizzard was able to hype up their new game, to promise an outstanding gaming experience because they had been able to deliver before. The gamers of the world knew that Blizzard had a chance of keeping true to their history of upping the score and taking games one more step and took them up on their promise by trying out StarCraft as soon as it came out. The repertoire Blizzard had built with “credited” sources in the gaming world added to

the success of StarCraft as a landmark in the history of RTS gaming. Once again, the work ethic and business strategies added to the success of StarCraft.

As I said earlier, Fitch's efforts with the efforts of the rest of the team assigned the task of improving on WarCraft II were anxious to do so and sacrificed much of their efforts to accomplish the task. But why are the players of StarCraft as obsessed with playing the game as the creators? One statement, made by all of the star employees of Blizzard, "Every game we do has to go through at least one major revision before it finally takes shape," is more evidence of the protocol followed by Blizzard employees. The statement is a testament to their intense hunger to make a winning game, a game that the employees themselves never want to stop playing, no matter the consequences. Their flexibility shows how they would rather start all over than suffer the consequences of making a "bad" game, a game that wouldn't make any gamer want to play continuously until they won.

In the eight player realm, though, what constitutes winning? Alone, the complete domination of all other forces means that you have won, but once you have added the other players of the game, the dynamics of the game changes. The question of who has won is posed because many times, the different players team up to defeat others, much like the world today. So, who wins in the end is a double-edged question because on one hand, the group has won, but on the other, who amongst the winners has truly won. These virtual politics seem very similar to the real politics that govern reality, but StarCraft's ability to recontextualize and reposition ideas in the virtual realm strengthens the evidence of the StarCraft subculture. This makes the answer to the question of what truly defines the success of StarCraft even more complex. Dennis Fong, a well-known

PC Gaming champion, said in response to the question of what has made StarCraft last through the years in an interview, “Simple - its game play. It is still one of the most fun games to play.” I must agree with Dennis Fong, as well as my brother, quoted earlier on the game play of StarCraft, to give an average player’s view, that this is true. In my opinion and based on the research I have presented, the plot, the graphics, the sound, the careful thought put into each detail of the game are all awesome innovations culminating in a social story-telling within this imaginative world. The paralleled virtual community and world created by StarCraft is so realistic that the game play is what makes StarCraft stand above the rest.

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