Balancing games

The open source way

What is balance

People say a game is balanced :

- When it is fair

- When it is challanging

- When it is fun

Multiplayer balance

- No match should be decided by the matchup
- No match should be decided by the map choice
- The best player should win... usually

When we provide an asymetrical choice to players, all values should be playable

A game should not be decided by a single, completely controled decision

Single player balance

- The AI won't complain if the game is unfair

- Players want the game to be challenging

- Each player has different capacities, we need to decide who we balance for

In single player games, we don't care about fairness, we balance for fun.

How to find balance problems

- Observe a lot of games and assess the level of the players
- Listen to feedback on the forum, but take it with a big grain of salt. Ask for replays
- Organize tournaments, people will do their best to exploit balance weakness during tournaments
- Always balance for the best, make it fun for the others
- Balance is a moving target, new strategies will appear
- Try stuff, balance is not a science
- Play the game yourself.
- Automatic statistic collection

User feedback : what it looks like

- All player are good players

- Players never do mistakes

- All strategies should work

- All defeat are always either due to random numbers or imbalanced game

So, what should we do with user feedback

- Ignore it.... tempting but no.
- Asses your feedbacker's level, remember it for next time
- Looking for recurring complaints. Even these are not always valid, but they should be considered
- Looking for good players and recognizing them as such (the selected few)
- Training the community to deal with itself

Training the community

- Respond in a civil manner, so others do the same

- Respect usefull feedbackers, treat them as if they were part of the team. They will come back

- When you implement a change, remember to thank them and present things in such a way that it is their change

- There will always be newcomers with stupid idea, when you train one, ten more will come. But the trained one will train the following ones. Encourage that behaviour

- But you will always have to make sure they stay civilized

The selected few

- Finding good feedback providers is like finding developers, it's not a one time thing, you should always be looking for more, and they won't appear magically

- These persons are important, and like all of us, they are fueled by ego. Don't forget to fuel them

- Give them commit right. Thanks to CMS there is no risk in doing that, and abuse is very rare

Testing the game yourself

- Playing the game ourselves : We have to. A lot.

- How good are we, be honest.

- You know the game by heart, and you improve over time

Automated stats gathering

The best tool there is

- Reliable
- Statistically significant
- Reactive

But highly polemical and costly to maintains

Still the best thing there is around...

So, what tools do we have

- Map balance

- Cross scenario balance

- Unit characteristics

- Game rules

Map balance

- When a local exploit needs a local change

- Has very little impact on the game

- Is a great way to add some fun where needed.

Cross scenario balance

- Mainly used to keep the flow of the game going

- Has some side effect within a campaign

- Usually won't break a campaign, but can make it locally frustrating or boring

Unit characteristics

- Far reaching effects throughout the game

- Far reaching effects on the way players use their units

- Still the most effective tool to deal with the most common cases

- Do small changes, trial and error is your friend

Game rules

- These will completely change the dynamic of your games

- The effects are huge and hard to predict throughout the game

- But sometime they are needed

- And sometime they are fun

Conclusion

- Balance is a full time job, you need someone to do it

- Your community is your best tool, listen to them and observe them

- There are many ways to balance, some not obvious and the effects are hard to predict

- Balance is fun, both for you and your players.