

Postmortem: Ironclad/Stardock's *Sins of a Solar Empire*

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Sins of a Solar Empire is a real-time strategy game that combines many elements typically seen in 4X (turn-based) games. The result is a title with immense scalability as players can zoom in to see individual freighters delivering cargo to trade ports or zoom out to see multiple star systems orbiting distant suns all in a single fluid mouse motion. *Sins of a Solar Empire* combines trade, diplomacy, culture, and of course military might into a single epic gaming experience.

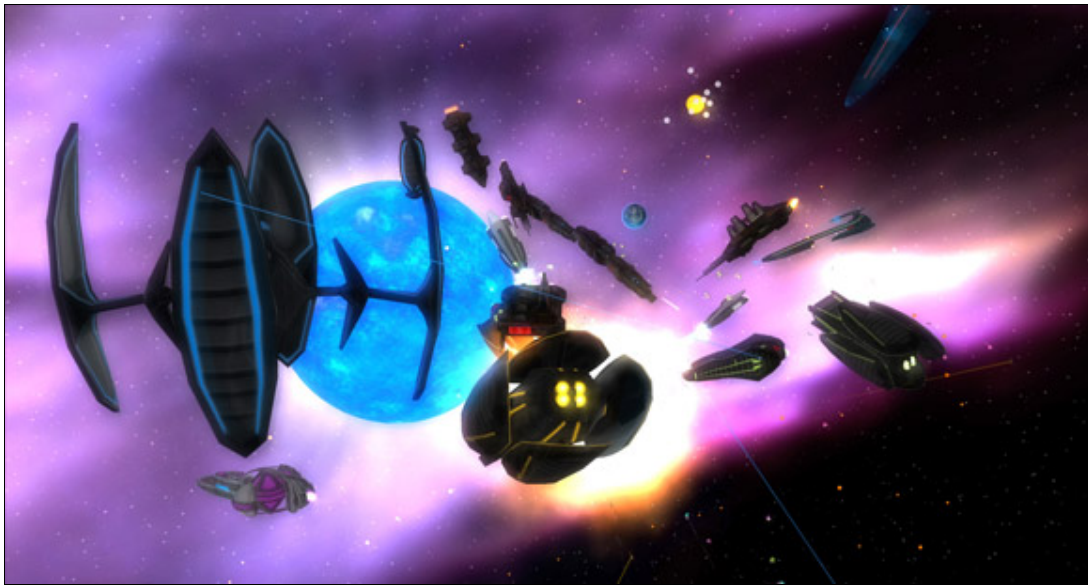
Released in February 2008, *Sins of a Solar Empire* arrived on the scene with little fanfare. However, it quickly took the game industry by storm thanks to its unique design, addictive gameplay, and grass roots community.

By March 2008, *Sins* was one of the top three best selling PC games at retail, despite most of its sales coming through digital downloads.

In addition, it was also the highest rated new game of 2008, sweeping editor's choice awards from Gamespot, PC Gamer, Games for Windows, GameSpy, IGN, and many more.

This is the story of how this remarkable game came to be and more interestingly, how closely it skirted disaster.

We will explain how the unique partnership of developer Ironclad and publisher Stardock took what could have been a run-of-the-mill strategy game and turned it into one of the biggest PC gaming sensations in recent years.



A *Sins* battle from an early gameplay testing build. Ironclad had playable builds up and running very early to test out new ideas, expose unforeseen gameplay issues (of which there were many), get a head start on pacing (which would turn out to be the most difficult problem) and to try and hone the overall fun factor.

In the beginning...

The original concept for *Sins of a Solar Empire* came from the board game *Buck Rogers and the Battle for the 25th Century* by TSR, which was played extensively by members of the *Sins* development team in their youth. The game featured fleets of space-faring warships which were moved about on a strategic map and led by powerful hero characters with special abilities.

However, it wasn't until many years later, in the fall of 2003, that some former members of Barking Dog Studios (*Homeworld* *Cataclysm*, *Treasure Planet: Battle at Procyon*) and Rockstar Vancouver (*Bully*) struck out on their own to create Ironclad Games, and began to develop new technology that would eventually be used to bring that idea to life.

Originally, the goal was just to experiment to see if the "RT4X" concept was possible -- could a real-time strategy game with much of the pacing, depth, and strategy of 4X work? After a year of almost pure prototyping, experimentation, and just trying out wild ideas Ironclad was convinced the idea would work, and self-funded development began on *Sins* in the winter of 2005.

Ironclad's primary goals shifted at this point to fleshing out the main gameplay elements, continuing refinement of the user interface, starting production on the art assets, and finding a suitable partner to help them bring *Sins* to market.

Unfortunately, Ironclad's efforts to find a partner were consistently hampered by the "three strikes you're out" philosophy which goes roughly as follows: if you are (1) a new company, (2) with a new intellectual property, and (3) you are in a new genre, your game is considered commercial suicide and almost no one will even take a quick look at what you have, let alone give it some serious consideration.

Convinced that they had something special, Ironclad persisted and eventually met a company that instantly understood what they were trying to do, recognized the game's potential, and was perfectly suited to bringing it to market.

Stardock and Ironclad team up

In the summer of 2006, Stardock was celebrating the success of *Galactic Civilizations II*. The retail success of the game convinced Stardock that there was an opportunity to bring other titles to market both at retail and through its digital distribution network, TotalGaming.net. The key would be to find a promising game being made by an extremely talented development studio. That search would lead to the meeting between Stardock and Ironclad.

Originally, Ironclad hoped to release *Sins of a Solar Empire* in February 2007, but after much discussion, the game was pushed to August 2007 so that it could be fleshed out. Stardock felt *Sins* had a lot of potential as a AAA PC game release, if it was able to have enough content incorporated into it by the release date.

By August 2007, *Sins* had come a long way. The game's potential convinced Stardock that if more content and balancing could be integrated, *Sins* might be the top strategy game of the year.

Stardock proposed that the title be pushed to a February 2008 release in order for the game to continue to be beefed up with features and content.

Delaying the game six more months was not an easy decision for Ironclad to make. The cost of making a AAA game for a start-up studio was not insignificant.

And while Stardock was providing advances to help with those costs, six more months would push back many other projects Ironclad had hoped to begin on. In the end, after much discussion, it was decided to push the release date.



***Sins* battle from the gold master. Battles can involve thousands of units and will run smoothly on lower end systems.**

What Went Right

A single unspoken decision made early in the Stardock / Ironclad partnership led to a host of positive results that might seem obvious in hindsight, but were not at all straight forward at the time.

1. The decision for Ironclad and Stardock to team up on game design elements .

This would fundamentally alter *Sins*' original design in exchange for a design that mixed the best of both Stardock and Ironclad's game experiences.

Examples include how the technology tree works, unlimited resources, the creation of metal and crystal resources that are harvested from asteroids, the types of ships and their roles, etc.

Nearly every game design element and mechanic had input from both teams. Had this not been done, odds are the reviews and sales of *Sins of a Solar Empire* would have been dramatically different.

2. The decision for Stardock and Ironclad to team up on marketing.

Just as it's unusual for a publisher to be intimately involved in the game design, it's also unusual for the developer to be intimately involved in the publisher's marketing program.

Ironclad was involved in nearly every major aspect of the marketing of *Sins* -- from the creation of the *Sins of a Solar Empire* website, to game magazine advertising, to web assets, to teaming up on web community support. Even in terms of providing technical support to users, the two teams integrated their resources.



An early *Sins* HUD featured building on the surface of planets, an early Empire Tree with associated sorting options, three harvestable resources, research points, and the ability to buy/sell them on the Black Market from the main screen (which is making a return in version 1.1).

3. The decision to release the game in February 2008 instead of August 2007.

This was, at the time, a significant gamble. Missing the Christmas season was a potentially catastrophic problem. However, by releasing in February 2008, *Sins of a Solar Empire* not only became a much better, richer gaming experience, it was released onto a market with virtually no competition.

There are very few major PC titles scheduled for release until fall 2008, giving *Sins* an opportunity to maintain significant retail stocking levels far longer than is normal. One can imagine the sales of *Sins of a Solar Empire* had it been released in fall 2007 against *BioShock*, *Crysis*, and the other major titles that came out during the Christmas season.

4. The decision to develop the 3D engine to support a wider variety of graphics cards and PC systems.

While it was tempting for the team to make the Iron Engine (the engine behind *Sins of a Solar Empire*) have Battlestar Galactica-like visuals, the decision was made to make the game look really good on the widest possible existing installed base of video cards.

Sins still has phenomenal visuals, even on lower end systems, but doesn't include DirectX 10 support (for instance).

5. The decision not to use any CD/DVD copy protection .

Like with *Galactic Civilizations II*, *Sins of a Solar Empire* includes no on disk copy protection.

This left the game open for piracy, but the calculation Stardock had made with *Galactic Civilizations II* was that more users would

buy it as a result of not being inconvenienced than would be lost from piracy. That trend has continued with *Sins of a Solar Empire*.



Another early HUD variation. Ironclad iterated on the HUD and the overall UI probably more than any other part of the game, knowing it was critical to making the RT4X concept playable.

6. The decision to allow multiplayer games to be saved and restored for later play .

This turned out to be a significant selling point to PC strategy gamers. Many strategy gamers like to get together and play with friends on the LAN or Internet. Nothing is more frustrating than a game being interrupted due to a dropped player or just not having enough time to finish a session.

Having a robust and easy to use save and restore option for multiplayer helped make *Sins* a compelling strategy game for a previously untapped demographic of PC gamers.

The interesting part is that Ironclad originally implemented this feature solely for the purposes of tracking down multiplayer bugs before recognizing its marketability and gameplay advantages.



A near-final *Sins* HUD. Expect more improvements in the upcoming 1.1 version.

What Went Wrong

As successful as *Sins of a Solar Empire* is, not everything went perfectly. A lot of the problems were simply a lack of budget and time.

1. No single player campaign.

Both Stardock and Ironclad recognized the need for one, but the budget and time to do something of equal creativity and quality to the core game was simply not there.

With Ironclad's team, Stardock's game team produced the opening cutscene that introduces players to the *Sins of a Solar Empire* universe.

But from there on, players play random maps and scenarios rather than going through a story-driven campaign.

This was the most widely raised criticism in reviews; on a game that averaged almost a nine out of 10, one can only imagine what the scores would have been with a campaign.

2. Vocal public beta testers were able to convince us to change features that would have been better left untouched.

For example, the beta allowed the AI to take over for dropped players in multiplayer. However, beta testers complained that with the save/restore option, players could just restart the game and having an AI player get involved interfered with the experience.

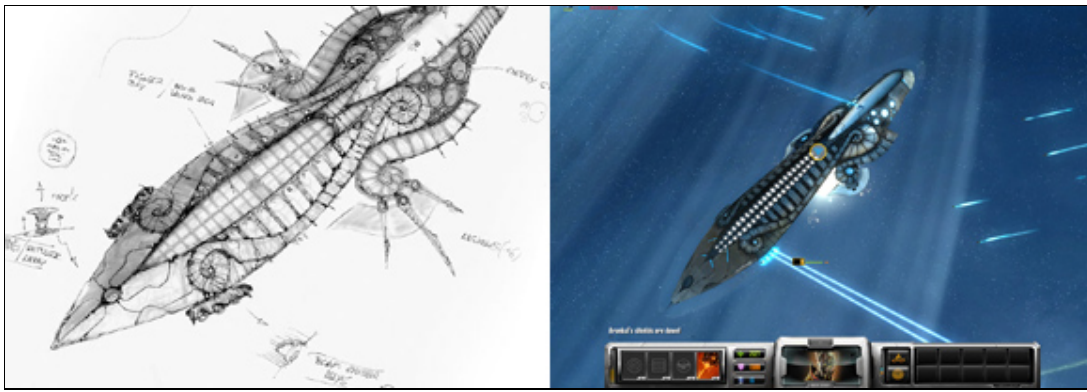
As a result, the feature of allowing computer players to pick up after dropped players was removed in the retail release (it was added back in 1.03).

3. The released computer players weren't as strong as they could have been .

Sins of a Solar Empire's retail release had computer AI that was as good if not better than most RTSes, but it was considerably weaker than what is commonly found in turn-based 4X games. This was simply a function of time and lack of opportunity to test it against live human opponents.

Version 1.03 took the experience of playing online and incorporated it into the AI. That said, the released version didn't offer a computer AI level that "cheated" (got more resources than the player).

AI's that get advantages are non-ideal, but making sure players are always challenged trumps any philosophical positions. As with *GalCiv II*, AI development will be ongoing throughout the lifetime of the game.



Left: Concept drawing for the Advent Halcyon Carrier.

Right: Advent Halcyon Carrier as it appeared in a near final version of the game.

4. We were unable to secure as much preview coverage as we wanted .

In the fall of 2007, it was difficult getting the general PC gaming media to give *Sins of a Solar Empire* the time of day. Only physical trips by the CEO of Stardock to particular game magazines secured any serious game coverage in some cases.



Left: Concept drawing of the Vasari Vulkoras Desolator.

Right: Vulkoras Desolator as it appears in the final version of the game.

5. Stardock failed to get Impulse, its next-generation digital distribution platform, completed in time for release with *Sins of a Solar Empire*.

Impulse takes all of Stardock's first-party applications and all of the games it sells (both first and third party) and combines them into a single platform.

It was hoped that Impulse would be ready for release by *Sins'* launch and included in the retail package. Instead, Impulse's release was pushed back to this month.

6. Multiplayer gaming on the PC remains a challenge.

On the PC, there is no standard way for games to interact with other users over the Internet. As a result, users inevitably have to configure routers to port forward.

Stardock and Ironclad hoped to make this experience as seamless as possible. Even with a six month long multiplayer beta, there were still users who had a hard time dealing with personal firewalls and their routers (99% of users have no problem but 1% of thousands of users is still a lot of people).

The good news is version 1.1 will include groundbreaking new network technology that should eliminate this problem altogether.

Conclusions

The biggest lesson we learned is the importance of making sure that the developer and publisher are compatible. If Stardock and Ironclad hadn't gotten along so well, the game itself would likely have been very different with very different results.

From Stardock's perspective, the experience on *Sins of a Solar Empire* cemented its commitment to ensuring that any games it publishes are developed by studios that view game design as an iterative, collaborative process where the strengths of both teams are combined.

Most of the "what went wrong" with *Sins of a Solar Empire* are tied to budget and time. Could *Sins* have gotten higher scores if it had waited another six months and incorporated a single player campaign, stronger AI and more content? Probably. Would it have sold better? A release date of August 2008 would have put it 30 days out from the release of *Spore* as well as other major titles.

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