GameStar's Interview with Dustin Browder, translated by TeamLuquid

Provided via SC2Blog.com

Introduction
We have playtested the most recent version of Sc2 in Paris and sat down for a chat afterwards with lead designer Dustin Bowder. In our exclusive interview, the Blizzard representative answers - among others - questions about the Beta test, about the most recent changes to units and abilities, about his design-principles, as well as about South Korea and the financial crisis.

Q: Gamestar Magazine
A: Dustin Browder

Q: In Starcraft II, the same three races will compete as in its predecessor: Terran, Zerg, and Protoss. This doesn't sound like much meaningful innovation has happened. Will Sc2 feel very different than SC I in multiplayer mode despite this?
A: Hard to say, since a lot hinges on the final balance. You know how carefully balanced SC I was. In the 2nd part, we have changed a lot. We still have to consider what the fans like and what makes it into the final game. That's what the beta test is for, after all.

Q: What happens during the beta test?
A: We take a look at which strategies are most popular. By that we realize, which elements work out already. Then we adapt the game into this direction, to make it even more fun. The players' opinion has always been important to us, Starcraft and Brood War have made fundamental changes during beta and even after release. The final version of Sc2 could be vastly different from what you have played so far.

Q: What would be the greatest differences to SCI at the time being?
A: Above all, mobility. Thanks to the new devices of transportation, all factions are more flexible and more mobile.

Q: By the way. Why did you change Zerg's Nydus Channel? When we played the aliens the first time, we have a giant worm dig behind the enemy lines to spew out troops there. Now we can only build a building that look like a worm. The original one was way cooler!
A: Right, but it caused technical issues. We had difficulties with its looks and its control. It would have been lots of efforts to get it right. Also, the worm didn't work out well in terms of balance. Therefore he won't make it in, at least not into the first episode of Sc II, Wings of Liberty. After that we will consider what we can do with him in future. We still talk alot about him.

Q: Can your allies use the Nydus channel?

A: At the moment, no. We decided only recently which abilities should affect your allies. The Nydus channel is not on that list. But it's not excluded that we change our mind. What's your thought?

Q: It would be an interesting tactical option at least. Why don't you try it?
A: Okay.

Q: But let's move on. Is there a second fundamental difference to SC I?
A: Yes, terrain plays a more important role now, as it offers more tactical possibilities, despite simply ones. But this is the appeal of Starcraft: Since it's so fast, even tiny details can have huge effects. For example, it's now [even] more beneficial to place troops on high ground. Also there are units like the Reaper that can just jump over cliffs. Or the Viking that transforms from Mech to Flyer. You can also hide ground troops behind some objects. These fresh tactics help to enliven the battlefield.

Q: Right, in the first part, you could only cross cliffs with flying units, plateau bases were therefore better protected. Since we just touched this topic: How do units benefit from being placed on high ground?
A: You cannot see them from low ground. At least as long as you do not use spotters, flyers or special talents, like the Terran scan. This can be a huge advantage, especially for Terran with their mighty Siege Tanks: As long as the enemy does not reveal them, they can blow him into pieces without resistance. Zerg profit the least from height advantage, since their ground range units do not fire very far. But with the Overlord and the Overseer they field two very good spotters. Apart from this, height differences have no effect. In SCI, there was a chance that units on the lowground would miss enemies on high ground. We removed this percentage since we do not like chance elements. The players ought to know exactly what advantage they have. And how to counter it.

Q: We are under the impression that there is more Micro in Sc2 than in part one. That is: We have to click more.
A: That's right, there is a lot of Micromanagement at the time being. If it stays that way depends ultimately on the beta test. Besides this, we have occupied ourselves extensively with Micro and Macromanagement - what the player must manage on a small scale, and what he can manage on a large scale - in the past months. Right now you have to do a lot by hand. For example, you trigger the Stalker's blink. Or you burrow and unburrow Roaches. Or you impede ground troups with the Disruptor's force field. This leads to a lot of Micromanagement, more than in SC1. Therefore, Sc2 plays out in a very complex way, especially towards the end of a match. But Macro should still stay important. Whoever does not cherish Micro can still earn victories. Especially by focussing on establishing a strong economy and then overrunning your foe with a superior army.

Q: Apropos huge armies. In comparison to its predecessor, you are allowed to select many more units in Sc2. And that's great. But still, some game concepts seem antiquated, for example the 3D camera that does not zoom out very far. Or the production queue that can only hold five units. Why did you change unit selection but kept the other elements the

same?

A: There is a quite obvious reason for the camera position. I am not a big fan of zooming out very far from battles. In other games, this might work out, but not in Starcraft. There is so much Micro that the battles would look confusing if you could zoom out further. Also the atmosphere would get lost - the units would transform into tiny symbols and you couldn't recognise anymore, how diligently they are designed. The feeling of fighting for a distinctive faction would get lost - and just in Starcraft, with its three characteristic races! Zoomed out very far, those battles would degenerate to a feud of ants. This might be appropriate for games like Supreme Commander, which are fully geared towards the zoom function, that have huge maps on which the units traverse very long distances. But Starcraft works differently: It happens faster, matches often last only half an hour. A zoom function simply wouldn't fit in.

Q: And what about production queues?
A: There you see that Sc2 is orientated towards esports. We have to keep a fragile balance: The game should offer comfortable usage, but it should not play by itself, else the challenge would evaporate. Let's see what the Beta testers say about it.

Q: So manual labor instead of automation?
A: Exactly. There is a nice story about this. Back then, I was working on addons to Mechwarrior 2. That's how I know that there was still automatic targetting in an early version: You only had to decide, which weapons to fire in what order, the Computer would guide them to the target. The only thing you had to watch out for was not to overheat. That might even have been interesting, but just for few players. The majority wanted action, and they got it in the end. The same applies to Starcraft: We want the players to go back to their base in order to produce reinforcements. We want them to really take care instead of relying on an automatic process.

Q: That leads us back to the balance between Micro and Macro. Since Blizzcon 2008, you have changed the economy system again. Back then there were already two vespene geysers in each base, but they would shut down for a short time after having collected a certain amount of gas. Therefore you would have to check the status of your source of income frequently, forcing a large amount of Micromanagement. Why this change?
A: Oh dear, we are thinking about how to modify the geysers since forever. We want you to have to manage your economy more. And the geysers would be a perfect start point, since they were quite unspectacular in the past: You sent three workers there, and that's it. So we decided to change the mechanic, which hasn't succeeded thus far. It was extremely hard to balance the new system. Had we decided to regulate the gas supply necessarily by hand, to collect the regular amount of resources, we would have severerly disadvantaged the newer players, since they couldn't afford expensive units like Battle Cruisers and Templar. But just these units have the most appeal to casual players. Therefore, we would have to modify the mechanic in that way, that you still earn enough gas if you leave the geysers to themselves. But then, Micro experts would collect by far more resources and would produce only very mighty units like Carriers and Archons. That would also be unfair. In addition, the constant geyser-checking would become annoying very quickly. We want to reward the players, not

annoy them.

Q: Sounds reasonable. I suppose that's why you have introduced the three new special units and buildings: The Queen of Zerg, the Protoss Dark Pylon, and the Satellite Center of Terran. Each of these new kids has defensive abilities that also affect resource collection.
A: True, the new talents are supposed to breath life into the economic system, for example by giving the players additional resources.

Q: How?
A: In SC1, collecting resources was almost identical for every race. There were small differences, such as Protoss workers being able to resume collecting right after warping in a building. Now we are deepening these differences. Terran can order the MULE-robot thanks to their Satellite Control center, to earn Crystals faster. The Queen offers a new method of production to Zerg. In the predecessor, they had to construct additional Hatcheries to mass-produce. Now they can build Queen alternatively to increase their number of larvae, and thus need less Hatcheries. However, the Queen's ability to spawn larvae requires a lot of Micro. The player therefore has to decide, whether to spend time on this or rather to construct additional Hatcheries. The races therefore do not only play differently, they also have more strategical options.

Q: Since Blizzcon, you have changed many other things. Aren't you frustrated about designing new game-content that gets scrapped again after a few months?
A: Hell, no! We have been doing this since years! It was always Blizzard's philosophy to try things. In Sc2 we just started early with announcing units and abilities. Wc3 went through just the same process. Admittedly, maybe it's a bit more serious with SC2. But that's how it works: We develop a game, then we change it. And then we change it again. And again. That's how we give the game the fine tuning. Of course many pieces of content accumulate that we cannot use at the moment, since they work reasonably well, but simply not great. I love that we are this flexible. We owe this to our technicians who have constructed such an outstanding engine. To rework a unit completely takes 2-3 hours at max.

Q: That causes the official website of SC2 to list many units and abilities that are long outdated.
A: I know. The main reason being that we have told too much right from the start. Afterwards there were way too many changes to keep track. That also applies to the fan sites. Anyone who sees the game at a convention and not at the next one has missed a heap of changes already. That's simply how the decision process works: We can decide freely at any time what we change, in order to create a great game in the end. During the Beta test we will proceed in the same fashion. If the websites cannot keep track with this, so be it.

Q: Among the units that are wrongly depicted on the website it the Protoss Mothership. There, the old special abilities are listed: the time bomb and the planet breaker. By now, the Mothership rather serves as a support unit that cloaks nearby troops and buildings and can teleport from building to building, instead as a super weapon. Why did you change its role this much?

A: When we announced SC2 in South Korea, the units were of course not balanced yet. We just wanted to present cool abilities, among them the Mothership. We thought: "Hey, a super weapon that knocks everything out! Let's show that!" But when the tests began, we rather thought "Oh, a super weapon that knocks everything out. Not good."

Q: Thus you nerfed it.
A: It just didn't feel good. Now, the Mothership is a vital supporter and a guardian for bases. It might still have the Vortex ability, with which it sucks in entire armies. But now it's weaker and resembles the Stasis ability from SC1: You do not destroy the sucked-in units, you just disable them. Shortly after, they reappear. This opens up interesting tactical choices. If you attack with 12 Cruisers and 6 get sucked in - do you run? Do you fight with six? Do you also send them into the Vortex to protect them from harm? With the Vortex, you can also seal narrow passageways. That's what the "new" Protoss excel at, also with the Disruptor's force field or the Templar's Psi-Storm. By those, Protoss prevent to have their small number armies surrounded.

Q: One of the units that was changed the most during the past two years was the Thor Warmech of Terran. Recently you could still reconstruct it after it was destroyed. Why did you remove this possibility?
A: In principle it was a cool idea: If the Thor was destroyed, you could spend 200 Gas to activate its repair system. After some time, it would get back up. During reconstruction, all enemies would see where the wreck was and could attack it, in order to knock out the Thor for good. The problem was: This tactic was essentially meaningless. Frequently the Thor would die within the enemy base, so you couldn't save him. Or he died within the own base. And reconstructing him there was too cheap and too simply. Therefore we removed this ability and gave him the particle cannon ability, which he used to pulverize ground troops. Let's see if that works.

Q: In paris we noticed that the AI opponents play extremely strong at the highest difficulty setting. Are they cheating?
A: Yes, on the highest setting "insane", the AI profits from additional resources. On all other settings, the opponents do not cheat. On the 2nd highest level "hard" they act as smart as on the highest, simply without the added resources. This is a notable improvement compared to the first game. As in many other RTS titles, the AI in SC1 would see the entire map and would know exactly where the player's units and buildings were. In part 2, this does not hold anymore. The AI opponents have to send out scouts to find the players. Only when they find out, what the opponents are building, they adapt their tactics. If you hide units from the AI - on hills or behind bushes - you gain an advantage.

Q: As we are speaking about scouting: On the multiplayer maps, there are neutral observation posts. If you place a units next to them, the fog of war is lifted within a large radius around it. Do you plan to introduce more buildings that can be conquered?
A: Not yet, but we are thinking about it. There are already the destructible rocks that block narrow passageways. And the bushes that block line of sight. And the yellow Crystals that provide additional resources. All of this is fairly simple but enriches the game. If we find any

similarily uncomplicated elements, we introduce them.

Q: Will there be night battles or weather effects in Multiplayer mode?
A: We are considering it in any case! Weather effects are possible and we are even testing the day-night cycle at the moment. I am worried, however, if everything is easily discernible at night. In the battles, many units clash that have varying size, from the tiny zergling to the gigantic Battle Cruiser. Also, the speed of the game is extremely fast, a bunch of things are happening with rapid speed.

Q: For example?
A: A ghost kills a Marine in a single shot with his snipe ability, a Hellion takes two fire blows for a Zergling. We even adapted lighting and colours on the multiplayer maps in order to make the units more discernable despite the high speed. At night, 30 Zerglings that storm across planet Shakuras could look like a purple blob. Still, we are trying out the changing times of day. But I wouldn't be surprised if they are taken out again.

Q: But the day-night cycle and the weather effects wouldn't have any gameplay effects?
A: We talked about it, and even tested it, but the answer's: No. We do not want maps with differing rules. Just imagine a snowy area in which ground troops move more slowly. That would completely revert the balance. The Zerg would suffer a lot, since they are highly dependant on their speed. Or imagine rainy maps, on which the sight-range of flying units is reduced. The balance would be shaky and we would have to rebalance the races just because of the stupid rain. That might be an interesting idea for the future, but at the moment we don't want it.

Q: All maps we have seen so far were symmetrical. Will there be asymmetrical ones at release?
A: Of course. In Sc1 there were also maps with better or worse starting positions, e.g. Lost Temple. If we will use these asymmetrical maps for the automatic matchmaking on bnet we don't know yet. But it would be unfair to start at a bad spot in a random game. Nobody should enter a game and begin cursing: "Damn it, I play Zerg and I spawned at bottom right - I'm outta here". Therefore, most of the maps should turn out to be symmetrical. We still try to slightly diversify the starting positions. For example, players could start closer to an observation post than others.

Q: Do you think it's sensible to release a game during the world-wide economic crisis that will definitely ruin the South Korean economy, since the entire population will stay at home and play?
A: *laughs* Hah, I can even answer this! I think people are smart enough to decide when they can play and when not. You will also be able to play Sc2 very cheaply in South Korea, in PC Bangs. I even read that the first Starcraft stimulated the Korean economy to such an extent that they could overcome an economic crisis. I don't know if that's true - but I read it in a book! Let's see how Sc2 works out on the Korean market. But I am sure, all will be good.

Q: What a great cliché as a finisher. Thank you for the interview.