

# Game critique: Starcraft

## Introduction

Since I haven't played for the last few years I do not know much about the current game market. I did play a lot of computer games from 1992 up to the year 2000. I remember playing Wolfenstein 3D, Stunts, Prince of Persia, Commander Keen at a friends house because we did not have a CD-ROM drive, so none of the *modern* games could be played on it. When we finally had a brand new 486 my mother did not want us to use it as a game platform. It took us not too long to get a Pentium 100, with this beast we could do all we want: play Doom, Carmageddon, Dune 2000, Tomb Raider and many other games.

One of those other games was Starcraft. It is probably the game that I spend most time with and that is why I want to evaluate it and look at it at a more scientific way. I will cover the usability of the game that is the structure and navigation and I think that is important in a good game. That includes artificial intelligence, gameplay, involvement

Starcraft is a Real Time strategy game and was released the first of April 1998 by Blizzard Entertainment. I could not have put it any better than the amiable people of Wikipedia:

*Starcraft is the best-selling computer game in that year and won the Origins Award for Best Strategy Computer Game of 1998. Blizzard estimated in 2005 that 9 million copies of Starcraft and its expansion pack, Starcraft: Brood War had been sold since its release, and it has achieved an international cult-like status in the computer gaming world,*

## Usability

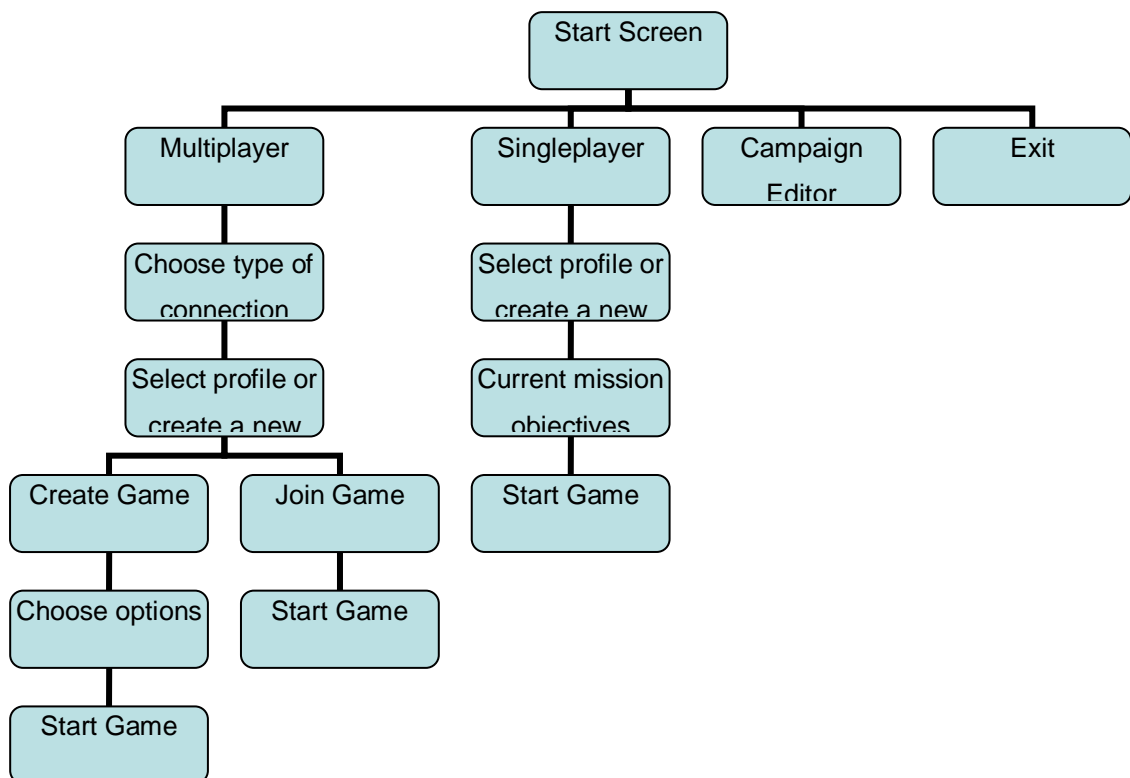
The usability study can be split up in two sections: the usability of the menus and the usability of the game itself. I am going to cover the structure and the navigation of both the menus and the game.

### Navigation & structure of the menus

The navigation through the different menus fits with the setting of the game, it is a sci-fi set in the year 2499. It is easy to do the basic tasks: start a game, load a profile, start a multiplayer game. Everything just feels right and goes smooth. The interface is really clean and simple. The average screen has about four buttons which makes

navigation easy. The following screen is the screen you get right before the game starts. At that point the objectives of the game you are about to start are made clear in a lively way. The different characters speak to you and to each other using a kind of futuristic video conferencing tool. It is entertaining to watch and if you have seen it before you can skip it using the start button. The other buttons are also self-explanatory and that is a good thing.

The structure of the menus is also intuitive and straightforward. Even if you start the game for the first time you will be able to find your way through the menus.



### In-game navigation & structure

The in-game navigation is not much more than the tried and tested classic RTS way of navigating. You can explore the map by moving your mouse-pointer to an edge of the screen and there is also a small map in the left lower corner to make navigation faster. The small map is used to notify the user of game events that are not visible on her or his current screen.

The rest of the bottom area of the screen is used for object specific commands. If you click on a unit e.g. a fighter you can see what you can do with that unit. Move, patrol, attack, stop - while moving -, hold position and use health packs are the commands for a fighter. In the next screenshot you see what you can do with the Terran barracks building. This seems all rather intuitive but there are some issues with the handling, especially with the handling of fighter units.

The handling of the right and left mouse button clicks is not consistent. When you select a fighter or a group of fighters and right click somewhere on the map they will move to that spot. When you right click on an enemy they do not attack, they do when you use you left mouse button. When attacking a building on the other hand you have to use the attack command and then left click. If you left click on the building directly you select the enemy building and loose control over you units. In the heat of the battle. This can be very frustrating. You get used to this behavior after playing the game a couple of times but when using it the first time, or playing it again after a lot of years it is confusing and annoying.



The rest of the navigation and structure is easy to use. The first time you play it you will be able to construct buildings, produce units, navigate and maneuver your army trough the map. Except for that major quirk with the mouse buttons it is a well designed interface.

## Game experience

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## Gameplay

Discussing the gameplay of a game is useless without defining the word gameplay itself. The most accurate definition I could find is the one by Richard Rouse [1]:

*no other art form: a nature of the interactivity that the game includes, i.e., how players are able to interact with the game-world and how that game-world reacts*

In this definition Starcraft has a good gameplay: you can interact with almost everything. Your buildings the terrain, the resources on the terrain, the units the enemy units, etc. The number of different buildings and units is large because there are three completely different races: Protoss, Terran, and Zerg. Each has their own characteristics and has a unique way of interacting with their environment and with the user. A good example of the differences between the races is the way buildings are constructed [2]:

- ◁ Terran, the human like race, buildings can be placed on most normal unoccupied ground and are build by robots (SVC). Large buildings that have corresponding attachment labs may be built (or may land) next to an open lab to connect to it.
- ◁ Zerg, the evil aliens, buildings must be created by sacrificing a Drone. The Drone "mutates" into the building at the selected location. Most buildings can only be mutated on Creep, a slime that is produced by the Creep colonies. For this reason, most Zerg buildings cannot be placed far from a central base.
- ◁ Protoss, the less evil aliens, buildings are warped in . like the star trek warping - from Aiur - the home planet of Protoss - instead of constructed. In this manner, a single Probe can begin the warping of many buildings at once, and does not need to stay still or sacrifice itself in order to build.

The danger of creating different races is that there has to be a good balance between them. The weaknesses and the strong points of each race must be very well thought out. It appears that when the game was released there was a problem with the balancing [3]:

*Although the game's three races were slightly imbalanced when the game was first released, the expansion pack and twenty patches(of which four affected the gameplay) have balanced the three races to most players' satisfaction.+*

## Music

I consider this as a very bad example of music. Starcraft did not. The game music sounds really cheap and cheesy. In comparison to e.g. the Dune 2000 soundtrack which was released in the same year it is downright bad. The music should support the game and make the overall experience richer, just as a good soundtrack should. The music makes the experience less appealing.

## Story

The story is what makes Starcraft a great game. Not only the in-game story but the whole Starcraft universe. All the races have an extensively documented history, have their motivation and to fight the other races. Each race has his home planet and each planet is completely characterized and has its own history and ecosystem. An example is the planet Aiur:

*Aiur is the home planet of the Protoss. The planet is covered with vegetation and has many lush jungles. It has furious seas and stormy weather. Aiur is a huge world located on the fringes of the Milky Way Galaxy.*

*Protoss were engineered by the Xel'Naga and left to them alone for a long period of time. When the Xel'Naga returned, they discovered the Protoss were highly advanced on the world of Aiur.*



Each and every character, place, building has a story behind it. Starcraft created a complete fictional universe and that is a point where a lot of games fail miserably. Wikipedia has a special Starcraft portal with more than 50 different Starcraft related topics. This is a lot more than a comparable game as Settlers II.

## Artificial Intelligence

Although Starcraft is mainly played in a multiplayer setting, the single player missions need a decent A.I. When playing against the computer it is crucial that that your opponent is strong enough and does not make the same mistakes over and over again. It should be strong enough without resorting to cheating: when starting the game the amount of resources should be equal, the unit production speed should be the same, the artificial player should not be able to know where all your

units are without a proper reconnaissance mission. In other words the computer should behave as a human player.

I suspect that the Starcraft A. I. does resort to cheating. The computer makes *better informed* decisions, it launches a strike on a site before it has sent a scout. This makes playing against the computer more challenging, but on the other hand it cripples a whole range of diversion tactics that can be used against humans. E.g. sending a small army to one site of the opponents base and then attack with your large army at the other side of the base. This is useless if the opponent knows where all your units are.

## Conclusion

Considering it all Starcraft is a great game. After eight years it is still being played by a lot of people and it still has a lively community. The technology the game uses was not that groundbreaking but the overall experience, the complete picture, setting and universe was. And this is a thing that a lot of games lack: a good story, a rich setting and charismatic figures.

## Bibliography

[1] Richard Rouse, *Game Design Theory and Practice*. Wordware Publishing Inc., 2000.

[2] *StarCraft*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starcraft>

[3] *Gameplay of StarCraft*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gameplay\\_of\\_StarCraft](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gameplay_of_StarCraft)