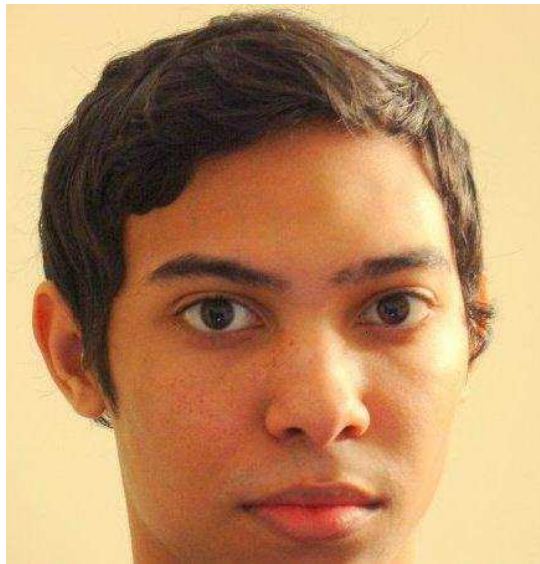


# **The Fight to the Top**



## **StarCraft: BW Through My Eyes**

Michael Gardner

## Introduction

I didn't know anything about StarCraft other than I had no interest in playing it. Despite one of my friends knowing this, he bought me the game for my birthday. I still resisted, as I was into playing sports and had started playing Diablo 2. Over the following months, every day at school, four of my friends would harass me to play the game.

I started playing once a week, with my friends, to get them off my back. Eventually, I ended up playing some 1v1 games. I had only had a computer for a year or so; I had never played a competitive computer game. But, I played a lot of console games, and I thought I was naturally good at games. I didn't particularly like StarCraft, but I was so unfamiliar with losing that losing really turned my world upside down. Losing at a game wasn't an acceptable thing to me.

The first thing I would do when I would rent or buy a game was to make sure the difficulty was set to the highest degree. To me, there is no such thing as winning if you're not playing on a difficult setting. I embraced all gaming challenges. StarCraft was the hardest game I had played, and I still view it as the hardest game. Thus, Starcraft and I have been nearly inseparable since that month where I lost to everyone; I seriously began to doubt if I would ever win a game.

One of my friend's friends showed us a replay. It was a replay of Boxer, a pro gamer. My friend and I couldn't believe there was such a thing, nor could we believe what was going on in the replay. It was all so new and crazy to us! One thing led to another, which led to us being told there was a competitive gaming ladder called WGTour. We were learning about APM and all of this stuff that was just foreign to us. It was as if we had just watched a replay with an alien from another planet. But, alas, I was fascinated. Some people chase ambulances; I chase challenges.

After months of arduous practice, where it was anything but easy, I became a top-16 player in the US: qualifying for the USA World Cyber Games (2006). I was supposed to travel to New York City to play in a group with 3 other players (Idra, Lastgosu, and TheOgnis). It was the most ridiculously stacked group ever. I'm all for a challenge, but sometimes you know you're not ready for it.

The next year (2007) I once more qualified for top 16. I traveled to play in my group; I was one game away from advancing to the finals (top 8) in Orlando, Florida. My chances of advancing were very good, but I forfeited. I had gained an experience that I needed to, and I had proved to myself what I needed to. But, I learned why a lot of good StarCraft players take up poker. From then on there, I played because it was simply the best game I had played. I declined an invitation to be among 12 players in a Non Korean tournament that was a tryout for Korean pro teams: the tournament that made Idra a pro.

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# Chapter 1

## Obtain all knowledge

Whether you're aspiring to play at a high level, reach a higher ladder rank, or to merely have bragging rights over your friend(s), knowledge is the key; e.g., two people are placed in a location that is unfamiliar to them, with one person being given the map-layout and a compass, while the other person is deprived of all useful aids. Who is most likely to reach their destination(s)? He who knows the path can travel the path.

I will show you the path I took to become a top-16 player in the USA, within a year, and how I became a top-8 player the next year. You will not only learn a tried and true path, but I will detail how I view the game and think about it.

True success isn't necessarily about being the best; it's about reaching *your* goal(s). "What should I strive for?" That's a philosophical question that each individual must determine: whether that entails beating the best Non Korean players or stopping at any level before that, this book will give the insight to take as many steps as you want.

In a strategy game, your biggest weapon is your mind. The beauty of StarCraft is it's ideas versus ideas. In life, many things are settled by debates, but the winner is not necessarily the one who is "more right." Starcraft renders us winners and losers in an objective manner. It makes you face reality and accept it. Starcraft, to me, is more than just a game – it's art: no matter what someone thinks of your ideas – bad, crazy, etc -- StarCraft gives you the platform, or "canvas," to express yourself and validate the worth of your ideas. Whether you want to be "in the box" or "out of the box," the bottom line is winning.

The steps of winning: how you can win more.

- Learning that pro gaming exists in StarCraft
- Learning all keyboard shortcuts and hotkeys and using them
- Learning about APM (actions per minute) and downloading BW chart (bwchart.com)
- Learning all of the "tricks" in the game
- Learning that there are competitive ladders (e.g., iCCup.com)
- Learning about "the" gaming forum in the SC community (teamliquid.net)
- Having an insatiable appetite for watching replays and thinking strategy
- Having the willpower and mental fortitude to play a lot of games

"The will to win means nothing without the will to prepare." -- Juma Ikangaa

StarCraft is a game which rewards knowledge and logic, and one that punishes those who are “in the dark.” The more checkmarks you can place next to the bullet points, the further your advantage over the field increases. Practically overnight, your peers will become fellow enlightened players that know the essentials to playing at a competitive level.

Starcraft races might be created equal, but not everyone has the same personality, and some personalities are better suited for a specific race. It’s hard to enjoy losing, but it’s also hard to enjoy playing a race you don’t like. It’s wise to experiment with all of the races, to enable you to find your best race and most enjoyable one (can be the same or different). Whether you view winning as the utmost important thing or playing the race that most gels with your personality, or a combination of the two, is up to you.

I was a Terran player for months; I soon realized I didn’t enjoy playing Terran versus Terran, so I switched to Protoss versus Terran. Recently, I couldn’t ignore the fact that I had begun to detest playing Terran versus Protoss. Meanwhile, I already knew that I loved playing as Protoss, so I made the switch to playing Protoss versus Protoss. Once you reach the point where you don’t want to practice a matchup because you don’t enjoy it, irregardless of skill level, it’s time to reconsider. If you enjoy playing a matchup, you can quickly reach your potential, anyways, due to always *playing* it.

Where’s the swarm? The good news is that I’ve played enough Zerg to realize that sound strategy, pertaining to warfare, is going to help you in a war, no matter what side you’re on. The “bad news,” don’t hold it against me, is that I don’t enjoy playing as Zerg. They feel too weak, and some of their tactics are a little too “bold” for my liking. Don’t let my personal preferences and opinions keep you from playing it, though. There are many successful Zerg players.

Some personal views of what characteristics embody the three distinct races:

### **Terran**

- Methodical and calculating: patience is a virtue. It’s largely a defensive oriented race. Due to being the least mobile race, it has to be the most selective in launching large attacks. Its strength is its defense. Every unit, especially tanks, is critical: every death is mourned. Positioning and well thought-out plans is the difference between life and death.

### **Protoss**

- Creativity and flexibility: Protoss offers the most viable strategies, thus the possibility for originality and variety is very strong. It’s a dynamic race that can be played any way your mind desires.

## Zerg

- Encroaching, aggressive, and overwhelming: a good Zerg player is everywhere. Be it an overlord gathering intelligence or groups of units roaming the map, there is a sense of entitlement of the map that Zerg has. Zerg's macro ability and their mobility make them a threat to go for the kill at any point in the game.

## Chapter 2

### Seeing the top of the staircase: pro gamers

Progression in Starcraft is like walking up a flight of stairs, in that you have to take it one step at a time. But, in Starcraft, the trick is to identify how many stairs there are, and to realize what attributes and skills you need to earn your right of passage to the next flight of stairs. It's like a puzzle, with those at the top of the stairs being the closest to completing it: the closest thing to perfection.

You need to become familiar with the pro scene, especially the Korean pro gamers (they have the best players). It will open your eyes to what is possible and what is being done in the game. If you're like 99.99% of the players, it can be jaw-dropping to realize just how big of a gap in skill there is between the pros and the non pros (most people). That's OK, though, because knowing is learning. Observing the pros will give you a good idea of how the game is meant to be played. It will be a means to help you stay on the right course.

One of the biggest mistakes I see from players is that they become fixated on only watching pro games. They only want to see the best of the best. For entertainment purposes, I agree with them. I want to see the best gamers, too! But, as for learning, you have to remember that, while very important, the pros show you the top flight of stairs: you must fill in the blanks (being the subsequent stairs you haven't reached yet. See pg 12 for elaboration).

Some of the top Korean pros for each race:

#### Protoss

- Bisu
- Stork
- Kal

#### Terran

- Flash

- Fantasy
- Sea

### **Zerg**

- Jaedong
- Zero
- Hydra

You can search youtube for pro gaming VODS (videos on demand). Pro gaming replays aren't frequently released, but there are StarCraft sites that have some: gosugamers.net, teamliquid.net, and Korean replay sites (have the most).

You will want to find a pro gamer that you want to emulate. It could be a different pro gamer for each matchup that you play. When you're starting out, you're not going to have sufficient knowledge to come up with the most effective strategies. The pros will be using strategies that are more effective than what you will encounter; thus, if you emulate them, you will have a strategic advantage. And, over time, you will learn why the pros are playing that way. As your skill increases and your knowledge increases, you will gain the ability to experiment and possibly create something that is ahead of its time (better strategies than even the pros use).

Pro gaming in Korea consists of individual leagues and team leagues (same players). It is like a sporting event in the United States, to some extent. If you're interested, you can go to teamliquid.net and find the schedule for the games and find streams to view them, when they occur.

No matter how brilliant you are or what ordained strategies you come across, the mental part of StarCraft serves little purpose if you can't execute what your mind desires to. Think of your mind as being a vehicle, while your hands provide the gas you need. Think of the ingenuity behind a rocket ship and the rocket fuel that propels it. A pro gamer would be someone who has upgraded their vehicle to something similar, and they have the appropriate grade of fuel

In the next chapter, I will talk about forming a solid foundation that will be of paramount importance. Personally, at this stage in StarCraft, I play for the creativity the game allows. Nothing excites me more than coming up with original strategies that end up working at the highest level in the Non Korean scene. If I didn't have the keyboard skills or the efficiency required to have my ideas be transmitted on the screen, I could never be certain whether my strategy was any good or not. The more certainty you can obtain from a game, the more chance there is for improvements to be made. After all, improving is about correcting mistakes.

## Chapter 3

### Foundation: Compromise is not an option

The building blocks:

- Shortcut keys and hotkeys
- EAPM (effective actions per minute)
- Macro management (managing your resources)
- Micro management (getting the most out of your units)

**Hotkeys:** if you're not hotkeying your units and critical buildings, you're on the verge of being used in a "Fail picture." If a player were to ask me, "what's worse: playing without hotkeys or playing with 1 arm and being blindfolded?" Well, I would probably respond by saying, "that's a great question, because I can't find the difference." Point: if you want to get serious about improving, accept the reality of you must learn to hotkey and how to do it logically.

An underrated concept but one that is very important to me is the idea of making sure what you have hotkeyed makes sense. Some observations and examples of what I'm talking about: In Terran versus Zerg, I've noticed that no one seems to be hotkeying a factory or a starport. These players not only don't have the excuse of having used up all of their available hotkey slots, but one of *the* most important things in TVZ is to have constant tank and vessel production.

StarCraft is about as being as efficient as possible because there's too much to do to be wasting actions. Not only can you queue a tank and a vessel faster if you use hotkeys, but you're able to quickly keep tabs on when you need to start queuing more of those units. You end up producing more of the most crucial units in the matchup, and you're able to manage your resources so much more efficiently. Understand this and apply this logic whenever you can.

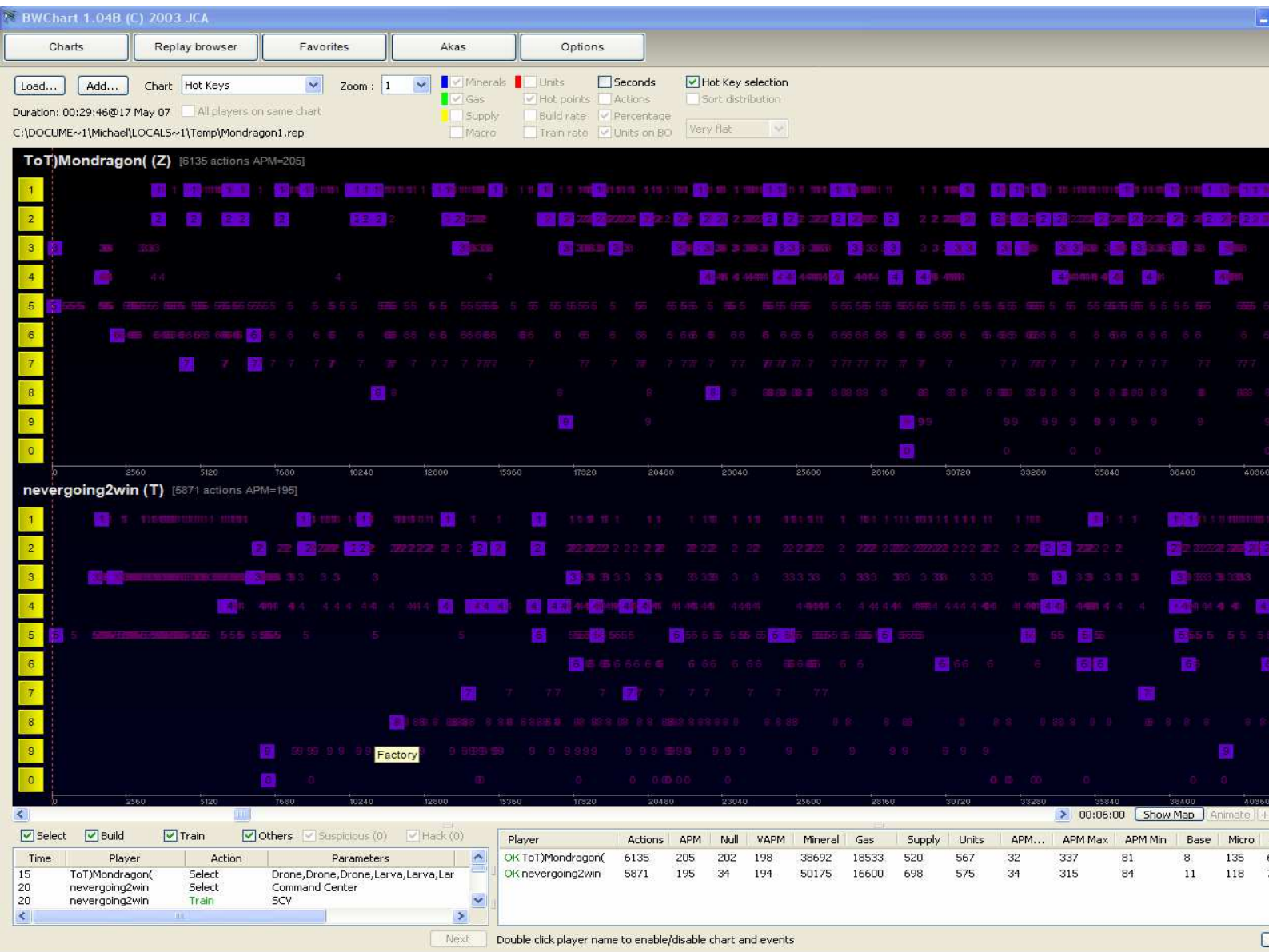
In Protoss versus X (all races), I think players are making an error by not hotkeying their robotic facility. What would you think if you had carriers and you just lost all of your observers, and you spotted cloaked wraiths? What would you think if a Terran attack was coming and you realized you needed a shuttle to slow it down/deal with it? In PVP, if you decide you want constant reaver production (having 2 or 3 on the field at any time), and 1 of your reavers just died... Well, I think you get the point. We either want an observer, shuttle or reaver ASAP. As we have discussed, a hotkey will enable you to make the units faster, keep tabs on production, and conveniently set rally points.



Terran versus Protoss: what can it teach us? When the majority does something, it doesn't mean they are right, but you should feel compelled to think about whether there is merit to doing it yourself or not. If you ever look at a Terran player's hotkeys, most likely they will hotkey their first comsat to 0, second one to 9, and third one to 8. This is the concept of "logical order." Perhaps an example of illogical usage will help; you're Protoss and you hotkey 3 gateways, setting them, respectively, to 1, 5, and 0. How efficient will you be at macroing, compared to alternatives (such as 4, 5, and 6)?

Hotkey setups are the aerodynamics of your "vehicle." Don't have it needlessly hold you back due to being negligent.

**Important:** If you don't have BWchart, you need to download it at BWchart.com. Below is a screenshot of one of my games. Until you're content with your skill level, you will want to regularly check your chart to monitor things such as APM and things like hotkey usage. I encourage/urge players to look at what players set their hotkeys to. Get in the habit of thinking "what are the merits for this? Is this something I should do?"



By now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "I'm in love with hotkeys. I can't get enough of them! I wish there were even more than 10, argh!!" You should be affectionate towards them, but you should also know about F-keys (F2-F4). These are referred to as location keys. You set them like you would a hotkey, but instead of holding control, you hold shift and hit one of F2-F4.

How would a logical person or a pro use F-keys? For example, in the chart shown, in a TVZ, I had no barracks hotkeyed. All high-level Terran players will build their barracks in an organized clump and will set a location key (usually F3) that will center the screen on it. Then you quickly click on the buildings and make what you want.

In most matchups, you're going to want to use F3 for your natural expansion and F4 for your third expansion. Not only will this possibly free up some hotkeys for you and allow you to keep up worker production, but it will greatly help you avoid losing workers to harass attempts on your mineral lines. Side note: always be aware of what is going on, on the minimap. It is your warning system. There are no "no rush 10" games in competitive SC.

## **Macro**

The F3 usage in TVZ to macro brought up a key macro concept for when it comes to efficiency: build your production facilities close together. Also, have similar buildings grouped together; i.e., if you have two stargates and you want to make carriers, I assume you're going for 2 at a time (or when the minerals are available). Efficiency is largely about being logical. Be logical.

The most important macro concept for a beginner is that you need to constantly be making workers. Until you're an expert, worship the expression that is "more is better." The next step for a beginner is to realize that you need to be transferring some workers from 1 base to your newly formed based. It is a saturation balancing game. If you don't transfer an appropriate amount or your timing is off, your macro suffers. When your macro suffers, you, inevitably, have fewer units. Fewer units in a war versus someone macroing like he/she should is a story with a forgone conclusion.

The most important macro concept for the competitive player that knows the basics is "benchmarks." You should always be aware of how many minerals you have at any given time. You should also have levels that "trigger you" to realize your number 1 priority at the moment is to macro. For me, I obviously always try to keep my minerals as low as possible, but if I ever notice I'm at 800, or more, I will only refrain from focusing on going beneath that number if I'm in a very, very critical battle. Once you reach something like 1,200, you really need a great excuse: microing on 4 fronts at the same time or something similarly drastic. It does happen and sometimes you just have to accept that, unless you have 400 APM. The key thing is to know your mineral count must be "justified." If you reach something like 1000 minerals, you have to have the mindset that

you deserve to lose or you're going to lose if you allow this to continue. Not only will it help you get your priorities straight, but it's the truth.

## **APM**

A lot of people like to downplay the importance of how many actions per minute you perform. In theory, if you had 2 clones that thought the same but one had a higher APM than the other, you would always call the higher APM player the favorite (whether it was a 1 APM advantage or 100). If they are both trying to accomplish the same things but 1 does it faster, it's only natural.

It's not so much that APM isn't important as it's that few people know how to play; i.e., if a player has 500 APM but is just a horrendous decision maker, as long as you keep pace macro wise, he/she should just be killing himself faster.

If higher APM wasn't beneficial, there wouldn't be 100% of pro gamers with a very high APM. That said, in the non pro scene, games are won by being the person who knows what he is doing and how the game should be played. Your focus should be on understanding the game and working your APM up to a level where you're able to sufficiently execute your strategies. Once you're around 150 APM, you're giving yourself a chance to compete. Once you're around 200 APM, losing can almost always be pinned on strategic decisions that were made.

I was never a high-APM player. I probably reached B- (ladder rank) for the first time as a 130-140 APM player. This is why being efficient is so important. It allows you to accomplish just as much as someone with considerably more APM than you. Just focus on how you use your actions and making sound, well-thought-out decisions. There's nothing wrong with trying to force your self to play faster; just remember that if you're merely increasing your spam (redundant actions), you're left with an artificial number: have it mean something.

## **Micro**

You don't need to be making highlight reel maneuvers, like 1 marine killing 2 lurkers, to be a good player. Things you will need: having your units hotkeyed and paying attention to the mini map so you can avoid making blunders. Unit movement, such as being able to organize attacks, be it on a base, setting up a flank or any army advancement is what you need to excel at. You need to be proficient at being able to quickly issue commands for up to 4 or 5 control groups. If you struggle, I would advise playing against the computer; not so much actually "playing," but just working on having smooth and organized unit movements.

What separates average Joe from the amazing Joe? Some of the most important and toughest decisions revolve around understanding how many units need to be committed to any given location, at any given time. If you can master knowing how many units are required to defend your locations, while being able to know the optimal amount of units to send to attack a location that you desire, you can be an elite player; given, you have the same keenness to be able to identify the key target(s) to attack and realize the most important locations to secure, and understanding what might make sense to sacrifice for the greater good.

Humans are fallible from time to time: in reality, we're not always going to know the optimal amount of units, so you have to factor in risk versus reward. An extreme example would be, both you and your opponent are only a few buildings away from elimination; you have 30 units and you're pretty sure he has 5 units. How many units do you use to defend? Something like having half your units defending, while the other half attacks is probably near correct -- even if you micro properly with 5-ish units you won't lose your remaining buildings. The point is to realize when it makes sense to error on the side of caution so you can secure your victory. Conversely, you need to know when it makes sense to take a risk and hope the other guy either isn't fully aware of the risk you're taking or doesn't respond correctly, for whatever reason.

Besides attacking in unison and forming concaves when attacking, there's something you need to know.

### **The "Building 7" of Starcraft:**

When the "impossible" happens and reality seems to have changed  
The tricks of the "gosu:"

#### **Zerg::**

1) Stacking your mutas by adding an overlord to your muta control group. This will allow you to have your mutas attacking at the same time.



2) “Stop lurkers”: the act of selecting your lurkers and an overlord and issuing the hold command. Your lurkers won’t attack until you tell them to.



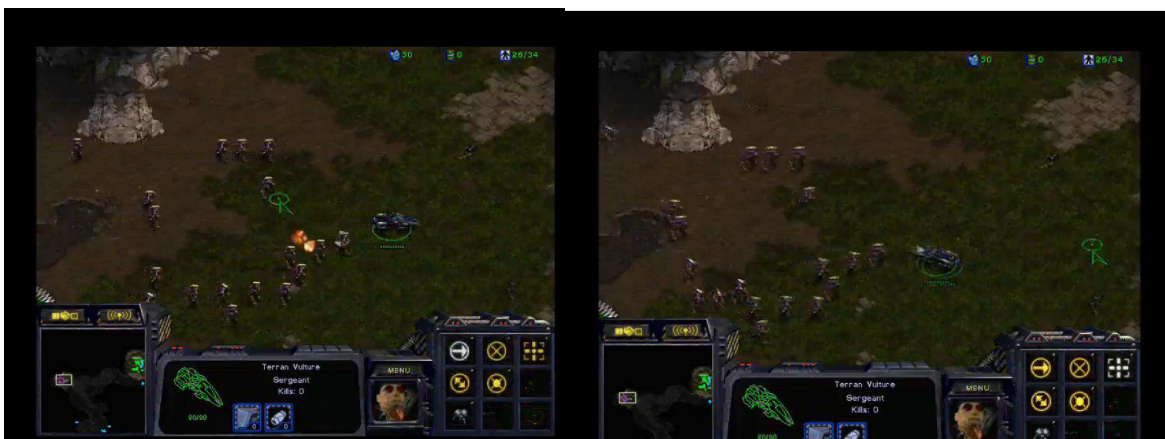
3) There is a trick to microing mutas versus scourges. It’s a bit challenging to execute. If you’re interested, I suggest searching on the internet for it (best left to the Zerg experts).

### Protoss:

1) Corsair stacking. Same as with mutas; however, with corsairs, if you choose to stack them, you’re going to want to add a probe to the control group to do so. Players who opt to do this will usually trap one of their probes behind their mineral lines (using pylons).

### Terran:

1) Patrol micro with vultures. This is a micro technique that is most used against zerglings and zealots. It will allow you to attack while turning away in time to not take a hit. It involves issuing the patrol command and clicking towards the enemy units, and then quickly issuing the move command in a direction towards safety. A very beneficial trick, and embarrassingly and painfully, I did not know about this until a few years ago.





2) Stacking wraiths. Like with corsairs, you will want to add a worker to a control group of wraiths if you want to use this command. You can use any unit that is a screen frame away, but it's most logical to use a worker.

**All races:**

1) All transport units (overlords, dropships, and shuttles) can unload their “cargo” while in mid-flight, if you issue the unload command and then click towards the center of your drop ship, etc. You can also just click on individual units in the wire frame.



## Chapter 4

### **Playing time: Where, how many games, and when am I “ready?”**

My first real goal, outside of winning my first game, was to have a Battle.net account with a winning record, over a decent sample size (200'ish games). It's been a few years, but if memory serves me correctly, I may have played more than 700 games before I had a winning account. I think I made 3 accounts before becoming a winning player. It was tough and frustrating. On my first account, my record was so unpleasing to me, that I played some comp stomps. Noobs... we've all been there at one point.

After I had started winning over half of my games, my skill was starting to increase more rapidly. I was ready to play the WGTour ladder. Well, WGTour was much, much harder than battle.net east, but, to me, that was the equivalent of the difficulty level on a game being set to the highest degree;

I had no choice but to play. I played *a lot* and I watched *a lot* of replays. I had an “aha” moment, but -- believe it or not -- it had absolutely nothing to do with a particular game I played. I was watching either a C3 or C2 (ranks) Terran versus Terran game; I just thought, “my god, they are butchering this game. Is this a joke? I play way smarter than this!” I actually had to watch more of their replays to verify they really played like that. From that game on, I knew I was destined to at least reach their level.

I was just a really curious and inquisitive player. I was watching almost all the replays there were. I would always keep tabs on the Terran players ahead of me on the ladder, and I would watch all of their replays. There was a Terran player from Brazil (name escapes, no one “big”) that had impressed me. I asked him if I could observe some games; he was very kind, allowing me to observe some of his WGT games. To me, that was as good as it gets. I knew I had my work cut out for me if I wanted to play at that level, but I was inspired.

#### **The Three most important things I did:**

1. I watched every replay of better Terrans than I. was.
2. When I lost to someone, I would view their match list and view the games they lost in that matchup.
3. I would watch the replays of the nearest ranks above me, and I would think “what do they have in common. What is that one thing they seem to be doing differently? What's the C- playing doing differently than the C player? What's the C+ player doing differently than both of them?” That's the kind of thinking that can only propel you forward.

Number “3” is crucial for “filling in the blanks.” It showed me how to get to the next step and gave me meaningful goals: if one rank always keeps their macro below 200 (just an example), odds are you need to have that in common, too, if you’re to reach that level. Find the common denominators. They say practice makes perfect, but until you’re at a high level, the next step isn’t the most challenging task out there (perfect is overkill) – you can do it.

I didn’t achieve a “high” WGT rank because PGTour soon came out and everyone flocked there. There were Koreans playing, thus I had no choice but to play there! Since PGTour automatically reported games, there was no library of replays for my perusal. But, I remained a replay junkie; difference was, I was now watching all of the Korean replays (that involved a Terran) that were uploaded to Korean sites.

I can’t recall ever being “stuck” at a rank on PGT. I partially blame that on maps of the week (point system that rewards you for playing certain maps). I was never big on learning a new map every week, even though I did play a lot of maps back then. PGT introduced something called maps of the season (1 or 2 maps that give you more points). That was more to my liking, but I became aware that the point system ruined the meaning to ranks. It’s not just about your rank; it’s about whom you have beaten and how you fare against certain players. Any decent player can reach a high rank if they play the “right” maps and put the volume in. The system was put in place to stop people from playing only a select few maps (namely, lost temple).

If you want to know your “rank,” simply be aware of the ranks of players you’re beating or losing to (on a ladder, just check their history). The only point in reaching a high rank is to have better practice. But half the time you end up being required to play maps that have no relevance to you. It’s just pointless. So, what do you do when you become better than most Non Koreans and you think you can handle being “brought down a few notches?”

Follow the Koreans. Play on some of the Korean servers (where 99% of the people are Korean), such as Brian clan and the Fish server. I’ve dabbled with all the Korean servers. I had already reached all of the goals I had before I played on a Korean server. It was a fun challenge, but I wasn’t serious enough about improving to get the most out of it. Playing on Korean servers is really for those who want to become the best player in their country. I’ve never once had that notion. Be warned: playing there is for the noble and brave. Those who do this, no matter their skill level, deserve a lot of respect.

(See next page for the playing recap)



## Recap

1. Achieve a win percentage of 65 or  $>$  on Battle.net. One vs. one, on low money.
2. After achieving that, play on iCCup (visit [iccup.com](http://iccup.com)).
3. If you're approaching B- rank, you can consider playing on Korean servers such as Brian clan or Fish (search for threads on how to play there at [teamliquid.net](http://teamliquid.net)).

If you get stuck at a level, you're probably repeating the same mistakes but waiting for different results; take some time to reflect and analyze. Try to watch as many recent replays as you can.

The advantage of emulating a player or playing a similar style to others (standard if you will), is that you can learn a lot more from downloading their replays than players with a different style will: a "100 book library opposed to 0."

## Chapter 5

### Improvement: Why we play who we do

One of the first Non Korean pros, Guillaume Patry, said something to the effect of “if you’re winning most of your games, then you’re not playing the right people.” It’s important to understand two things:

1. There is always going to be someone better than you
2. The opportunity to learn arises from having \*better players\* exploit your play

Winning or losing can be thought of as simply playing someone better or worse than you. When you think of it in these terms, winning or losing would largely be based on luck (for any given game) if you were to be given a random opponent; i.e., if you’re better than 60% of the population, you would expect to win 60% of your games over a big enough sample. What’s the point to take from this? If your wins would turn to losses if you were given a slightly stronger player – focus more on how you played each game, instead. Always analyze your play and think about what is working, what’s not working, and what can be improved upon. Don’t get caught up in the “luck.” Remain objective so you’re not distracted from weaknesses in your play that are staring you in the face.

To a thinking person, playing someone better than you is like being given free coaching. No, they aren’t given you the answers, but they are pointing out your mistakes. Your mission becomes to think of solutions. If you can run 5 miles, and you continue to run 5 miles, what are you doing? You’re merely affirming the obvious... you can run 5 miles. If your goal is to improve your distance, focus on going after the next mile. Or, else, you’re just stagnating. One of the biggest obstacles players face is their need to “feel good,” which usually consists of playing the people they are better than. Having some confidence can undoubtedly help you; but, simply remember that if it feels too easy, odds are you’re not improving. So if you’re stagnating but want to improve, push yourself from time to time.

Where do I find the most benefit in playing players that are “inferior?” Eventually you will find a level of play where a lot of strategies you try will work, but some won’t. This gives you the chance to try stuff out and gauge whether there is some potential in your ideas, or if you just really need to scrap it and move on to something else. It can end up saving you a lot of time; even when some strategies do work out, you can often times tell that it’s just due to their lack of skill. If you were to try new stuff against higher ranked players, it would be hard to get a correct feel for things: even your good ideas would falter badly, due to not being refined enough.

## Chapter 6

### Awareness:

### Do you have any idea what you truly seek?

“Let me ask you something. What color were the chairs in the hotel bar?  
You were in there for hours. What color were the chairs?”

- Green.
- Beige.

How many lights are there in this room? A Super Soldier wouldn't have to look. He would just know.

- A Super Soldier?
- A Jedi Warrior.

He would know where all the lights were. He could walk through a room and he could tell you how many power outlets there were. People are walking around with their eyes closed. At Level One, we were trained to instantly absorb all details.” – *The Men who Stare at Goats*.

What is StarCraft? It's a game pertaining to wars and battles. When you want to get better at StarCraft, what are you implying? You want get better at warfare. If you want to transcend the game, so to speak, you have to see it as more than just a game. Otherwise, you're better off sticking to checkers or maybe connect four. Not that I don't enjoy those games.

A good StarCraft player is a “super soldier.” Anytime he sees a replay or scouts his opponent, he's more aware of what the opponent is doing than even he is. He's obtaining all knowledge and he's figuring out what it all means. What does it lead to? What are the correct responses? He's always thinking multiple moves ahead. When you watch a replay and you see something, make sure it registers. You could be seeing a strategy or a tactic that you would want to incorporate into your play – if you were seeing and thinking.

It's not about saying “who can I copy now,” it's about always thinking “what make sense to me. What's the most logical thing to do?” Sometimes that is copying. Other times, it's branching out and expanding on stuff to make it better. Other times, it's true ingenuity, or, rather, a spark of common sense.

## Chapter 7

### **A game of nuances: Where subtle differences make the difference**

Noticing what is going on in the game is half the battle. The other half is making sense of it and understanding the impact each decision you are making has. If you don't understand the effect that each minute thing you do has, you're incapable of knowing where to look to get the "wrinkles" out of your play. Anytime you do something, you should know the purpose behind it. Even where you place your supply depots, pylons or overlords you should have a defined reason for each placement. A good player is never random: there's always a thought out reason behind the action.

An example of a seemingly small thing making a world of difference, explained: In Terran versus Zerg, your opponent opens up with a standard 3 hatch build, and you research siege, because, well, we always need to. Right, but it's of the utmost importance for us to know exactly when we want/need to use siege; when we begin to research something, we always time it to finish right when we need it. You might be thinking, "better to be safe than sorry." Well, I got bad news for you if that's the case: when you go for your mid-game push against Zerg, if you already have siege researched, you're going to be at a unit disadvantage against a good macroing player. You could have had another factory or another tank, or another vessel and so on. The absence of these things will slow your push down, and you will risk being overrun.

Moreover, timing is everything in Terran versus Zerg. You must make a big advancement on Zerg by a certain time in the game, or he will take the map and it's game over. The Zerg player can not be allowed to freely take his fourth (3 third expansion). If a Zerg player takes a fourth base in the early-mid stage of the game, this must mean impending death for him. With timing being everything, we can't even afford to siege early into our push. Sieging takes too much time (time we don't have). If you time your build right, you won't need to siege or want to siege until you're advancing towards the middle of the map, where you begin to lose the defender's advantage (the closer you're to your base, the more units you have to engage with). If the Zerg goes 3 base hive and you reach his base before he has swarm, then your timing is good.

No matter how great you are at 99% of things you do in a game, one seemingly small decision can always cause you to lose. There are very few unimportant decisions in StarCraft, if any, so it's negligence to treat any decision as such. Be aware of the "domino" effect. This can work towards your favor or against you. And it can all begin with the one subtle thing.

## Chapter 8

### **Roll call: present or absent? The concept of the “shot clock.”**

Our eyes are now wide open. We're taking note of everything that is going on in the game. That's fantastic. Now it's time to take it to the next level, which can make one seem “psychic”; what is your opponent *not* doing? While on the surface it sounds a bit silly, but dig a little a deeper and it gets serious pretty quick.

Each strategy has a certain window of time where it will either take place or your opponent is doing something else. Even if your opponent does in fact do the strategy that is outside of this time window, the “shot clock” has expired. Basically, you view this as the window of viability.

Once you think your opponent has missed this window of viability, you need to start preparing for the next timing window (strategy) that is coming up, and so on and so forth -- unless you have scouted what your opponent is doing, already. Example: in Protoss versus Terran, if I don't see the T expand by a certain time, I instantly prepare against a possible drop at my base. I have the mindset of I'm getting my expo at an early stage in the game, so he either has to keep pace with me by expanding by a certain time or try to cripple me with his units by a certain time. Once you know someone's agenda and the onus is on him to succeed, he is running into a wall. Be that wall.

Knowing what your opponent is not doing is half of knowing what he is doing. You will need to watch a lot of replays and/or be very observant in your games, so you can know the timings for every strategy. When does 2 factory push out? How many units should he have if going 2 factories at this stage? How many pylons should he have in his base at this stage? Understanding this concept and knowing how to apply it will basically give you psychic ability. A good player rarely ever gets surprised by anything the opponent throws at him.

Not only do I think in these terms when it comes to figuring out what my opponent is doing, but it's also the reason I always scout the base with the closet dropping distance to my main (if the distances are equal, I scout the one closest to my mineral line).

1. The likelihood that your opponent will go for a drop oriented strategy increases at close positions.
2. If your opponent is going for a drop at close positions, it can come incredibly soon. I must alter my builds to account for this. However, if I can scout the guy's base and find out he isn't dropping me, or at least at not using the quickest possible timing, then I don't want to adjust my build. Having certainty at close positions is very important, and it can become a drastic advantage if you can deny the other player information.

## Chapter 9

### Time trails: Reaching “checkpoints”

Think of a racing game where if you don't reach a certain point by a certain time, then the game will end; conversely, if you do reach the checkpoint, you will have (x) amount of time to reach the next checkpoint -- and so and so forth until you reach the end.

StarCraft has something akin to invisible checkpoints that require the same amount of urgency, because the consequences of failing to reach these are just as stark. In Protoss versus Terran, Protoss will occasionally opt for a nexus (expansion) before gateway opening. Upon scouting this, the Terran player will be presented with 2 or 3 different “race tracks” that will have different checkpoints to reach.

If the Terran player's base is in close proximity to the Protoss player, he will be tempted to go down the path of trying to kill off the Protoss expansion before he can get enough units out to repel attacks. There will be a window of time, where if the Terran player sends the right amount of units and executes on the micro end of things, then Protoss will have to concede the expansion and go from there.

If the Terran player spawns at far positions, then his/her thinking will shift more towards thinking of ways to catch-up to their opponent's economy, without relying on attacks to do so. This usually means the Terran player will double expand, as quickly as it can safely be pulled off, while trying to deny the Protoss player from taking a second expansion (termed the third).

Then, there's the in-between method/multi-faceted approach, which aims to put a dent in your opponent's economy, while being committed to getting your economy up to speed to your opponents. This option can involve vulture dropping your opponent's main base, while you gear up to double expand. If your vultures manage to kill off a sufficient amount of probes, you're putting yourself in a position to take the lead in the game; however, if you don't put a dent in your opponent's economy, then your prospects to gain an edge on your opponent are becoming more and more bleak.

The gist is, to be good at StarCraft you must understand what “path” you want to take and realize the “checkpoints” that must be reached to end up winning the game. I played some games against Day[9], who is a superlative player. After watching the replays, I realized he had scourges arriving at each key location at the very second a drop could be possible. To me, it was beautiful art. But, really, it was turning the game into a science.

In short, understand the reward that comes from achieving certain things within a certain time and understand the consequences of not meeting deadlines. If you “know your opponent,” you can turn your game into a science, too.

## Chapter 10

### Who is in your house? Know your arena

If you thought someone broke into your house, would that concern you? Would you want to know if in fact someone might be out to hurt you? Would you care where he was? I can't blame you if you hide and play dead in this scenario; however, in StarCraft, there is no excuse for this lackadaisical “maybe he'll just go away” attitude.

I have news for you -- the objective in StarCraft is to kill the other person. He's coming for your buildings, and he's coming for your units. If he's not attacking you, he's busy plotting how to do it and when to do it: **Find out what he's doing and where he's at.** Believe it or not, this is not a one time thing. When the game has ended, you should be able to critique everything he has done, because you're aware of *everything* and have assessed everything.

I know of top non Koreans who haven't even begun to understand this concept. They use comsat like they got the add-on to simply make their Command Center look more aesthetically pleasing. It's so shameful and embarrassing. Here's a pro tip: if you don't know what the other guy is doing, you can't make a well-informed decision. You're guessing. No amount of genius is going to solve a problem that requires a psychic. This concept must be fully comprehended. Understand the gravity of not properly scouting.

## Chapter 11

### **The driver's seat; Blindfolded passenger (opponent)**

Dominance and control, the story of a beautiful relationship on the battlefield: when you play a game, you want to be playing the “same game,” over and over. What this means is, having a plan/route for everything. Think of it this way, in real life, are you more comfortable traveling to a location that you normally do, or one where you can't even be certain you're on the right path? Familiarity can bring on a sense of auto-pilot. If you know exactly where you're going and all you have to do is focus on execution, then you're well off. Take control of the game. Make him play your game.

A car gone of the road, the perils of going off course or being hijacked; your opponent is going at full speed, and he has you on the defensive. You have no idea where he is going, and you have no idea how to react. Since StarCraft is a complicated game, that presents difficult problems, you don't want to be the one facing all of the problems; you want to have your opponent stuck answering the questions. The concept of instinct/training versus confusion and free styling: practice makes perfect. When you're in a chaotic game (for you), your chances for making errors drastically increase. StarCraft is a game based on making fewer errors than your opponent and capitalizing on the mistakes of your opponent.

How does one seize control? You can either keep presenting him with scenarios he is unaccustomed to facing, or you can exploit what he is doing – good counters – or you can say, “we will travel down the same road (standard play), but I'm going to go a lot faster than you (out multi-tasking/out executing).” Out executing your opponent puts him in the game of playing catch up. He knows he has to do something drastic to get back into the game, or rely on you making a big blunder.



Know when your opponent is against the ropes. Once your opponent is “against the ropes” and needing to even the score, his time to do is on the verge of running out. This tells you that your opponent needs to attack you soon or aggressively expand to try to catch up macro wise. This, to me, is called “the onus of having the burden.” If you have the advantage, think to yourself “where must he attack me to have a chance to win.” Sit back and defend. Having the advantage and being able to play psychic is a hard combination to beat.

If your opponent doesn't attack you, he must take an expansion that he doesn't have the means to defend. Even if he can defend it, in the short-term, the supply discrepancy will only make him further vulnerable to head on engagements. Be aware of when your opponent takes this expansion(s), as this will be your opportunity to go for the kill. If your opponent does neither, it's OK: he's digging his own grave by not accepting his “burden.” As long as he's relying on us to make a critical mistake, he has no chance, because we know how the game is played. Simply avoid making unforced errors and rash decisions. A game of attrition never favors the already starving.

Note: harassing your opponent is a great tactic which all good players incorporate into their play, but be aware of the risk versus reward function. If you risk 12 vultures to kill an amount of probes that 5 vultures would have the same potential to do so, you're making a big mistake. Always make sure the reward justifies the risk.

You have just accomplished one of your objectives/desires in the game: killing a lot of your opponent's workers. He is crippled and the onus of the burden is on him. Which begs the question should we harass him some more? NO. If your opponent's is already screwed (for a lack of better words), from that point on, we have more to lose than to gain. Don't give him a chance to pick off a unit or two here and there. No, make it clear to him that it's up to him to get back into the game.

It's psychological warfare. You want your opponent to know that your understanding of the game is goddamn near flawless. Be the driver who makes his own rules and goes where he wants. Make your opponent feel like he is dragging behind the car. In a war, you want fight on your own terms and pick your own strategic locations, such as having the high ground. You can either take control or be controlled. Don't be the abused person in this relationship. Embrace the control and seek it.

## Chapter 12

### **It is what it is: Accepting reality**

When it comes to improving at StarCraft, you must be receptive to incoming data that is there for you to interpret as reality. Not only do you need to be aware of all incoming information available for discernment, but if you can't remain objective in your analysis, then it doesn't matter how much information you have at your disposal, cause it may as well be trash to you.

Einstein said that insanity is repeating the same thing but expecting different results. If you have 400 APM and you lose to a 100 APM player, we can probably figure that it wasn't due to being "outrun." You have to be realistic about why you lost before you can realistically expect to improve. If you make a strategic mistake, it's OK. It happens to all of us. But, good players are driven to fix mistakes and think of alternative ways of handling situations; problems that are ignored don't go away.

Until we are winning every game, there is always room for improvement. There's no shame in it. It's just a game of identifying all of the things we need to do better and then working at it. Efficient practice is really just limiting how often you end up repeating the same mistakes. That's what enables people to improve so much faster than others.

We have learned that StarCraft is a subtle game and that there needs to be sound reasoning for everything we do in a game. So, we need to make sure we're analyzing a lot of our replays. Most people will say "watch all of the games you lost." While I can't argue that, that's not great advice, I just have to be honest and preach what I live; I never was fond of watching most of the games I lost. I respect those that can do this and I encourage it, but I usually just watched most of the games I won. Believe me, winning or losing, there is no shortage of errors being made, granted you're playing someone similar enough in skill level to make them stand out.

If you do end up watching fewer losses than winning replays, it becomes essential that you're studying the replays you won and not just gloating over "how awesome you are." I really do analyze the games I win. I just find it less frustrating to watch a lot of my winning games, which keeps my mind more clear and focused. I think about everything. I even think about if my opponent would have done something differently then how would that possibility make me adapt my play for future games? Don't just analyze what happened – analyze what could have happened. It will save you a lot of time and you will be accounting for all possibilities; i.e., practicing against a better player.

Watching replays is largely where you formulate how you're going to improve. You're removing some previous ideas and adding new ones and noting what you think your timing needs to be for certain things and what you need to keep your minerals at (macro). Playing is about practicing execution and either affirming your ideas or giving you a better sense of what adjustments you need to make. It's a constant game of tweaking things and altering your builds so that everything runs smoothly. Making sense and working in unison is the simplified gist of what it's about.

If you're ever just not sure of whether you're on the right track or not and you need guidance, it's probably time to watch some top pro gamer replays. Pros don't know all of the answers, themselves, but they do a lot of things right. It can do a lot of good to watch a replay from a pro gamer's perspective (maybe just one player's vision) and think "why is he doing this?" A subtle tip: if you're transferring your workers to another mineral field, not only should you be sending them to different mineral patches but you should use "return cargo" once they are near your hatchery, so those with minerals return them before mining. Once you think this small, big advs. can be built off lots off small ones.

## Chapter 13

### **That's not standard: "Bah."**

It's not that "sheeple" don't think. I imagine they do; don't quote me on it. But, rather, they have yet to grasp that "standard" is merely a word for normal. I understand where they are coming from, but these are your uncreative types that can't think of better alternatives. That's OK, but the problem is, in today's game some people like to label everything that doesn't follow the trend as being "cheesy."

Some players end up discouraging creativity and innovative play, on the grounds of truly idiotic reasoning. A few people even told me that I was incapable of playing standard, or else I would do so! Rest assured I know my own history. I used to religiously download TVZ replays. Everyone played standard, so that's what I did: 1 barracks, fast expansion. I had yet to come across a better way. I played, strictly, standard TVZ for years, even beating A+ Zerg players in standard games.

In Terran versus Protoss, I was using a build from a replay of Boxer against Kingdom on lost temple. It was a standard build, but I thought it had a nifty opening: 5 marines, 2-3 vultures off 1 factory, into expo. I had reached A- with Terran versus Protoss being my strongest matchup (the next chapter will document my TVP switch in style).

However, in Protoss versus Terran, the critics were right: I couldn't play standard PVT. You know why? Because, having played TVP at a high level, I would have to be a fool to play standard PVT. I knew how much of a mistake it was: there is nothing better than seeing a Toss player playing "standard." It's as if the Terran players have tricked them into playing the only style that isn't incredibly hard for us to deal with. Protoss has a myriad of strategies that are very challenging for Terran players to deal with, yet they choose the least difficult one? Toss players would follow each other off a bridge if it were deemed standard. Think for yourself.

Side note: in PVT, I initially copied/emulated a Chinese player called PJ. He was a high level Terran player that played PVT. He ended up switching to only playing toss, later on. I watched a few replays of a Terran pro gamer, Nada,

who was playing PVT. He would always try to Reaver drop people and DT drop them (simultaneously). The gist... Terran players don't understand why Toss players play standard... Later on, I'll explain some of thinking behind how I play PVT.

The most important thing to remember is that StarCraft has continued to evolve. New and more optimal strategies and better ways of doing things have always been coming out. Basically, this is to say, if you're following current trends, in a sense, you're "living in the past": odds are it's going to be deemed inferior in the future, thus your true task is to think "what's the build of the future? Is there something that makes more sense than what I'm seeing now?"

Standard play should be referred to as "default play." It's basically a fallback plan for when you can't come up with a better alternative. This is not the end of the world by any means. Your opponents will probably be playing the default way, too. Basically, in a game where there are no secrets of what the other is doing, it comes down to mechanics and execution. To me, I never got much satisfaction out of copying others, but I made it work. You can, too.

### **Advantages of standard play**

- **Pros have proven it can work at a high level.**
- **There's no shortage of replays to study from.**
- **It's usually a safe, solid style of play that will help you develop your understanding of the game and force you to practice all of the core things such as macro and micro.**

### **Disadvantages of standard play**

- **You can "read like a book," which will remove any element of "surprise."**
- **If your opponent is familiar with what you're doing, you're open to being exploited.**
- **If your mechanics are inferior to your opponent's, this has a tendency to become more accentuated.**

## Chapter 14

### **Playing at a higher standard: Your own accord, what you see and feel**

I played against a player on West, a “no name” non Korean; he absolutely brutalized me with reavers. I thought, “If this no-name player is able to destroy me like this, then how could I ever defend against iefnauj (best reaver user, who always uses them)? I thought to myself, “Making turrets is beyond foolish: it couldn’t be any less cost efficient against someone with micro ability. It’s impossible to not give a good player an advantage in the game once you make turrets.”

Solution: mobile turrets (aka, goliaths). I came up with a build that made sense to me; I found iefnauj on Battle.net East, and I played him and won against his reaver build. When his shuttle entered my base, he said, “gollies?” If I made turrets, I would have had a 0% chance of winning.

What’s there to take away from this? Two things:

1) The only label we need to care about is “optimal,” as that is our goal. If that happens to be “standard play,” so be it.

2) Understand that there is an inherent advantage that comes with playing a style that your opponent is not familiar with; i.e., more times than not, you don’t need to have an unorthodox strategy be better than standard ones, per se: If I play 10k games against standard play, how strong do you think I will be against it, compared to something out of the ordinary? So, if you can take that advantage, AND have a superior strategy to other known strategies, then you have something beautiful. StarCraft is a game for “artists” that can’t particularly draw well but want to produce beauty.

The important thing to take away from my Terran versus Protoss example is not, simply, “make goliaths.” No, you could make a wraith or try to find a way to defend without using turrets, goliaths, or wraiths. The important thing is the concept of being more cost efficient than your opponent, or at least as cost efficient as you can be.

If your opponent makes a shuttle but you spend more than 200 minerals (static D) to defend it, then your opponent doesn’t even have a burden of needing to damage. In fact, he already has the advantage. His shuttle will remain useful and he now has a mineral advantage. Killing your units would merely be a bonus. That gives us two choices:

1) Spend minerals on units that can also increase our supply count while remaining useful. 2) Have a unit, such as a wraith, that can snipe the shuttle; even if it doesn’t succeed, either dropship harass can make it pay off, or your opponent will “pay for your starport” by making additional cannons that he otherwise wouldn’t.

## Chapter 15

### Through my eyes: The vision behind the rise

In Protoss versus Terran, Protoss basically has multiple hero units: units that are game changing units. These units require an expert player to adequately deal with. If you simply make certain units and do simple tactics, the other player has to be at a high skill level to even have a chance. This is the kind of stuff that you must exploit and use to your advantage. If you can throw enough complex “problems” at your opponent, while controlling the game flow, then even the best of the best will begin to crumble. It’s the art of throwing 100 punches at your opponent, while only having to block 5, yourself. Most won’t survive your initial “punches.” Even if they think they have, they haven’t; they don’t understand the “macro attack” that is going on that can’t be stopped.

It’s not about teaching someone a particular strategy. It’s about teaching someone how to think: how to understand for themselves; after all, those with similar thinking will usually come up with the same solutions. Know the “hero units:” DT’s, Arbiters, Reavers, and Carriers. Experiment with your own combinations.

I usually tailor my play around taking minimal risk, while having some degree of reward. I try to accumulate, say, 10 small advantages that add up to be decisive in determining the winner. I never put myself at great risk, but any tactic I try can potentially win the game if the opponent doesn’t respond correctly. Solid play is built around not taking big risks. First off, what’s our real objective in a strategy game? It is getting an edge: an advantage. Once you have an advantage, as long as you can maintain it, you will win. That doesn’t mean we shut it down and don’t seize further opportunities to further get ahead, but it means realizing who the burden is on to make up for lost ground.

By simply attacking with 1 or 2 units in the early game, you’re already going to weed out the bad players. Either they won’t have passable micro or they’re letting their macro slip. As long as you’re in the driver seat, you’re basically deciding when the other guy will tap out. However, in some matchups, or on some maps, early attacks aren’t a practical way to get an advantage. That’s where the real decisions are made.

Where will the edge come from? This is the real question behind the game. Sometimes I’ll aim for an early macro advantage; sometimes I devise a strategy that counters anything that can come my way, and I hope to dominate them in the middle game, and other times I concede there is little I can do but keep pace with them and try to beat them in a long chess game (unless they want to “kill themselves”). Different maps offer you different advantages and possibilities. I can’t say which is right or wrong. Just know what your edge is.

## Chapter 16

### **End of the road, but armed with the tools and knowledge to pave more**

This book isn't so much about giving someone answers to whatever questions pop up in my head. I could never answer all of the questions you will come across in StarCraft. It's like the adage of "Give a man a fish; you have fed him for today. Teach a man to fish; and you have fed him for a lifetime"

Obtain all knowledge and rely on your ability to discern it and know what to do with it. At the end of the day, that's the name of the game. You can rely on being "fed fish" to do well enough to be content, but you can't expect to compete with the "fisher."

If desired, I can be reached to go over a few specific strategies and give the reasoning behind it. But, remember that part of the learning process is simply finding out what doesn't work. That means failing in nearly every way imaginable.

Magnus Carlsen, the youngest chess player to achieve a number one world ranking, said something to the effect of "I would play multiple games against the computer at the same time (thousands upon thousands of games). I failed every way possible. I simply remembered my failures."

Hopefully it's becoming clearer that the most practical way to be "coached," is to have knowledge of the steps that had to be taken and one should think about the game. Hopefully I have helped you.

"But I want to reach a level beyond yours! I want to be a pro gamer in Korea." There's nothing wrong against setting the bar as high as possible. I can't speak in certainties of what is required to do something I have not achieved. But, I know the best player in the world is Flash. He said that he thinks about StarCraft all day. He said he is always playing the game "inside of his head," even when not near a computer. Bobby Fischer, perhaps the greatest chess player ever, used to spend his time playing against himself.

I've long suspected that, that is probably the ultimate level. It would be like practicing against someone that is maphacking. How could you not fix the "leaks" in your game and gain a perspective that few have? Then again, anyone that reaches this level has a lot of passion for the game and desire to improve; something that, undoubtedly, is the driving force behind achieving all of the goals we will set.

The first step towards achieving something is to say "I would like this." The only one that can stop you from that point on is you. Good luck and have fun pursuing your goals.