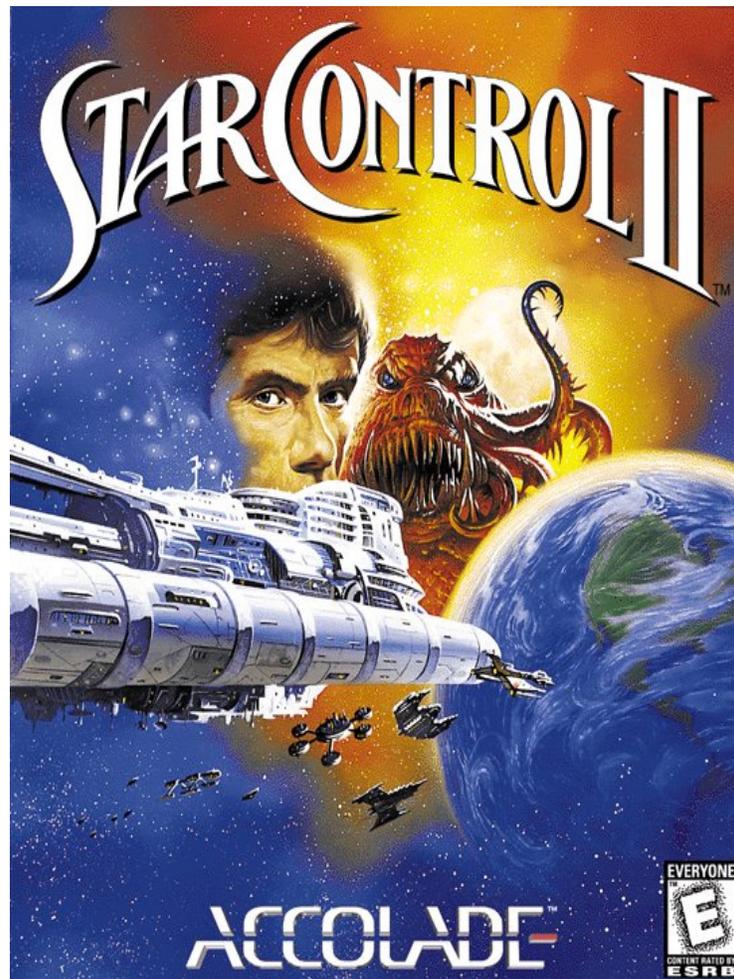


Case History:



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Case History

Star Control II: The Ur-Quan Masters

In July 1990, the two partners who formed the software company Toys for Bob released their first game, *Star Control*, under game publisher Accolade for the personal computer system. These two men – Paul Reiche III and Fred Ford – were big fans of science fiction, and in Reiche’s case, fantasy role playing games (especially *Dungeons and Dragons*). Unsurprisingly, the game had a strong science fiction theme and heavy doses of traditional role-playing elements, wherein the player controlled one of two sides in an effort to either take over the universe as the marauding conquerors of the Ur-Quan Hierarchy, or save the universe as the brave defenders of the Alliance of Free Stars. *Star Control* effectively interleaved elements of strategy and action; the player tried to outwit the opposing forces in various turn-based inter-planetary strategic scenarios, and subsequently engaged enemy ships in real-time “space melee” one-on-one spaceship dogfights, similar in style to *Spacewar*, the earliest of video games (Derrenbacker). Many of the sequel’s most interesting elements, such as the unique characteristics of each race’s ships and behaviors, were established in this game and would carry on to *Star Control 2*. Figures 1a and 1b show some scenes from *Star Control*, illustrating how advanced some of the graphics from the game were for the time (figure 1a is also an early manifestation of the creators’ sense of humor – the ship shown in the middle of the picture is the flagship of an all-female race of humanoids; the explanation behind the visual is left to the reader’s imagination.).

Star Control, though not a wild success, did rather well both critically and financially, and spawned editions for the Sega Genesis, ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64, that also sold well (Woerner). This was all despite Accolade not wanting to spend too much on advertising and promoting the game (perhaps discouraged by the release of *Wing Commander* by gaming giants Origin at around the same time), which resulted in the company being rather taken aback by the game's success.



Figure 1a, 1b. Scene from *Star Control* and title graphic.

The success of *Star Control* – especially given its lack of any serious form of advertising – prompted Accolade to ask Toys for Bob to create a sequel for the game, an idea which was met with much enthusiasm from the creators. *Star Control 2*, the creators decided, would be bigger and better than the original, in every sense of the phrase – more interaction, more alien races, more ships, and even a solid first-person role-playing element. The creators also wanted to further develop the graphics and game engine to make use of newer technologies, allowing for a faster game and higher-resolution displays. This ambition, however, was costly for Reiche and Ford, as they ended up going six months over schedule, during which they worked without pay because Accolade cut off their funding as a (a perfectly legal move – more on this in the next paragraph) means of stressing the production deadline to the duo (Hu).

At this point, it is worth mentioning the history of collaboration between Accolade and Toys for Bob. When Reiche and Ford started working together in 1989, Reiche was under contract from Accolade to produce three games as a contractor (Woerner). What this meant was that Accolade had no creative input in the game at all; in fact, Accolade simply owned the trademarks (though not the ideas behind the game) and published and distributed the game, something a small software development unit like Toys for Bob could not manage as effectively. Thus, Accolade's move to deny payment for the two creators was legal, by the duo's nature as contracted workers, who were supposed to be paid for milestone developments in the creation of the game but had gone over schedule. Various fans of the *Star Control* series propose this mistreatment, and subsequent low pay offers for the development of *Star Control 3*, even after the success of *Star Control 2*, as one of the main reasons why Ford and Reiche ended up leaving Accolade after *Star Control 2*.

In November 1992, *Star Control 2* was finished and finally released for the personal computer. The game featured a rich, multi-layered and complex world and offered hours of engrossing game-play; these were among the factors that helped the game garner many positive reviews from critics. Accolade, however, saw none of this in their handling of the game's creation process – an often-told anecdote describes how the publishing company, upon receiving the final product in December, asserted that this was no better than it had been a few months ago, and that they should have released the version they saw in September – despite the dialog not having been written yet at that point (Woerner, Hu). Accolade seemed to be ignorant of one of *Star Control 2*'s storyline, which was, in most players' opinions, one of the most complex and involving

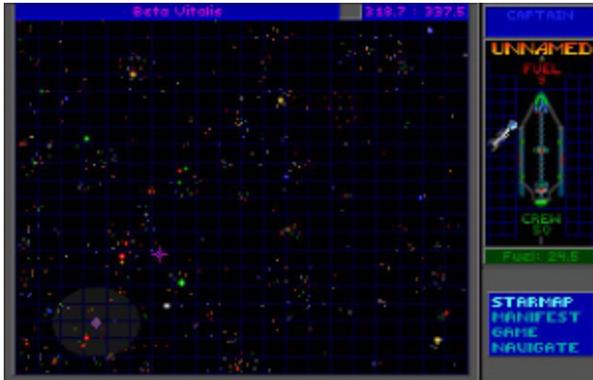


Figure 2a. Interstellar exploration, with literally hundreds of stars to explore – not all of which were friendly territories

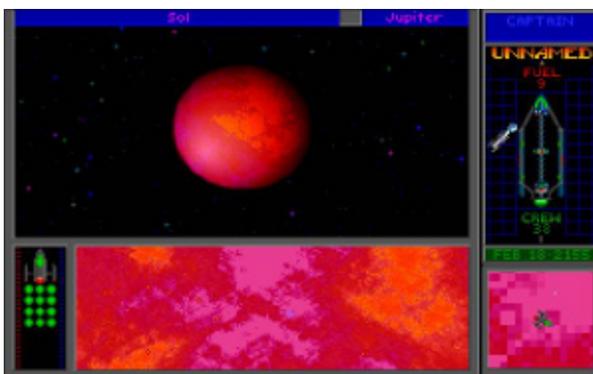


Figure 2b. Planetary exploration, where the player sent a resource collecting vehicle to pick up planetary resources for weapons and exploration technology development. However, many mineral-rich planetary surfaces were hostile environments.



Figure 2c. Exploring space can be hazardous, especially when encountering hostile alien races, which end up engaging the player in one-on-one space melee battles.

elements of the game, and was what attracted them to keep playing the game for many hours, immersed in its game-play and storyline.

To express it simply, *Star Control 2* was a huge game. The original ensemble of fourteen alien races grew into twenty two even without including the various ancient races alluded to in the unfolding storyline. Each of the twenty two races had characteristic space vessels that fought and behaved differently. Furthermore, each race's individual traits were carved out in (frequently hilarious) conversations the player carried out with alien ambassadors through the use of conversation options that would advance the storyline in different ways, depending on the player's diplomatic skills. The player was offered an entire galaxy of stars to explore in no

linear sequence, and had to balance his time between exploring (figure 2a), gathering minerals from planets using land-rovers (figure 2b), fighting off hostile alien spacecraft in a revival of the popular Hyper Melee mode real-time battles (figure 2c), and ultimately trying to save the New Alliance of Free Stars from the conquering Ur-Quan Hierarchy yet again. With hundreds of star systems (translating into thousands of stars), a rich variety of enemy and ally interactions, secret worlds and hidden quests (such as the mysterious “Rainbow Star” configuration deducible from the star map), many players were rarely ever at a loss for something to do in this game (Reisig and Allen). In that sense, the creators created a game that is unique in its being “infinitely expansive both in space and time” (Gabel); more than achieving their goals of making the sequel bigger and better than the original.

Certainly, *Star Control 2*'s game-play was engaging and offered the player a multitude of quests and games-within-games (such as Hyper-Melee and the planetary exploration sequences), much like many other role-playing computer and video games of the time such as *The Legend of Zelda* and *Might and Magic*. What made *Star Control 2* exceptional for most players, apart from its novel science-fiction role-playing hybrid nature, were its narrative aspects – the background story, conversations with characters in the game, and the development of the storyline, of which the player was made to feel as truly a part of. The gist of the game's immense story is as follows: the player controls a newly discovered Precursor ship, belonging to an ancient race of spacefaring beings, and sets out to rediscover Earth as the captain of a crew of humans abandoned in a far corner of the galaxy, unknowing of the events that transpired in the first *Star Control*. On the way, however, the player finds out that the Ur-Quan Hierarchy had been largely

successful in wiping out or enslaving sentient life in the galaxy, but were also in inner turmoil as a separate, more violent breed of Ur-Quan aliens were engaging in civil war deep in the heart of the Hierarchy's empire. After freeing Earth from the grips of the Ur-Quan, the player then has to gather allies, weapons and tools to save the galaxy from a threat far worse than the Ur-Quan. Despite the plot's generic-sounding nature – “save the New Alliance of Free Stars from the Ur-Quan Hierarchy” – the player is gradually introduced to multiple facets of each race's plights and situations, even the Ur-Quan's, and a fully-fleshed out plot is revealed further into the game.

In terms of overall plot advancement and presentation, though, *Star Control 2* developed an epic feel and scope, wherein ground-shakingly important events were constantly happening outside of the player's immediate knowledge. For example, if the player were to simply wait around and gather resources without exploring new planets, seeking allies and engaging enemies, the storyline would begin unfolding by itself. By observing each alien species' sphere of influence on the star map, the player could see some species slowly getting conquered by the Ur-Quan hierarchy, or watch as the Ur-Quan split into the Kzer-Za and Kohr-Ah camps and engage in self-destructive civil war. The player's inputs, of course, would influence these events as well, and he or she would usually be given enough hints within the game to prevent mindless wandering around the vast game world. In general, the player discovered new mysteries twice as often as he or she solved old ones. *Star Control 2* is one of those exceptional games where the back story is as important and intriguing as the story that the player carves out for himself or herself; indeed, in *Star Control 2*, the separate diachronic and synchronic stories (back story and actual game respectively occurring “asynchronously” and “synchronously”

with the player's responses) introduced by Poole are merged into one fully engaging cinematic moment, wherein the player discovers the back story while forging the actual storyline of the game (Poole).

Attesting to the strength of the story, we see that on Gamespot, *Star Control 2* was listed as one of the “ten best gameworlds” in an online readers’ survey, where one reader fondly states that “the dynamic world of ... *Star Control 2*, remains as one of my most cherished gaming experiences.” (Gamespot) A similarly representative testament to the popularity of *Star Control 2*'s storyline was how poorly received *Star Control 3* was in terms of its story and character development; many reviewers were unhappy with how it lacked any form of depth and storyline. One online reviewer laments, “the story ... is so pointless and incohesive that the player merely feels as if he is observing a disjointed comedy of errors instead of taking part in a grand-scale epic, as was the case in *Star Control 2*.” (Gamespot) The lack of depth in *Star Control 3*'s story, while disappointing for many fans of *Star Control 2*, serves to demonstrate how well-received the latter was in terms of its remarkable storyline.

Typical of games with such heavy emphasis on the role-playing elements of the story, much of the player's time outside of interstellar exploration, mining and combat is



Figure 3a, 3b. Conversation scenes, with Vux and with the Earth commander. Possible responses are shown in the blue area on the bottom left.

spent in conversation with representatives from other alien races. These conversation scenes, many fans claim, are the real gems of the *Star Control 2*. The player engages in conversation with alien representatives either when confronted by alien ships or when visiting alien planets, at which point the playing screen switches to a traditional menu-style dialog screen, as shown in figures 3a and 3b. Depending on the player's choice of a conversation response, the alien might choose to respond by attacking, making an offer of peace or simply running away (as the amusingly cowardly Spathi would tend to do). These conversations are integral to the game – many quests, important or otherwise, are begun in conversation (for example, saving the Shofixti race from extinction, or assembling the Utwig's Ultron), just as in more traditional computer role-playing games. The conversations add to the depth of the game, allowing a wide variety of responses to an even wider variety of situations and aliens.

However, with *Star Control 2*'s similarity to traditional computer role-playing games in utilizing conversations to advance the plot, it could easily have suffered the same problems that turned people off these games – namely, that these conversation sequences were dull, lengthy and generally detracting from the actual game-play elements. Reiche and Ford anticipated this, however, and spent months making the conversation sequences as interesting as possible. The writers' strong sense of humor definitely helped in this aspect; many conversation options and alien responses were hilarious, and thus the game managed to hold the player's interest with clever and witty conversation threads. Even more remarkable were how unique each alien race was – threaten the Ur-Quan, and the player would face imminent attack; threaten the Spathi, and they would most likely run away. Further examples of this attention to detail in

creating characters and their personalities are apparent in the Orz and Arilou races, who seemed harmless and peace-loving upon first contact. However, through prolonged contact (and warnings from other alien races), the player would begin to feel wary about these and maintain a sense of caution in his or her dealings with them. The entire concept of diplomatic relations was turned on its head as the player tried to manage alliances with aliens who had been long at war, or who treated each other (and the player) with only the utmost suspicion. Little nuances such as these demonstrate the level of detail the creators went into as they strove to create a believable game-world and more effective narrative.

The degree of interactivity with the computer players was – and still is – a rarity in many computer role playing games. *Star Control 2* offered “hundreds of hours” of dialog, “witty at times, touching at others and relentlessly deep,” (Gabel) but the artificial intelligence component of the game was not limited to just the conversations. In Hyper-Melee mode, each race also has a distinctive fighting style, with a commendable effort made at a working Artificial Intelligence model for the action component of the game. Reiche and Ford had gone out of their way to make a convincing and compelling storyline by making their characters as realistic in terms of personality as they were fantastic in appearance (see figure 3a for the picture of the vile Vux). While it is certainly true that computer games “can show you the imaginary milieu and thrust you into a pitched gun battle, but they ask your imagination to supply the 'interaction' and 'open-endedness' that complete the escapist milieu” (Wininger) – *Star Control 2*, however, made a heroic effort to complete said “escapist milieu” by having a cast of behaviorally (though not physically) believable characters for the player to interact with.

With the main features and qualities of the game established in some detail, it is worth considering some of the cultural and design-related issues that surround *Star Control 2*, with hopes of better understanding what made it so exceptional for its time.

Apart from the science-fiction and role-playing influences in *Star Control 2*, some claim that the Reiche and Ford were also influenced by other computer games of the time (Gabel), such as the *Starflight* series and, to a smaller extent, cult favorites *Captain Blood* and *Solar Winds*. With a better understanding of *Star Control 2* in mind, we can proceed to analyze the influences other games, *Starflight* in particular, might have had on the creators. Greg Johnson, designer of *Starflight*, is a good friend of Reiche and Ford, so the game is often credited as being the source of inspiration for *Star Control 2*. Judging from this description of *Starflight*, that comparison could easily be justified:

Starflight gave you the Star Trek-ish goal of seeking out new life-forms and adventure and let you explore an entire universe. With the very existence of Earth in doubt as a result of our sun's pending supernova, Starflight gave you a sense of urgency and epic purpose. While exploring new worlds could yield valuable minerals and empowering artifacts, interacting with our alien neighbors was perhaps the most interesting aspect of the game. Each different alien species - and there were many - had its own form of communication and technology and its own wants and needs (and often bizarre sense of humor). Cooperation and negotiation were often the keys to long-term success in the game. (Gamespot)

Gamespot even calls *Star Control 2* a “spiritual successor” to *Starflight*, conceding the similarities in its concept, gameplay and design. It might be interesting to note that *Starflight* and its sequel *Starflight 2* gained immense popularity with a small group of dedicated players, and until now retains an avid fan-base that creates webpages about the game, puts up fan fiction and even works on a sequel to the now-defunct series. In fact, this is tremendously similar to fan reaction to the *Star Control* series, a point we will address towards the end of this paper.

Star Control 2's other high-profile parent is an illustrious member of the computer gaming history books. The Hyper Melee mode of *Star Control 2* is similar to the game of *Spacewar*, also the first computer game created. In *Spacewar*, players control two opposing ships who fire at each other while avoiding the opposing player, his shots, and the planet in the middle of the screen. *Star Control 2*'s Hyper Melee mode works similarly, but with more bells and whistles; it contains more ships with different characteristics – speed, maneuverability, weapon strength, etc., each ship has two different weapons, ships have hit point indicators and battery life indicators, the playing field is zoomable. Even the concept of hyperspace in *Star Control 2* – teleporting around normal space – seems, to some extent, “borrowed” from *Spacewar*. The basic idea remains the same, however – avoid the other player, avoid the other player's bullets, avoid the planet and shoot the other player – and even the controls remain the same; a thrust-turn system simulating actual movement in space that builds up the player's acceleration but does not allow “braking,” only turning around and accelerating again to slow down. As early computer gamers can attest to, this formula for a game was highly addictive, and so was Hyper Melee. Roeche and Ford wisely added a separate Hyper Melee mode that allowed up to two players and could be accessed independent of the game, bringing many more hours of entertainment into the players of *Star Control 2*.

Finally, we take a look at life after *Star Control 2* – what impact has it had on the gaming industry? For one thing, how well did the game sell, after it was released? Initially, sales of *Star Control 2* were “fairly disastrous” (Woerner), despite garnering enthusiastic reviews from most critics. However, it remained on the shelves for longer than its predecessor, and slowly gained publicity as players began to take notice of the

game and it slowly gained in popularity, attaining cult-favorite status. With the sales numbers the game eventually posted, Accolade decided to release a new version of *Star Control*, but without the original creators on board. This paper has already documented some extent of the *Star Control* fans' disappointment with the new installment, but many agreed it was a decent game, just lacking in the strongest and most critically acclaimed points of *Star Control 2*, namely plot, conversation and depth.

As with *Starflight*, *Star Control*'s fan base was – and is – fiercely dedicated to the game, and this dedication manifests itself in various forms. For example, we have webpages devoted to the game – [The Pages of Now and Forever](#) (PNF) being an exceptional well-documented example. Set up like a bulletin board, PNF features articles chronicling the history and development of the entire *Star Control* series, and contains much information about characters, races, ships, back story, fan fiction and illustration, as well as other tidbits of information. Another example of the impact of *Star Control* is the Star Control Writers' Collective. As its name implies, this is a collection of fans who create fan fiction based on the stories presented in the *Star Control* series.

Most notably in this area, we have *Star Control: Timewarp* (Daggar). *Timewarp* is a full-featured version of Hyper Melee that combines ship classes from all three games and allows for networked multi-player support (instead of the traditional one-on-one sharing the same keyboard). Disillusioned by the third incarnation of the series and knowing that Reiche and Ford will be unable to create a “true sequel” due to copyright problems, fan took it upon themselves to create a version of *Star Control*'s Hyper Melee fighting system that everyone could enjoy. Thus far, they have created a free, working downloadable version of *Timewarp* that is reminiscent of *Star Control 2* in gameplay,

though slightly more advanced in technology – the graphics and display resolution have been spruced up, the game is fully Windows compatible and the battle engine has been adapted to allow up to eight players. *Timewarp* is an exceptional demonstration of the cultural impact of *Star Control 2* on players' lives; despite being unable to change the gaming world in any major form (*Star Control 2* is, after all, no *Quake*, *Doom* nor *Command and Conquer*), it spawned a form of enthusiasm and loyalty all its own.

In summary, having walked a path through *Star Control 2*'s development, from its earliest days as a conceptual sequel to *Star Control*, to its birth fraught with delays and finally to its impact on gaming culture in general, we have explored various issues pertaining to the business and cultural factors surrounding the creation of *Star Control 2*. Unfortunately, an overarching theme of *Star Control 2*'s history has been Reiche and Ford's mistreatment at the hands of Accolade, ultimately leading to their dissociation from the company for *Star Control 3*, and leagues of dissatisfied fans. Nevertheless, the duo still known as Toys for Bob managed, in *Star Control 2*, to create a game wondrously distinctive in its narrative strength, its vastness and its impeccable sense of humor; an accomplishment in computer gaming that is rare even in these days of computing and technological advancement.

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Interviews, and other notes

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Images of the *Star Control* games were also obtained off The Pages of Now and Forever. Copyrights to the original owners/publishers where appropriate.