Video: How Star Control II was almost a much more boring game



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Video shot by Sean Dacaney and edited by Evan Watkin. Click here for transcript.
Welcome back to “War Stories,” an ongoing video series where we sit down with game designers and ask them to tell us about game development challenges that almost sank their projects. In previous instances, we’ve been lucky enough to get some time with the likes of Lord British (of *Ultima* fame) and Paul Neurath (of *Thief*), among others. This time, we’ve scored big: we tracked down the creators of the *Star Control* series—none other than Fred Ford and Paul Reiche III.

Star Control was a fun little *Space Wars*-alike, but it's the second game in the series that truly became famous. *Star Control II* is the last—and many would say best—entry in the sorely missed *Starflight*-style space exploration/RPG genre that flourished in the 1980s and '90s. That pedigree is strongly represented in the game's form—in fact, Ford and Reiche even had the assistance of *Starflight* alum Greg Johnson in fleshing out aspects of *SC2's* design and dialog.

Control them stars

For the few Ars readers who might not have played *Star Control 2* (or its later open source re-release, *The Ur-Quan Masters*), it might be difficult to see why I'm so effusive in praising a game that turns 26 years old next month. And I admit to no small amount of personal bias here, as *SC2* is one of my favorite games of all time. But the game is just *so damn good*—from the tight plotting, to the wonderfully written and varied alien dialog, and especially the beyond-addicting two player melee combat with hilariously unbalanced ships.

- Most of the treasure trove of design documentation that Fred & Paul hauled out for us. Not pictured: the famous Spathi captain Fwiffo, who was hiding under the desk and refused to come out.
- The original starmap, along with plot flow diagrams.
- Detailed view of some of the potential conversation flow with the Melnorme, a race of nomadic traders.
- Detailed view of some of the plot flow. At left is a diagram of the original conversation the player has with the Earth Starbase commander; at right is a bit of the later-game interaction with VUX commander ZEX.
- The original envelope sent to Fred and Paul by musician Riku Nuottajärvi, containing Riku's music for the game. After realizing they had no good way to create *SC2*'s music themselves, Fred & Paul advertised (perhaps

"spammed" is a better word) a contest on the WELL, wherein the winners would have their music featured in the game.
- *Star Control 2*'s 3DO port next to the box for *Archon*, one of the original *Star Control*'s biggest influences. (Fun fact: "starcon" is a play on the title "Archon.")
- The Fred & Paul discography.
- Watching the masters prepare to fight each other. This is kind of like watching a kung-fu match between Bruce Lee and Bruce Lee.
- A peek behind the scenes at our *movie magic*.
- Behold, Grimthwacker! This is the original prop used in *The Horde* a game which is near and dear to the heart of our video producer.
- More details on Grimthwacker, in far higher resolution than the game ever showed!
- "Captain! We've detected an unknown alien life form! It's hailing us! It….appears to be advertising a pest control service of some form. Recommend we bring it aboard to get an estimate!" (This Dalek was found wandering the halls of Fred & Paul's office.)

After talking with Fred and Paul, it quickly becomes obvious that the reason for *SC2*'s enduring legacy is the two head designers themselves. They hauled out boxes and boxes of original game design documentation showing carefully hand-drawn dialog trees and plot maps; while we lingered hungrily over the collection, they talked in detail about the game, as if they'd just been working on it last week rather than two-and-a-half decades ago. Paul is effusive and almost bubbly, while Fred is more taciturn and tends to let Paul run, interrupting only when corrections are necessary. (The more I watch them, the more I'm reminded of the Zoq and the Pik talking to each other. Or maybe the Fot and the Zoq. Whichever the two were that talked.)

- Fred and Paul also were kind enough to send us some

original high-resolution George Barr art from the game. Here’s the source art for the Arilou.
George Barr

- Original art for the Druuge.
George Barr
- The Umgah. Don’t let the extra eyes fool you—they’re quite nice! Until they’re not.
George Barr
- The Orz. Another “nice but not really” alien.
George Barr
- A frame of the Syreen Talana, from the game’s end cutscene.
George Barr
- One of the frames from the game’s introduction, where the Precursor cavern is discovered.
Goerge Barr
- Another shot from the intro, showing the settlement where you, the protagonist, were born.
George Barr
- Original art from the game’s ending. “But Grandpa, what happened next?” We’d all like to know, kid.
George Barr
- A design study of the Mycon Deep Child destroying the Syreen homeworld. This wasn’t used in the game.
George Barr
- Design study of the Androsynth. Don’t ask about where they went. There is only Orz now.
George Barr
- Design study of the Chmmr, a race you run into near the end of the game.
George Barr
- Design study for the “Mark II,” which presumably we’ll be flying when Paul & Fred get around to making *Ghosts of the Precursors*.
George Barr

Enjoying the sauce

The main war story that Paul and Fred lay out—one that deals with a programmer's desire to rely on generation and simulation wherever possible—works because it's kind of a timeless problem. You might hear the same thing from a developer today, and the solution would likely be the same now as it was then (that is, to realize that simulating the entirety of a planet's formation and evolution just to get some interesting scenery is probably more trouble than it's worth). It's an excellent design lesson, and rather like "don't touch a hot stove," it's one that most developers have to learn for themselves.

But in gathering the footage for this video, we realized that Fred and Paul were a veritable fount of '90s game design stories and that the two of them are connected in a fascinating web to a *bunch* of other influential developers of the era. There was no way we could pack all of this into a single video, and so we're deep in production on another video piece we're tentatively calling "Six Degrees of *Star Control*," which we expect to have done in a few more weeks.

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