A Perfect Storm
Starcraft as a window into Blizzard’s design philosophy and success

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STS 145
Prof. Lowood
Winter 2003
The Forecast

Blizzard Entertainment stands tall in the gaming industry, their sterling reputation nearly unmarred by the failures and embarrassments that few companies have managed to avoid. Their short history is characterized by both the commercial success and artistic achievement of each of their games. Nowhere is Blizzard’s incredible success story more evident than in the field of Real Time Strategy (RTS) games, an area where they continue to dominate. Although Blizzard did not pioneer the RTS format, they revolutionized and refined the concept into “a core genre of PC gaming” with their Warcraft and Starcraft titles (PC Retroview: Dune II).

Starcraft in particular is among Blizzard’s most successful projects to date, and its success reflects the philosophies and practices that have made Blizzard the thriving company that it is today. This case history will examine the development of Starcraft as an example of Blizzard’s general business model for success, with a special focus on Blizzard’s obsession with game quality. It will first set the stage with the creation of Blizzard and the development of the RTS genre, and then move on to analyzing the development of Starcraft itself.

The Calm

The beginning of Blizzard entertainment took place in a familiar setting—a beautiful California college campus. Mike Morhaime and Allen Adham were two college undergrads taking the same programming class at UCLA in the late 1980’s (Keighley Eye
of the Storm). While coding next to one another, Morhaime deviously waited until Adham left his computer and seized the opportunity to change his classmate’s logon password. Adham returned and, much to Mike’s disappointment, had no trouble accessing his account. The two soon realized that Morhaime had unintentionally guessed Adham’s exact password! From that bizarre meeting, a close friendship blossomed between Morhaime and Adham that would lead to the formation of Blizzard and inspire the family atmosphere that exists at Blizzard today.

Allen Adham came to UCLA with his sights set on the game industry. During his college years he gained practical experience testing games for Interplay founder Brian Fargo and programming his own games for DataSoft (Blizzard Anniversary, Keighley Eye of the Storm). By the time 1991 rolled around, Adham felt that he had amassed enough experience to venture out into industry and decided to start his own game company. He approached his buddy Mike Morhaime and another UCLA student, Frank Pearce, and convinced them to join him in his venture. On February 8th, 1991, these three college companions founded Silicon & Synapse.

Adham and Morhaime each contributed $10,000 to jump-start their endeavor and assumed the positions of president and vice-president, respectively. Frank Pearce became their first programmer, and they were soon joined by yet another UCLA student, Pat Wyatt (Blizzard Anniversary). It was in these infantile stages of the company that
some of the Blizzard’s business characteristics were first formed. For two years, Adham and Morhaime typified the sacrifice and devotion that now characterizes Blizzard game designers. Adham recalls, “Every penny we made during those early years, Mike and I would put back into the company. If we made some money, instead of drawing our salaries from it, we would hire an artist or another programmer” (Blizzard Anniversary). This sacrifice foreshadowed the months of 80-hour weeks and camping out at the office that would accompany the development of Starcraft.

It was during the early years of Silicon & Synapse that Blizzard’s fundamental rule of game design was first defined. Adham recalls that working on their first original game (RPM Racing) taught them that “a game, first and foremost, should be fun to play, that it should feel good and look good…and that technology is just a means to an end” (Blizzard Anniversary). This simple priority dominates Blizzard’s game design to this day. During the development of Starcraft, as we shall see later on, Blizzard’s absolute devotion to the quality of their games had significant effects on their business decisions.

Silicon & Synapse went through several changes before they finally became Blizzard Entertainment. The company briefly changed their name to Chaos Studios before Adham finally picked “Blizzard” randomly out of a dictionary (Keighley Eye of the Storm). In 1993, Davidson & Davidson purchased Blizzard but allowed the 20-employee company total autonomy. At last, Blizzard was poised to make their first game release
under its new title. The game was Warcraft, and it paved the way for Blizzard’s domination of the Real Time Strategy (RTS) genre with Starcraft.

**Rumblings of RTS**

The concept of a Real Time Strategy game is generally traced back to Westwood’s Dune II, which was released in 1992. The brainchild of Brett Sperry, Dune II established many of the genre conventions that Blizzard would later perfect in Starcraft (Geryk *A History of Real-Time Strategy Games*). Sperry’s concept of real time strategy was to add a “real-time aspect...[to] resource management and a dynamic, flat interface” (Geryk *History of RTS*). Unlike Sid Meier’s turn-based Civilization, Dune II required that players make quick, strategic decisions lest their opponent take advantage of their indecisiveness. As ign.com puts it, “Dune II put a ticking clock into turn-based action and changed strategy gaming forever” (*PC Retroview: Dune II*).

Many of Dune II’s revolutionary features have become the norm in RTS gaming. For example, the simple idea of giving the player the ability to control the construction of their base was new to the game industry (*PC Retroview*). However, it was Dune II’s different races that ultimately set the stage for Starcraft’s success. The inclusion of three races with specific and unique units was unprecedented in any PC game. Ign.com recalls that

![Figure 3 - Dune II pioneered the RTS format](PC Retroview)
the “Atreides had powerful Sonic Tanks, the Ordos had the Saboteurs who could destroy structures or vehicles, and the Harkonnen had the deadly Devastator, to name but a few” (*PC Retroview*). It would not be until Starcraft came along that three separate races could be so successfully implemented in a single game.

**The Storm Gathers**

Blizzard’s Warcraft, released in 1994, marked their foray into the RTS genre and paved the way for Starcraft. Allen Adham admits that “Warcraft was really born out of Dune II…We loved playing that game and thought we could do a game in a fantasy setting like Dune II and add multiplayer” (*Keighley Eye of the Storm*). Warcraft standardized many of Dune II’s features such as structure dependencies, resource gathering, and separate races. Selling over 100,000 copies in its first year, the game established Blizzard as a force in the gaming industry. Blizzard capitalized on the game’s success by churning out Warcraft II less than a year after the first Warcraft hit shelves. Warcraft II surpassed its predecessor by selling an astounding 1 million copies in its first year and being named Game of the Year and Multiplayer Game of the Year by PC Gamer Magazine (*Keighley Eye of the Storm*). These back-to-back successes set the stage for Starcraft to take the world by storm.
Thunder and Lightning

Blizzard’s unbelievable success with its two Warcraft titles gave the blossoming company incredible momentum. Somewhat tired of the medieval feel of Warcraft, the Blizzard team decided to go to the opposite extreme and try their hand at a sci-fi themed game. Thus in 1996, only a few months after Warcraft II had shipped, programmers began work on Starcraft.

With one definitive success under their belt and another blockbuster eating up the market, Blizzard was gaining confidence in their business strategies. Blizzard’s design philosophy and practice had been honed and refined during the development of their Warcraft titles, and the development of Starcraft exemplifies their maturing model for success.

Even before Starcraft’s development began, Blizzard’s hiring philosophy set the tone for the course of the development. Allen Adham explains, “We are a game company, staffed only by gamers, and managed at all levels by gamers. We make all of our strategic decision through the eyes of gamers” (A Decade of Blizzard). Adham and Mike Morhaime understood that the best way to understand their consumer base was to actually be part of the consumer base. Rather than trying to anticipate the needs and desires of consumers, Blizzard designers
simply made games that they themselves wanted to play with the knowledge that they had the same interests as the people who bought their products.

The exclusive hiring practices of Blizzard reflect a deep-rooted company philosophy that pervades every aspect of the company and is especially exemplified in Starcraft’s development. This fundamental characteristic of Blizzard is their absolute devotion to the quality of their games above all other factors. Having released two successful games in a row, Blizzard began to take their reputation seriously as they developed Starcraft. The story of the game’s development is a testament to Blizzard’s uncompromising stance on maintaining the highest quality in their games.

The task of programming the first version of Starcraft fell to Lead Programmer Bob Fitch. A relative veteran at Blizzard, Fitch decided to try and craft a sci-fi game out of Warcraft II’s game engine (*Blizzard Anniversary*). Having produced Warcraft II in under a year, Blizzard in hoped to crank out another blockbuster by 1997. However, Fitch’s decision to start with Warcraft II’s engine reflected a deeper devotion to quality game play. By 1996, 3-D games such as Wolfenstein 3D, Doom, and Doom II had hit the market. Fitch’s devotion to the 2-D, sprite-based format that had already been used in two of Blizzard’s games reflects his focus on the game play rather than technology of the new game. Programmer Pat Wyatt reiterates this concept by noting, “games which have good technology but bad game play don’t survive long” (*The Collective*). Fitch’s implementation of the Warcraft II engine shifted Starcraft’s focus from hardware boosts to game play and story.
Fitch and his team of roughly 20 developers churned out a nearly complete version of Starcraft for the 1996 E3 convention. Blizzard initially devoted equal advertising at the convention between Starcraft and Diablo (another game being developed simultaneously by Blizzard), but by the end of the convention it was painfully clear that there was little interest in Starcraft. Blizzard programmer Dave Brevik recalls that the game was ridiculed as “Orcs in Space” and “Warcraft Goes Purple” (Keighley *Eye of the Storm*).

Blizzard was not about to let a lackluster game mar the impressive reputation that it was building in the game industry, so they sent Fitch back to the drawing board. This action reflects Blizzard’s iron resolve to release only “AAA Blockbuster” games. Bill Roper notes, “We know that if our games meet the standards that both our
players and we place upon them, we are rewarded with excellent sales” (Keighley *Eye of the Storm*). It was this attitude that made the company executives comfortable with delays in the name of quality.

Bob Fitch initially tried to refocus his team’s efforts into the game’s design and programming while retaining Warcraft II’s game engine. By early 1997, however, that Fitch became frustrated with the limitations of Warcraft II’s outdated engine. Fitch recalls:

> The Warcraft II engine just was not capable of producing the effects that we were looking for. All of the spell abilities, such as the burrowing, the cloaking, and having interceptors on carriers, couldn’t be done...Eventually I said, ‘I’ve had enough. We can’t do what you (the designers) want to do with the game engine the way it is. Give me two months.’ (*Blizzard Anniversary*)

Thus in February of 1997, Fitch scrapped all of the work that he had done for E3 and devoted his time to the development of a new game engine to handle the demands of the Starcraft designers. Fitch’s resolve echoes the company determination to make any

![Figure 8 - Fitch's new game engine gave the Starcraft team more creative freedom (*Starcraft History*)](image)
sacrifice to preserve the quality of their games. Company executive Allen Adham notes, “Over the long run, we have NEVER regretted a decision that put the quality of the game first” (*A Decade of Blizzard*). Fitch and the rest of the Starcraft team put the quality of the game before even themselves, for the redesign of the game would make its development the “longest and most painful,” according to Mike Morhaime (*The Tracks of the Games*).

As promised, Fitch delivered a totally new game engine within two months that was capable of handling all of the demands of the game designers. From there, however, things only got more and more intense. In the middle of the game’s design phase, executives Adham and Morhaime approved the creation of a separate cinematic division to focus on Starcraft’s cut scenes. They were willing to sacrifice designers and artists to a new division because they realized that well-integrated cut scenes could effectively advance and contribute to the story (*Blizzard Anniversary*). This reasoning demonstrates Blizzard’s single-minded focus on producing the highest quality game possible.
Even as new departments were being formed, the rest of the game developers were totally focused on completing the game. As development went on, employees devoted more and more of their lives to Starcraft. Fitch reminisces:

I started crunch mode in August of 1997…Initially, that meant working 50 hours a week for two weeks. Then the next two weeks I worked 60 hours each, and then 70 hours, and then 80 hours. The next thing I know I’m living at the company for six months. I wasn’t leaving my office. People would bring me food. I was sleeping on the couch, and despite all of that, I still wanted to play the game. (*Blizzard Anniversary*)

Bob Fitch exemplified the absolute devotion to the game’s success that all of the Starcraft team members exhibited. Jeff Strain, a programmer, worked on Starcraft code as his wife was giving birth in the hospital (*Keighley Eye of the Storm*). Even Mike Morhaime, a company executive, worked seven days a week for eight months on Starcraft (*The Tracks of the Games*). These are all examples of the near fanatical obsession with quality that is at the core of Blizzard’s company culture and vital to Blizzard’s success.

As Christmas of 1997 approached, it became clear that a truly excellent version of Starcraft could not be released in time for the holidays. Rather than skimp on the quality of their game, Blizzard decided to continue working on Starcraft through the holiday season. Mike Morhaime remarks that, “Given the choice, I would rather be criticized for missing a date than for releasing software that wasn’t ready. It really is that final ten-
percent of polish that makes the difference between a good game and a great game” (*The Collective*). In the last three months of Starcraft’s development the company practically shut down operations as its employees played the game over and over again, constantly tweaking various aspects of the game play. Balancing the game’s three races was “a total pain in the butt,” programmer Frank Pearce notes, but was an absolute necessity to make the game truly excellent (*The Tracks of the Games*). Finally, in April of 1998, Blizzard unleashed Starcraft on the public with incredible consequences.

**The Rainbow**

Starcraft’s amazingly successful worldwide reception rewarded the devotion of Blizzard and the whole design team to making the highest quality game possible. Despite its late release, Starcraft sold an incredible 1 million copies in only three months, setting company sales records. The game was named Computer Entertainment Title of the Year and Real-time Strategy Game of the Year by the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences (*Blizzard Anniversary*).
Especially surprising to Blizzard was the phenomenal reception of the game in Korea. Although Korea has just 40 million people, 1 million copies of Starcraft were sold there in 1999 alone (Geryk History of RTS). In total, there is now approximately one copy for every 23 people in Korea (de los Reyes Being Blizzard Entertainment). Korea’s potent reaction to Starcraft is indication enough of Blizzard’s successful design philosophy. Their devotion to refining and balancing the three races of Starcraft is reflected in the fierce game tournaments that continue to this day. Rob de los Reyes notes, “At one promotional event, over 5,000 people turned out just to watch a match played on several large monitors. There were even three tuxedoed commentators offering move-by-move analysis of the match in progress” (de los Reyes Being Blizzard). The attention that Starcraft receives in Korea is only possible because of the months of work spent refining the game and Blizzard’s refusal to rush their development process.

Worldwide, Starcraft’s persistence bears testament to Blizzard’s successful business philosophy of absolute devotion to quality. Recent reader polls on Gamespot reflect the phenomenal impact that Starcraft has had on gaming. Starcraft was voted as having best game ending of all time, even though strategy games are not generally known for their narrative excellence (Ten Best Readers Endings). Gamespot readers also voted the game
as having three of the “top ten best gaming heroes” and having some of the “best voice acting in games” (Readers’ Choice – Best Heroes, The Best Voice Acting in Games). Starcraft’s dominance in these game details bears testament to the success of Blizzard’s focus on quality and game play. Although the game is relatively old, the blood, sweat, and tears that the Blizzard development team poured into Starcraft gives it its lasting appeal. On the whole, Starcraft’s worldwide success and critical acclaim vindicates the company’s obsession with quality as a successful business model that should serve Blizzard well in the years to come.
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