

Indie Postmortem: Nayantara's *Star Chamber*

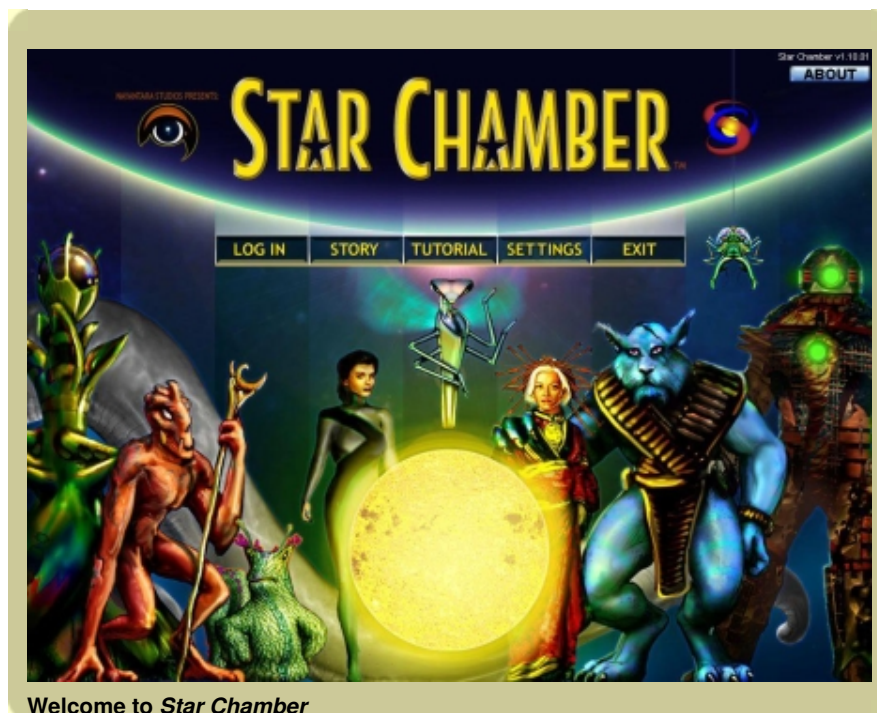
By Paul Dennen

Star Chamber is an independently developed PC online strategy game with a science fiction theme, combining the elegance of a board game with the depth of a collectible card game. Players assume command of one of ten available starfaring races, each with its own special power and technology tree in the form of game cards. Players clash in short CCG-based duels (about 30 minutes per conflict, on average) in which they attempt to win in one of three ways: military, cultural, or political.

I've been a fan of the collectible card game concept since ripping open my first deck of *Magic: the Gathering* cards. CCGs provide players with a tremendous amount of creative space when designed properly. With hundreds of cards, each doing various things when collected and combined, there are a gigantic amount of different approaches and strategies that players can utilize.

But in traditional non-digital CCGs, the playing field is a blank slate, and I'd always imagined the CCG concept would be even more fun if the field of play didn't start empty, but instead was a randomly generated board. So, I wanted to see cards, but also a board to play the game on. Oh, and I wanted to get rid of the physical hassles involved with the actual cardboard by going digital. For example, I don't want to bother maintaining physical decks; if the cards are digital, I can have the same card in as many virtual decks as I want.

This merging of CCG and board game on the computer had already been attempted by Digital Addiction, with its game *Sanctum*. While I wasn't involved in the creation of *Sanctum*, I was hired by the company to work on a sports collectible game to be published by EA. Unfortunately, Digital Addiction floundered as a business, and when they went bankrupt, EA.com hired me to finish work on that sports game. That was in early January of 2001. As bad luck would have it, three months later, I was laid off, along with many other EA.com employees. It was at that point that I made the decision to develop *Star Chamber*. I expected it would take about a year, an estimate that turned out to be way off.



During the course of development, I discovered that, to develop a fun CCG, you must overcome significant hurdles. Achieving balance is incredibly difficult because of the combinatorial aspect involved - as a designer, there are only so many decks you can test by yourself. Yet achieving a balanced playing field is of utmost importance. If you stumble with even a handful of cards, the balance of power could be slanted too far in the direction of some of the game's factions, making the metagame less fun because the powergamers will all end up playing similar decks based on those few broken cards.

But what would the gaming public think of such a title? Would they even give our game a try for long enough to discover the yummy gameplay within?

Focused vision - Focusing the design down one clearly plotted path from start to finish resulted in a game with strength of clarity and identity. On my previous project, I had run into issues with certain producers and executives wanting the game to go one direction, while others on the design team wanted the game to go in another direction. The result was an arguably muddy finished product. With *Star Chamber*, I knew exactly the kind of game I wanted to build, and while some of the details of the design changed along the way, the main vision never strayed.

Even though I was working alone, I did write a design document, but it was a relatively minor chore. It was small and succinct, not written for others, but rather as a sanity check and a roadmap for myself. I wanted to convince myself that this game looked good on paper before fully committing to the arduous programming needed. It wasn't being used to pitch the game to a publisher, because I felt that spending energy to convince a publisher to fund *Star Chamber* would have been a fruitless expenditure of energy, especially because I had virtually no contacts with publishers.



Early prototype - A playable version at the three-month stage allowed me to spot some problems with the initial design and revise it accordingly. This resulted in less time being wasted implementing or worrying about certain game mechanics, since I worked out problems with them using a prototype version. For example, I discovered that there were plenty of mechanics to work with and plenty of fun to be had, without personal combat mechanics for when opposing heroes ended up at the same planet.

Development contracting - Contracting some of the development work out and using creative payment schedules allowed the very tightly budgeted game, while remaining a one-person vision, to be a competitive commercial product, with better features than I could have developed totally alone. I signed graphics artist Lee Moyer onto the project early so I knew all along that the artwork would be do-able. A lucky break happened when, after the deal with NIOGA fell through (see below), Aaron Walker became available as a programmer to help with the server design and implementation. On the other hand, we had an unlucky break when Keith Baker, about to start helping with back story and flavor text, was suddenly needed elsewhere, as he made the top three and subsequently won the Wizards of the Coast *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign setting search contest with his Eberron entry. After launch, I hired two additional contractors for helping with server maintenance, technical support, and improving the game's website with important post-launch features, such as improved payment services and web-based trading.

Alpha and beta testing - Long, meticulous early testing periods allowed players to acquire deep understanding of the gameplay, and they were then able to provide well-informed feedback that was invaluable in balancing the game. Alpha testing carried on for about four months,

and beta testing for another five months.

When beta testing started, within a day, some players started making kneejerk balance proclamations without fully understanding the gameplay. Their comments were often contradictory, for example: "Androids are far too powerful" vs. "Android ships are way too expensive." It quickly became obvious that it was going to take a while to let the players sort out their evaluations, by simply letting them play lots of games. So, I decided to mostly ignore balance reactions for the first couple weeks, and instead concentrated on bug reports and interface feedback. One example of beta tester feedback contributing to an improved interface was that players weren't happy with the collection manager being a separate area from the chat lobby. The end result is that players can enter the main chat area and then switch to collection mode, allowing them to build decks or make trade proposals while also participating in the lobby chat.

The long beta period was crucial for a healthy gaming environment, even though I had not expected testing and fine-tuning to take that long. If beta had only lasted a month, the game simply would have been terrible. But with long, committed testing periods, modeled after the Blizzard mentality of "ship when it's done and fun", we were able to achieve deep, balanced gameplay that has helped foster a small but strong community.

Low maintenance and continuing development costs - This means that *Star Chamber* doesn't need to achieve massive numbers of players to break even and continue to move forward. Being a turn-based game, the bandwidth bill for the production servers is quite low. The majority of the bandwidth that we pay for is for the website, for players downloading the client, forums and web trading. Actually, the *Star Chamber* server at launch was running on a friend's machine in his basement, and only after amassing sufficient customers did I have enough money to buy a rack server and put it into a professional hosting facility.

Diverse purchasing options - The range of payment options we implemented allow different types of players to get into the game at their own pace. The game client is free to download, and trial players can get started with five different sample decks on a fixed map. There's enough gameplay in the sample games to get players excited about buying in and collecting their own cards. Purchase options vary from \$5.99 for a few packs, all the way up to \$49.99 for a box of 36 packs and 6 event tickets. There's an optional \$5.99 monthly subscription that gives players special perks like promo cards, enhanced web trading, and the ability to play in special tournaments. Many casual players will just buy in for \$20 to \$50, and that purchase provides months of gameplay. It is not uncommon for some hardcore players to spend hundreds of dollars over the course of many months. This, intentionally, doesn't buy them raw power as much as improved versatility. Therefore, where the casual player might be able to build competitive decks for three races, the hardcore collector can build a deck for each of the races. Players are free to buy and sell their cards in the secondary market, something that *Nayantara* stays out of.

What Went Wrong

Major tech licensing issues - I had to switch back-end technology ten months into the project. This hurt badly, and was the biggest impediment in trying to reach my one-year estimate of getting the game out. The back-end technology I was planning on using was the one powering Digital Addiction's *Sanctum*. When Digital Addiction went bankrupt, it was forced to sell its assets, and the *Sanctum* game was bought by a group of players who formed a company called NIOGA (Non-profit International Online Gaming Association). When I first started work on *Star Chamber*, I had discussions with NIOGA about using the *Sanctum* technology, and it seemed likely, at the time, that they would be willing to let me license the technology for a relatively small fee and a small percentage of future sales. Somehow, though, over the months, after I was already building hooks into the client to use their back-end (with their blessing, assuming a deal would be worked out), the numbers that were verbally discussed changed into numbers that weren't palatable to me. So not only had I wasted some time writing code to hook into their server, but now I was on my own in terms of coming up with appropriate substitute technology. However, there were several silver linings: instead of forcing my game to conform to their more limited tech, I could go on to design a server that would have more and better features, my new server would be written in a language (C++) that I could maintain and upgrade more easily, and I would own it without having restrictions.

Trial play is a double-edged sword - While try-before-you-buy is a great opportunity for certain consumers and for the company when those trial players convert into paying customers, it is arguably a bad business model, for a couple reasons. With a small player population and a multiplayer game, new trial players are likely to play not against other trial players, but against veterans. The veteran will usually defeat the newbie, and many newbies will be turned off from the experience, because they feel they're diving into a pool of sharks. They would simply prefer to play against other newbies, or learn by themselves. I talked to a veteran producer at a games publisher after we launched, and he suggested that demos and trial play can actually dramatically lower the sales of your game. With regard to the above problem, it may be that novice players who have already paid for something will be much more likely to "stick it out" in a situation where they have some skill ramping to do, in order to learn how to actually play the game.





Single-player issues - I did not think that this was necessary, perhaps, but I was wrong. The model of giving away the client for free and digital cards doesn't really support putting effort into a single player experience. But when we went into the beta test, it became apparent that the players wanted a single player mode, even if it didn't have a good AI. This way, the players would be able to learn the game and practice on their own, without the nuisance of having to find an online opponent, and perhaps because of pride and embarrassment issues. So while we did end up launching with a Practice Mode, allowing players to test their decks against a dumb computer opponent, not having a better single player mode probably hurt sales of the game significantly.

Not enough eCommerce options at launch - We launched with PayPal support only, and without credit card support. We were in that state for about two months, and were in the unfavorable position of losing potential customers who didn't want to use PayPal. We did have card resellers who would buy packs of cards with PayPal and then resell them to players, but many casual players don't want to be bothered going through that kind of effort in order to buy our product. When our resellers lost their ability to accept credit cards, it became critical that we implement credit card acceptance.

Insufficient load testing before launch - We didn't get enough of a chance to load test before *Star Chamber's* official release, and as a result, we didn't find some crash bugs with the server when certain unlikely conditions were met. In late December 2003 and early January 2004, after we received some good press, the server started crashing erratically as the number of players online had reached an all-time high. This resulted in a lot of lost sleep and a frantic search to find and eliminate the bugs.

While we did write a test client that would connect to the server, chat randomly, create games, and then quit out, our tests weren't thorough enough to find all the bugs with the server - a fairly complex multithreaded application. We should have put more thought and energy into this, as the instability was a big annoyance to our players.

Unexpectedly long development time - Morale and motivation dropped dangerously low because of the working environment and the longer-than-expected development time. For more than two years, I was working alone in the backroom of my house. While I worked with contractors for a good year, they worked from their homes hundreds to thousands of miles away from me. Without a spirit-boosting buddy system available, I went through some dark and lonely times, and was tempted to give up several times during the long course of development. Thankfully, with the support of family and friends, I was able to finish the game.

Conclusion


The making of *Star Chamber* was a brutal, draining ordeal; I was silly and naïve to undertake such a project by myself. If I had known it would take more than two years from start to finish, I would never have started. I can recall reaching the alpha test point in September 2002, and how it felt like I had been working on the game forever. Even then, I was overambitious in my expectations of getting to and through beta test in order to release the game. I imagine this doesn't apply to certain categories of games, but for a CCG/strategy game, do not underestimate the amount of testing that your title will need to go through. The *Star Chamber* beta test began in late December 2002 and continued until the end of May 2003. Even when the beta test concluded, I wasn't ready to release the game. I had been working so hard during the beta test, making game balance changes as well as interface and production value improvements that I was completely burned out mentally, and I hadn't even finished all the preparatory work to actually sell the product online. After the beta test ended, I had to take a mental health break, and I put the finishing touches on the game during the summer. In November 2003, the game was finally ready for release.

While I'm quite proud of the game, and it has achieved some critical success (*Star Chamber* is currently rated #74 on [GameSpot's Top Rated Games list](#)), *Star Chamber* cannot be called a commercial success, at least not up to this point. While it has attracted a small following of players, it hasn't come close to the potential that I thought, and still believe, it had. Whereas high-budget games count subscribers in the tens or even hundreds of thousands, *Star Chamber* has not yet reached 2,000 paying customers, and has never had more than 250 simultaneous monthly subscribers (subscriptions are optional, and you can play forever without ever purchasing a subscription).

However, what we have achieved has been with an extremely limited marketing budget (online advertisements only), and no distribution assistance - we're still looking for publishing partners for the game, if interested parties would like to [contact us](#). However, we continue to support the product with tournaments, updates, and releases of new card sets - the first expansion, *Incursions*, was released in July of 2004.

and we are currently working on a second expansion due out this winter. Overall, the team still believes in *Star Chamber*, especially as it offers a unique gaming experience with little competition in its field, and, despite the ups and downs of development, are delighted with the final results.

Game Data



Publisher: Nayantara Studios
Developer: Nayantara Studios
Number of full-time developers: 1
Number of part-time developers: 0
Number of contractors: 4
Length of development: 2 ½ years
Release Date: November 10, 2003
Target Platform: PC
Development Hardware: My pitiful Win95 PC for about 6 months, then a more modern PC.
Development Software: Visual C++

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