

# Case History: The Star Control Games

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## Star Control: Toys for Bob is born

Paul Reiche III started his gaming career playing Dungeons and Dragons. He and his friends played the game as teenagers, and as teenagers they formed a company to make fantasy role playing game books. This landed him a job at TSR, the makers of Dungeons and Dragons, but Reiche decided that what he really wanted was to make video games. He soon started doing just that: his first title was Archon, which he co-designed in 1982 for Electronic Arts. More games followed, including Mail Order Monsters. Many of these efforts went on to become some of the classics of early computer gaming. Reiche's games tended to be marked by a combination of various elements of other games to produce new ideas. For example, Archon combined the strategy of chess with arcade action. Players moved their pieces around on a tiled board, but when two pieces met, they would duel in a two-dimensional arena, and the loser would be removed from the game. This allowed Reiche to experiment with having some pieces be stronger in some squares than others, in effect using the arcade aspects to add depth to the strategy. His other games are similarly deep.

As strong a designer as Reiche was, he was not a programmer. For the earlier projects, he worked with various programmers to get the titles done, but while working on one particular game (The Adventures of Elmo in the 4th Dimension), his programmer quit suddenly, and he had to cancel the project. At this point, Reiche needed to find another programmer to work with if he was to continue his highly enjoyable job of making games.

Reiche would eventually hook up with Fred Ford. Ford's first programming job was working on Japanese games, most of which were never published in the US. After that, he drifted in and out of various programming jobs, including work on a Unix windowing system, CAD/CAM software, and graphics software such as paint programs, desktop publishing packages, and business presentation software. Ford was introduced to Reiche when some mutual friends realized that Reiche needed a programmer, and that Ford was looking to work on something more fun than what he was doing at the moment. In 1989, they decided they should work together on what they really enjoyed -- making games -- and formed a partnership they would call Toys for Bob.

Their first game, published in July 1990, was Star Control, a science fiction game where the player controlled either the fleets of the Ur-Quan Hierarchy, bent on conquest, or those of the Alliance of Free Stars, bravely defending their worlds from the onslaught of the Ur-Quan Battle Thralls. Like Archon, Star Control featured a strategic level where players would build and move their ships to capture key planets (either for their resources or their strategic location), as well as an arcade action level where ships would dogfight in 2D around a planet. The variations of weaponry, speed, and maneuverability in the 14 ships in the game made both the strategy of choosing which ships to build and send on the attack and the action of the actual dogfighting quite deep and exciting.

The early days of Toys for Bob illustrates a trait that is characteristic of many video game developers, especially smaller ones: Reiche and Ford had a passion for the games, and had their own ideas about how to make a good game. Their primary motivation was to make fun games, in the vision that they have for this ideal game. Even the name of their partnership shows this emphasis on fun, rather than business.

Once together, they set on this task with great enthusiasm, and to great effect.

### **The Relationship with Accolade begins**

However, it's rare that developers, especially smaller ones, have the resources to make a game without the backing of a larger company. In order to make their game, Toys for Bob needed to connect with a publisher who could back the expenses involved. They were able to get a contract with Accolade, as outside developers. They were on their own for the most part, but they were paid for meeting milestones and would collect royalties on sales (while Accolade made most of the money, to recover the costs of paying the bills). Accolade would own the trademarks, but Reiche and Ford were careful to retain ownership of the ideas.

It's important to see here that, from Accolade's standpoint, it didn't matter what the game was. The developers' passion for the game was lost on the publisher: what mattered, and rightly so from a business standpoint, was the bottom line of how many units the game would eventually ship. As long as a game was on schedule and under budget, and sold enough copies, Accolade didn't care whether or not the developers were pouring their souls into the games or whether the games were even fun. In fact, as a publisher of sports games, Accolade didn't even understand Star Control at all, let alone how to support the title and its developers.

However, despite this, the game was quite successful, garnering positive reviews and an extremely loyal fan base. Never mind that they didn't know how or why the game was so popular; all that mattered to Accolade was that it was making them money. On the other hand, Toys for Bob didn't care what Accolade thought, so long as they paid them to keep doing what they wanted to do. They came back to the company wanting to do a sequel, and Accolade was quite happy to let them have another go.

### **Star Control 2**

Their second game design was quite a bit more ambitious than the first. They kept the space combat system, making changes only to improve the graphics and tighten up the camera and controls a bit. However, they replaced the strategic game with an action/role-playing component, and developed an extensive universe and plotline to go with it. Here, instead of combining action and strategy, Reiche was experimenting with action and role playing, and both of them looked forward to the task of populating a huge game universe with a diverse assortment of alien races and personalities to bring the game to life.

Once again, the Alliance of Free Stars was battling against the Ur-Quan forces. However, the new game was set some time after the original, after the Alliance had largely lost the wars. Most of the Alliance member races had been defeated and forced to fight for the Ur-Quan, or confined to their homeworlds under a slave shield. The player takes the role of an officer from an isolated Human scientific colony which was unaware of the Alliance defeat. The player, when he returns with ancient Precursor technology to aid the fight, finds Earth under a slave shield, and must rebuild the Alliance and find a way to defeat the inexhaustible forces of the Ur-Quan.

In the course of the game, the player must go to many of the hundreds of star systems in the game, looking for mineral resources, clues to the fates of the old Alliance races, and seeking new allies to challenge the Ur-Quan. Of course, it's never that simple: the player soon learns that besides the Ur-Quan, there's a new threat, the Kohr-Ah, which seek to destroy rather than enslave, and now the Alliance must defeat both these forces. Along the way, the player unfolds the truth about how the Ur-Quan and Kohr-Ah are related, the history of the Ur-Quan, and the reasoning behind their lust for conquest, in a surprisingly deep story: it turns out that the Ur-Quan were once slaves, and through some extreme

measure were able to free themselves from their slavery. In order to ensure that they'd never again be subject to others, they decided they would force all others to fight for them, or be unable to fight at all.

Each alien race needed unique art, music, and dialog to flesh out the story line. This is perhaps the strongest aspect of the game: the personalities Reiche and Ford created are incredibly fun to interact with. Each race has its own quirks and modes of talking, and there were plenty of little jokes sprinkled throughout, many of which were self-consciously poking good-natured fun at the game itself. For example, the first alien you meet is a Spathi named Fwiffo, who had originally been stationed by the Ur-Quan to guard Earth. However, Spathi are a cowardly lot, and all his compatriots had long since left him to look after things by himself. When you talk to him, your first dialog permits three choices (dialogs are done by presenting the player with various lines from which he could choose the one he thought was the best way to interact with the alien), one of which is "Attention alien vessel: Identify yourself or be destroyed", and another of which is "Hi there friend! We come in peace and mean you no harm". If you choose the latter, Fwiffo responds, "Are you sure? Because your statement is often just a more polite way of saying `Attention alien vessel: Identify yourself or be destroyed.'"

### **A Long Six Months**

Reiche and Ford would end up paying for their ambition. Their schedule slipped, and the project began to run late around May 1992. However, they were unwilling to compromise their game design: they knew what sort of game they wanted to make, and would not finish early just in order to ship a product. Accolade at this point decided to cut off any more funding, which was perfectly within their rights. This was their way of encouraging Toys for Bob to finish up the game as soon as possible, so that the company could see a return on all the payments until now. Again, what mattered to the publisher is the bottom line, regardless of the quality of the game.

The game's developers continued working, unpaid, for another six months. While the game was largely playable, there was still no music, dialog, and much of what the game would later be remembered for. Towards the end of the project, they worked 18 hour days, 7 days a week. In November 1992, finally, they were able to show a final version to Accolade. Despite the massive improvements they had made towards the end, Accolade continued to show little understanding or appreciation of the game: they continued to assert that they would have preferred to ship the version from September. Among other deficiencies, that version included none of the final dialog, just placeholders such as "Arilou hello 1". Despite the tension between the developer and the publisher, Toys for Bob was able to make the game they wanted, and (as would be obvious soon) Accolade got another successful game.

### **More Sequels?**

Understandably, the pair was burned out on Accolade and the Star Control universe for at least the short run, and wanted to move on to different projects. However, Accolade wanted yet another Star Control game to follow up Star Control 2's success, hoping to hit it big once again. Toys for Bob and Accolade were unable to reach agreement about what their next game would be (Toys for Bob proposed a game called The Horde, which they eventually completed while working for Crystal Dynamics), so Reiche and Ford ended their association with Accolade, while Accolade found another developer to work on Star Control 3.

Star Control 3 ended up being a big let down in the series. The graphics and technology were solid, but the new developers could not maintain the high standards of good story and better humor that was established by Reiche and Ford. The old fans were disappointed, and kept wondering when the original

creators of the series would return and set things right again.

Accolade made one last attempt to cash in on the franchise: they began work on an arcade flight sim/shooter titled "StarCon". Accolade was hoping to take advantage of the Star Control brand, which they still owned, to sell a totally different kind of game. However, the project was terminated before they finished, and the game shelved.

### **Conflict of Ownership**

It's still not clear whether Toys for Bob will ever make another Star Control title. There's certainly demand from the fans: Star Control 2 left more than one opening for future games, and the fans were unsatisfied by the mediocre Star Control 3. Reiche and Ford have also expressed some interest in returning to their masterpiece. When asked which game of theirs they liked best, they compared the question to asking "Which of your children is your favorite?", and deferred on a direct answer, but they have said that of all their games, they are most proud of Star Control 2, and would love to explore the possibilities in that creation further, if the opportunity arose.

However, the chances seem slim. Accolade still owns the trademarks, so Crystal Dynamics (which now employs Toys for Bob) would have to buy the rights first. Given how much Accolade spent on the last two games, they would probably ask for a large sum to recover the losses. On top of that, Star Control 3 and StarCon were deliberate attempts by Accolade to change what "Star Control" was, so that at some point in the future, they could create new games without having to worry about acknowledgements and royalties for using Reiche and Ford's ideas. To Reiche and Ford, these attempts were successful enough to make it difficult for them to return to Star Control.

### **Conclusions**

The developer-publisher conflict is fairly well illustrated in the relationship between Toys for Bob and Accolade. Where Toys for Bob was primarily interested in making the games they felt would be fun, Accolade was most worried about maximizing return on their investments, and maintaining the value of their properties. Not all publishers have this sort of relationship with their developers (for example, Toys for Bob was very happy with its relationship to Crystal Dynamics after they left Accolade), but the fact is that sometimes the publisher and the developer simply have different concerns and understanding of the situation, leading to these sorts of conflicts in the relationship.

It might be easy to say that the game developer is always right in these situations; after all, they are the ones trying to make the fun games, and the publisher is just looking to make a quick buck. However, it's not always so clear cut. While Star Control and Star Control 2 attracted very loyal fans, there weren't all that many of them: Star Control sold 120,000 copies, while Star Control 2 sold 130,000. Despite the critical acclaim, the sales figures were not that impressive. One measure of a game definitely has to do with how many copies the game has sold (and thus how widely the game is played and known); by that measure, Star Control's success was modest at best. On the other hand, the publisher is always trying to maximize for this measure, since to make a lot profit they need to sell a lot of copies.

This tension of appealing to the core audience as opposed to trying to achieve mass appeal is one that games continue to face. While games like Myst and Deer Hunter draw ridicule and scorn from the rest of the industry, it is exactly such games that sell the most copies and have the widest mass recognition. The games that are the most highly regarded by gamers are often "cult classics"; just witness the recent failure of Looking Glass Studios. Despite putting out high quality games like System Shock, the developer still went out of business. As video games start to become more mainstream and start to compete with other

forms of entertainment (such as television and cinema), this dichotomy will need to be resolved, or else the industry will have a hard time maturing.

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