Multiplier

Real-Time Strategy Unit Balancing Tool

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# Abstract

Video games is a medium of boundless potential when it comes to game features, and is a reason why gamers love video games.[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore, it is hard to figure out what game features to include and what not to include when making video games. This paper aims to evaluate whether or not having a game feature allowing players to fully tweak the game balance is appealing to the players.

The main component of the evaluation is the unit attributes editor, which is a game feature. It is up to the players to decide upon how they will tweak the game units by using the unit attributes editor. The chosen game is a custom-built real-time strategy game, built with a flexible game balance in mind. It is flexible in the sense that players can fully customize the unit attributes of the game units, making the game easily balanced or imbalanced depending on the players’ choices.

It should be noted this custom-built game can be used to explore the premises of game balance using a mathematical approach, and whether or not procedural content generation game balance for real-time strategy games is possible. However, this paper does not explore these premises, and it would require further research for related future works.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dean O’Donnell as supervisor for providing guidance, Brian Moriarty and Charles Rich as readers for providing assistances, and Jennifer deWinter for feedback from a non-technical perspective.

I would like to thank the volunteers and testers for their feedback. Their feedback helped to improve the game, and made the game as it is.

# Introduction

## Strategy vs. Tactics

The term, “Real-Time Strategy,” is used to describe a subgenre of Strategy games as “a type of strategy game where it closely resembles reality, in which time is limited, and if the player loses time, their opponents may have already taken advantage of it.”2 In other words, real-time strategy games are games where players execute their actions in real-time, without pausing or taking turns. The term was used since the late 1980s, at the time for describing what an action strategy game, *Cosmic Conquest* plays like in the table of contents of the publication magazine, *BYTE*.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, the cofounder of Westwood Studios, Brett Sperry, is mainly credited for using the term to market their game, *Dune II*.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is what we used to define the “real-time strategy” genre in video games.

Real-time strategy games are sometimes confused with real-time tactics, in terms of game mechanics and gameplay.[[4]](#footnote-4) Real-time tactics is a subgenre or a related genre of real-time strategy games, which removes the aspects of base-building, or in general, reducing the importance of macromanagement. Macromanagement represents the general economy aspects of managing the intake and expenses of the player’s resources, such as constructing buildings, conducting researches and technology upgrades, and the purchases of unique units and items affecting overall gameplay strategies.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In real-time strategy games, players devise intricate strategies involving collections of resources, base-building, technology upgrades, and unit types to take advantage of what they believe their opponents will do, and what strategies their opponents will use, without any prior knowledge.[[6]](#footnote-6) These strategies usually involve applying upgrades which helps to make their units perform better than they would expect the performances of their opponents’ units, or playing mind games to deceptively lure their opponents to their downfall.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Real-time tactics, on the other hand, is about the placements of units on the battlefields, the unit troop formations, and the exploitation of terrain and environment for tactical advantages against enemies. Usually, players are provided with limited available resources, such as a given set of units provided in missions, and are tasked to complete game sessions using only those resources. Strategies to preserve limited resources is therefore encouraged to increase the likelihood the player succeeds in completing the game session.

## Inspiration

When evaluating real-time strategy games, it is pretty difficult to say which player is better than the others, when all players do not have any prior knowledge of the situation. We can therefore assume each player have equal, negligible levels of certainty to successfully execute mind games for tricking and deceiving others. This way, we are able to simplify many factors based on player intuition and subjective decisions that other players may or may not dare to play. Instead, we look to evaluating performances based on upgrades being applied to game units, in which the process of improving game unit performances fares with how well a player is when compared to the rest of the players or enemies. This is more apparent when players are confronted with other players with stronger army compositions and higher tiered units.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This leads us to the very core of determining the game balance, the variables of play. A typical real-time strategy game requires a lot of gameplay testing to see if units made are balanced for players to play with. Making the balancing process more streamlined for simulating real-time strategy units can be done by running algorithms to determine the most optimal unit attributes given. This process allows access to more unit diversity and game designs in the real-time strategy genre.

To come up with the best approach to do this, is by building a real-time strategy game using simple mathematical equations to determine usable unit's attributes, and assess the outcome. Whatever outcome it may be, will pave the way to future works in the realm of procedural content generation in real-time strategy unit balancing.

## Procedural Content Generation

Procedural content generation in real-time strategy games is one of the most interesting challenges in the video game development process.[[9]](#footnote-9) The dynamics in real-time strategy games alone vary greatly, especially when involving multiple players of varying skill levels and backgrounds. These dynamics can be treated differently depending on how the contents are procedurally generated, therefore paving the way for many possible research routes, of which procedural map generation for a real-time strategy game has already been explored[[10]](#footnote-10).

There are video games that have done research in procedural content generation, in which some of them were able to use procedural content generation methods and techniques, but the usage is somewhat limited to a particular type of game content.[[11]](#footnote-11) It has also been proven that it is possible to have automated content generation in mainstream games.[[12]](#footnote-12) Notable examples include *Minecraft*[[13]](#footnote-13) and *Mini Metro*[[14]](#footnote-14), in which the former uses procedural content generation to generate terrain, and the latter uses procedural audio generation.

## Game Balance and Related Works

Game balance is hard. Period.

It is a difficult task where the developers have to balance game elements that function completely different from each other, and not to give a player more advantages over the others. A major reason why game balancing is hard to achieve, is it can be difficult to perceive the game as being balanced.[[15]](#footnote-15) There is no clear, mathematical ways to do this, and at the end, the developers would have to make an educated guess.

Real-time strategy games are notoriously known for their high difficulty when it comes to game balancing.[[16]](#footnote-16) Players can choose amongst various factions and units with different strengths and weaknesses, developers must carefully test all potential interactions and ensure they are balanced and fair across different types of terrain, maps, game modes, and scenarios. Here, there is a particular interest in the concept of Nash equilibrium[[17]](#footnote-17), and related concepts of dominant strategies, in which there exists an equilibrium state where no players can benefit from changing their strategies. Meaning, players will tend to gravitate towards the most optimum strategy, or the dominant strategy. The existence of such strategy saps away the potential for choice, thus making the game boring to play.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Here, we look into balancing the game by having very few strategies for players to choose from, and allowing as few dominant strategies as possible, in order to minimize factors that may hinder the evaluations. We also look into the option of allowing players to balance their units, to see if this increases the potential choices of strategies the players can choose from, so the players will not be bored by the game and lose the game’s appeal.

There has been research done on production capability for different species of units in a game. Units that rely only on damage per second is not the best, but rather a mix of other unit attributes, such as hit points, defense points, along with other properties, is suggested.[[19]](#footnote-19) Other researches involve using procedural map generations built to fulfill requirements in order to maintain interesting and appealing games, suggesting that game balancing can be perfectly achieved only on extremely dull games.[[20]](#footnote-20) It also theorizes having moderate dynamics and moderate balancing can give ample stimuli to players to expand and to seek their enemies.

Games that have moderate dynamics and balancing can be used as references. *Total War: Shogun 2*[[21]](#footnote-21), *Total War: Attila*[[22]](#footnote-22), and *Multiwinia*[[23]](#footnote-23) are all real-time strategy games where unit compositions are similar, and require the players to use strategic unit troop placements on the battlefield to win battles. In these games, the battlefield area is large enough to provide ample stimuli for players to venture out and prepare for battle.

Games with more complicated unit attributes and geographical properties that affect player decisions would be *Starcraft II*[[24]](#footnote-24), *Warcraft III*[[25]](#footnote-25), and *Total Annihilation*[[26]](#footnote-26). In these games, unit attributes are affected by unit dynamic properties (speed, regeneration, and cooldowns), which are incrementally increased through tech upgrades. It has been shown that unit attributes can determine the outcome of a real-time strategy multiplayer game session[[27]](#footnote-27).

Environmental obstacles used in these games, which can lead to players not being able to spot the enemies at a glance can also affect the outcome of the player game session. For example, trees with enemies behind it can block the player’s view from seeing the enemies. Other than environmental obstacles, the game *Homeword: Deserts of Kharak*[[28]](#footnote-28), which encourages the players to see further with higher ground, and to avoid lower ground from enemy fires, the player is given the option to use smoke screens to block enemy line of sight, thus preventing players from receiving excessive fires when retreating from enemy units.

Similarly, there are some real-time strategy games, such as *Auralux*[[29]](#footnote-29), which utilizes map layouts designed with a blend of *Footmen Wars*[[30]](#footnote-30)in mind. Research has been done exploring map layout and balance in real-time strategy games[[31]](#footnote-31), made similarly as *Auralux*.

The game, *Auralux*, provides the basis of linear upgrade paths that players can use during gameplay, as well as taking into account of the map layout. *Footmen Wars* provides a similar structure of gameplay, in which each units of different factions have attributes that players can upgrade accordingly, but ultimately, the players can only use that unit for the rest of the game.

You can start to see many varieties of ways to approach game balance in real-time strategy games, but most of all, unit interaction is one of many core components of real-time strategy games.[[32]](#footnote-32) It is because of this, experimenting the possibilities of game balancing using mathematical equations is the main focus of this research project.

## Game Feature and Appeal

As quoted, a game may be defined as “a system of rules in which agents compete by making ambiguous decisions.[[33]](#footnote-33)” We group the system of rules to be a part of the game as features the players interact with. Thus, game features are unique sets of system of rules that make up the game. When ambiguous decisions have meanings and repercussions within the game system, it is said to cause new challenges to emerge, and will have an impact on the final outcome of the game.

The impact may be a certain type of experience the players may find attractive, or the players may perceive a liking for the experiences.[[34]](#footnote-34) This attraction is defined as the appeal to the game, or the perceived notion of the game’s appeal to the players.

In short, by giving the ambiguous decisions of tweaking the game balance a meaning to the unit attributes editor, we can then define the editor as a game feature with the appeal of being able to manipulate game unit attributes. Since game balance itself is a very debatable game design aspect in real-time strategy games, its meaning is therefore perceived to be very appealing, due to how ambiguous the decisions of approaches for tweaking the game are.

# Game Design

This section contains the design document of the project. Each subsection goes further into detail of portions of the whole project design.

Can include UML diagrams of game logic workflows, and other aspects of the game (aesthetics, core, etc.)

## Overview

## Game Mechanics

## Other Things Worth Mentioning

# Resources

This section contains any game assets used in the project. Includes current assets and unused assets, as well as sections explaining the uses of the assets in general. Should go more in detail.

# Tools

This section discusses the use of Unity, and all resources related to Unity, Unity Networking, shortcomings and issues with Unity, and other advice worth sharing.

# Evaluation

The meat and grits of this paper. State the project’s goal, and come up with the hypothesis that goes into evaluating the project to be successful or failure. Subsections must go into detail of how the evaluation is done, and so forth.

## Research Method

## Research Question

## Result / Conclusion

# Postmortem

Typical game postmortem structure goes here. For reference, see Gamasutra postmortems.

## What went right?

## What went wrong?

### Tutorial Manager

I've learned my lessons when it comes to creating a tutorial for my game. So I want others to not follow my footsteps when they are also working on, or are about to start working on the tutorials.

**What not to do #1 - Make 1 Tutorial Manager managing every single item, when they all can be broken down into modular components.**

What boils down to is, my game is never designed from bottom-up to be very modular. I haven't used Open-Closed Principle when I was making my game, so the whole game was built with "rewrite every scene from scratch for every additional modes". This also means, the tutorials cannot be made to allow players to issue commands or do their own thing, while the tutorial "guides" the players around. It's just not possible, unless I redid everything from scratch again.

Instead of doing a rewrite due to time constraints, I have to resort to static animations and force the players to read monotonic dialogues. That would not give a good game experience overall for the players in the long run.

**What not to do #2 - Write all dialogues inside your Tutorial Manager script.**

This is especially true if you want to have a tutorial that will be modified over and over again until it is right.

For me, since I have to create the game in Unity Web Player as a browser game, I didn't think much on what to do with this, and decided that I will be writing the dialogues up in a C# class object and make it easier to set and get. I was actually lucky that I do not have to work a lot on the tutorial dialogues. But thinking how hard it is to modify the dialogues, I think it would be best to put it in this short list.

**What not to do #3 - Completely separate animations, scripted dialogues, and scripted events.**

This is key. Like what I mentioned before, I have to do everything from scratch when I'm adding additional game modes to the game. And that includes the tutorial mode. Since all game objects are not built with modularity in mind, there is not much I can do except to "wing" it, and pretend to the players that I have something to show to them.

This means, I would have to find some way to manage tutorial animations, scripted dialogues, and other events that needs to occur for the players to understand what's going on. I managed to separate all three of them, and they work nicely, except for a few major flaws.

* You cannot rewind the tutorials.
* You need to restart the tutorials from the very beginning in order to get to a certain point the players missed out on.
* You have to exit the tutorials first.
* You cannot easily move anything around. If you have a script that needs to be moved earlier, everything needs to be rewritten.
* It is hard to get the timings right.
* You cannot change the length, the width, and the height of dialogues.
* It is definitely hard to track down weird bugs that would work normally in some cases, but not other cases.
* It is painful to fix when you are dealing with free aspect ratios. Good thing you can give fixed aspect ratios on some websites.
* You are limited to publishing on those websites.
* You are limited in any other ways.
* You are limited to a certain Unity game engine (because I'm using Unity Web Player).

Yes, the last one is really harsh on my development. Because every significant component of a good tutorial is effectively affected poorly.

With just the tutorials alone, I have my internal testers complaining very much on the flaws of the tutorials to the point they do not want to read a few **paragraphs**. Yes, I said paragraphs, because I cannot modify the dialogues. I can do something with the UI, but the dialogues are not affected by that in any way.

Still, this last bit is crucial to me. I do not have any ideas on how to create **interactive** scripted tutorials. So I had no other options but to make the tutorials I am using right now.

## What did I learn?

# Conclusion

This section contains the final evaluated answer to the hypothesis stated in the Evaluation section. Shortcomings of this project is also included in this section. Make sure limitations are noted. Never gimp out on the details.

# Future Work

State the endless possibilities this project could have, assuming there are no deadlines and unlimited budgets are given. State when this project is deemed complete, and state what possible research can be made and for what other purposes.

Uncertain if this section should contain Github project repository links, and explanation on how to use the project.

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# Appendices

The first appendix should be the IRB questionnaires handed to the testers/volunteers. This is important. Can be split up into multiple appendices in case 1 section is not enough.

Any other following sections can have anything I want that is related to this whole project, even if it is irrelevant but useful resources. This includes project documents, documentation and API manuals, game art, conceptual designs, irrelevant sketches, notes, scrawls, etc.

Proposals can also be added into the appendices, but it must be marked as old, new, or anything in between. (Uncertain if that is the case.)

Nothing stops me from adding nothing, though.

1. (Nutt, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Byte Publications, 1982) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Geryk, 2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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17. (Nash, 1950) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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22. (Hafer, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. (Griliopoulos, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. (Dulin, 1997) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. (Bangay & Makin, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. (Blackbird Interactive, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. A minimalistic real-time strategy game for Android, based in outer space. (Parker, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. A real-time tactics custom map game for the real-time strategy game, *WarCraft III* and its expansion, *WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne*. (StrategyWiki, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. (Lara-Cabrera, Cotta, & Fernández-Leiva, A Procedural Balanced Map Generator with Self-adaptive Complexity for the Real-Time Strategy Game Planet Wars, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Unit interaction is discussed in the Introduction of (Li Yan, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. (Burgun, What Makes a Game?, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Perceiving a liking to a game feature is done by justifying the choice to obtain a higher level of entertainment. See (Slovic, 1995) in regards to choices and the prominence effect. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)