

How to Improve at Age of Empires Online

By BboyProfessor

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[X] Event Log

05/07/2013 Update: Decided to establish a PVP guide for new and advanced players who want to improve.

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Last updated: 05/072013

Created By: BboyProfessor

For: Those in the community who play Age of Empires Online

[i] Introduction

Age of Empires Online is a history-based real-time strategy PC game.

[i.01] What this document is about

This document aims at giving all players the opportunity to improve their game through a compilation of RTS guidelines, tips, advice, and experiences I have acquired since I started playing pvp in AOEO. We all start out as newbies, from the day we came out of our mother's wombs, so everyone technically starts out from just a zygote (fertilized egg – cough cough, I'm a microbiologist). Nevertheless, following this advice has allowed me to defeat some of the top 100, and thus this content should help any player increase their skill level likewise.

This document is not about current strategies or trends; it's about improving the aspects of game-play that apply to any player despite current strategies or trends. To clarify, this document will give you the tools necessary to *improve* as a player, not simply to get you to win more as fast as possible.

This guide is about much more than learning to win as fast as possible and as often as possible, this guide teaches you how to improve the core aspects of what it means to be a gamer. Instead of relying on throwing solid players off to win, this guide can provide you the foundation you need to start becoming a solid player the cheesers try to take games off of. If your goal is to become more skilled as efficiently as possible, to become more solid of a player, then this is a great guide for you.

Please note that you will receive from this document what you put into it. If you practice hard and put great amounts of effort into following this document, you will reap benefits proportional to your efforts. From here on winning shouldn't be your focus. I can play ten games against my friend Eaglry and lose every single game in a convincing manner. However, the win or loss alone isn't the only thing determines a success or a failure. You shouldn't be reading this to win more. If that is your mindset, then your mindset is a poor one. You need to be reading this with a willingness to learn and grow. Your goal should be to grow. The thing about growing is that it often times hurts. In order for you to become something new, you have to press outside of your current boundaries until you become used to your uncomfortable state, and the new distance you traveled becomes your current boundary once again. I know that whenever I play someone I have a chance to learn something that I never have known before, and losses do not bother me. The losses don't bother me because my goal was never to win more games. Your goals affect both your actions and your reactions, and in order to make any use of this document you must have the correct mindset and goals.

[i.02] Defining Goals and How to Achieve Them

You're never going to get anywhere if you don't know where you're going. Similarly, you'll never get to where you're going if you don't know how to get there. In order to achieve a goal, you must first of all have a goal.

Now, in order for your goal to be achievable it has to be measurable in some way. I can measure my goal of "improving" by taking a look at the post-game stats after a pvp match. It is absolutely key that whichever goal you choose can be both qualitatively and quantitatively measurable in some way. Having a measurable goal allows you to take pragmatic steps to achieving your goal, which is in reality the only way anything is ever achieved; by taking the necessary steps to do so.

You cannot have an arbitrary goal of "I just want to improve my game." Imagine if a professional Baseball player had an overall goal of "playing the game better". If this Baseball player's whole mindset revolved around getting better he would end up chasing an arbitrary sentence without any real direction, thus wasting all his effort until he eventually gives up out of frustration. Now imagine if this Baseball player focused his mind on hitting successive line-drives over the head of the shortstop between left and middle field, allowing him to easily get onto first base. Since his goal is precise (the opposite of vague) it's easy to imagine the sort of realistic and achievable steps he can take in order to accomplish his task. He'll focus on aspects of allowing his bat to connect with the ball against a wide variety of pitches, as well as practice the art of aiming where your strike sends the ball to. He can also focus on practicing sprints to be able to get to first base as quickly as possible. If you have a clearly defined (often numerical) goal in mind it becomes possible to come up with fruitful steps to achieve that goal.

[i.03] Thoughts on Different Ways of Learning

Everyone has a personal preference on how to learn. It's true that if a person learns something on their own they tend to learn it ten times better, than if they were taught by someone else. My progress has developed rather faster than my peers who started at the same time as me because I figure things out as soon as possible why and why not certain decisions are made. Many people can only learn so much before they hit a wall because they have not developed the skill of learning complicated, intricate skills or ideas on their own. I believe that a person's tendency to perform at a high level of competitiveness in any field of interests involves the ability to continually learn and improve on their own.

Are mentors a wasteful resource then? No. How about a third-party spectator? Or what about a friendly opponent or clan you spar with? Information and philosophies communicate between parties that can be rather beneficial and useful. There is no hinder to learning from someone else. Rather, the dependence on someone to give you advice (or even assistance in 2v2) will not aid you in a 1v1 game by yourself. Thus, my main point is to lead you in the direction of teaching yourself, finding your own journey and adventure, rather than just following the footsteps of someone else.

[i.04] You Suck

You suck. There is a mindset you need to have in order to grow.

The thing is, in any highly competitive atmosphere or industry, the measure of skill between the individual percentages can be graphed out non-linearly; as people are ranked higher they become exponentially better than everyone else. This is true in any highly competitive field. You can think of it like this: it is more probable that any given person will be very unskilled, therefore the more people you have in a population the more likely it is for a few highly skilled people to arise. Once you have a good idea about how much you suck, then it becomes possible for you to see the differences between your play, and play from top tier players. Once you can see the differences in play, you can start to think of ways to breach that gap!

Consider this analogy: the people in the top 10% of the AOEO community are ten times better than the people in the top 50%. The people in the top 1% are 10 times better than the people in the top 10%. The people in the top .01% are 1000 times better than the people in the top 1%. This might sound strange if it's the first time you've heard it, but in reality it rings truer than you'd think.

It can be slightly difficult to realize how much you really do suck. Some people realize it by watching a VOD (video on demand) of a professional player, and when they try to mimic all the actions they realize how much skill is involved. Other people just have some sort of vague natural appreciation for the pros. Though I feel a great way to gain this appreciation is to purchase a private lesson from a high level player. Seeking a lesson from a high level player is an interactive, hands-on, first person experience of how much you truly do suck compared to a high-level player. This is just about the only thing I recommend purchasing a lesson for. However in rare cases sometimes purchasing a lesson from a higher level player can benefit you in learning a lot of information by getting it all quickly from a convenient source -the teacher!

I had a mentor, PF2K who occasionally gave me lessons. Since we all start out the same (without much RTS experience), he knew the necessary steps to become a top 100 player. To begin with, I wasn't sure exactly how I could improve my game play; otherwise, I just felt too slow to keep up against other players. He quickly identified with me the fact I did not utilize hot-keys, which brought out the major underlying flaws in my play, and, ultimately, he could quickly sense that I developed a great appreciation for the skill it takes to compete at a higher level play. Upon this realization, I was able to clearly see what I lacked and started working on fixing those discrepancies asap.

So the moral of the story is: be humble and keep an open mind.

[i.05] Positive Mindset

Having a positive mindset is important. The previous section isn't to make you feel terrible, or lowly, but simply to humble you. Not having a positive mindset will prevent you from seeing your own mistakes, force you to misjudge situations, and overall lessen your experience while playing Age of Empires Online (or any RTS genre) competitively.

So what is a positive mindset? A positive mindset is one that is more optimistic than anything else, in my opinion. You want to trust that if you practice efficiently, you'll improve efficiently. If you play better than your opponent, you'll win the match. There's no reason to rage and no reason to become depressed. This is truly just a game, and all that anyone can do is everything in their ability to improve as best as possible.

The killer of most players I know is rage. This rage comes from losing matches where they believe they played better than their opponent, or think their opponent doesn't deserve to win. It's important to understand that unless your opponent was cheating, if they won they played better than you in some way! This is a good thing! If AOEO allowed a player who played worse to win, then the game would be imbalanced, which it is not. This means that no matter what, if you lose you have something to learn. I find this very comforting and this fact helps me to cope with all of the losses I encounter.

[1] General Guideline and Terminology

[1.01] Terminology:

There are some definitions that everyone must understand in order for the ideas of this document to be properly understood by the reader.

Mechanics - The ability the player has to translate what they want to happen in the game into the necessary actions via user-interface.

Macro - Building, constructing, or queuing the correct things at the correct times and in the correct locations.

Micro - The orders given to any individual unit (or moving building) during game play.

This includes walk-in commands, as well as attack move, stand ground, and any actions ([un]/packing) or rites performed.

Essentially, you need good macro to have the units/structures/abilities to micro. In order to macro or micro, you need the mechanics to input actions through the user-interface.

Most people have the basic mechanical skills necessary to play the game at a basic level, so I recommend focusing on nailing down your macro. Once your macro is at an acceptable level, you should then work on mechanics. This is because you can't really work on your mechanics first if you don't know what to input into the game in the first place! Lastly, you can focus on the subtleties of micro.

“Good” Mechanics - How well you control your game, move and attack with units (micro), and manage your build (macro) are examples of good, solid mechanics. Mechanics are the basic skills of AOEO. This includes using your mouse and keyboard accurately and efficiently, spending your resources and using hotkeys instead of clicking. Mechanics should be improved first and foremost, as these skills stay the same, no matter how the 'Knowledge' (build orders and trends of play) shifts.

Knowledge - Understanding of the game is vitally important in learning how to play. The basics of the game are simple, but it will take a long time to master.

Information - Even with great mechanics and a profound knowledge of the game, you cannot become really good without learning how to obtain and interpret information in real-time.

These three factors are limited by each other. Knowledge will have no meaning if you do not know how to put it into practice mechanically. Mechanics are pointless if your information on the situation is incomplete and you do not know what to do or what to expect. Information only helps if you have experience in what it means and how to obtain it.

[1.02] General Guidelines:

Macro

Macro is the most important part of game-play and the first part you should focus on. With practice, Macro should become an almost subconscious action. The way to this is repetition.

Here is a basic checklist *recommended to new players*. Later you will add more to this as your play become more advanced.

1. Keep your resources low - Unspent resources are useless; spend them! Time spent gathering resources that aren't used is lost time.
2. Check your resources on the top of the screen - Make sure you can always produce more units.
3. Constantly produce villagers - This is particularly important in the early- to mid-game. You need to keep expanding your economy. There are exceptions to this rule, but usually they're only relevant for very high level players.
4. Constantly produce units and manage a good military composition - Make sure you minimize as much idle queue time in your production buildings as possible.

The things in this list may seem simple, but it is easy to forget them when you are controlling several groups of units in different places as well as thinking about several other things. These four things should be second nature to you, so that you should not have to think about doing them. The way to do this effectively is to learn how to use hotkeys (especially for production buildings), and to learn the shortcuts for units and upgrades.

Associative Response

This is a really easy way to improve your macro. This works in way of association, WHEN x → THEN y. Some examples include:

- When you build a unit: Check and manage your resources (avoid floating resources). Then you will see if you have enough supply for the next round of units – this means you frequently must reallocate your villagers to gather resources at different times and circumstances depending on the demand.
- When you scout a barracks (produces infantry), start making anti-infantry units. Likewise, do the same with archery range and stables.

Controlling Units (Micro)

Having good micro can be the difference between winning and losing a battle. Apart from having accurate, quick and precise mouse movement there are some techniques that set better players apart.

Here are some basic techniques for good micro control:

1. Attack-Move - (pressing A and then clicking on the ground) will make the units attack any enemy units or building in that path. In most situations, this is preferred to just moving your units, since they won't fight back while on their way to your selected destination.
2. Multiple Unit Groups - allows for better army control. On the contrary, to have all units in one group is called "One-Control-Group-Syndrome".
3. Queuing Commands - using SHIFT will queue commands for a unit. For example you can tell a villager to construct a building and shift click a mineral: this will issue the command to gather a resource after the building has been constructed. You can also use shift command to focus fire enemies in a certain order, i.e. commanding a slinger to shift click on its anti-ranged units (like bowmen) one by one will cause them focus fire them down.

Build Orders

The build orders are the basic building block of AOEO strategy. You can, of course, improvise, but unless you have practiced a build beforehand, it won't be very fast or efficient. A build order is a way to start the game and transition into the mid-game. From that point on its generally hard to have a precise plan on when to build something, and a player must instead rely on a more general strategy when deciding what to do.

The goal of most build orders is to get an early lead, so you can play the rest of the game from an advantage. Some build orders are designed to win the game directly, but these are highly risky, because if you don't win outright, you are generally too far behind in Tech or Economy to recover.

It's vital to understand and practice a build order beforehand to smooth out any gaps in it.

- Study the build order to understand how it's meant to be used.
- Repeat the build order in single player (no AI) until you know it by heart.
- Learn to execute the build under pressure.

Speed

Increasing the speed of your game is not just a matter of spamming buttons fast. APM does not equal speed.

- Know the next thing you are going to do. You cannot play fast if you don't know your next action.
- Speed will come with repetition; practice a build or a match-up over and over.
- You have to push yourself to play fast until that becomes routine; then you can push yourself even more!

Knowledge

Knowledge is another big part of gameplay. It is the strategic and tactical knowledge that wins or loses a game. The player with the most experience is always at an advantage. It's a lot harder having to react to something completely new or unexpected.

The basic knowledge and understanding of the units and abilities of each race is what most players learn first. Later comes the different strategies and tactics used by players. Start by learning some of the most common strategies in each match-up.

Timing windows

Timing windows (or timing attacks) are in a build when it is good to attack because you generally have an edge over the opponent. Knowing your build gives you an indication on when to attack and when to be passive.

By studying some of your opponents builds you will learn about what times you should be prepared for certain attacks.

Analyzing Replays

Analyzing replays is different from just watching them. You have to determine if the actions you took were good or bad, and if there were alternatives that would have turned out better. At the least, you should watch replays of the matches you lose once. This is to determine the reasons you lost, and what to improve in the future. Possible reasons for a loss include:

- Mechanics - Did you execute the build incorrectly?
- Knowledge - Did you not know how to counter the build you faced?
- Information - Did you fail to scout that your opponent was making a particular unit (for example, Banshees)?

Pro Replays

Watching replays or VODs of professional players is a great way to learn about the game, and is vital to your improvement. If possible, start by watching from the view of the player only. Make sure to pause at key moments in the game and consider what you would do in this situation. Then you can compare your decision to the pro's, and see which would have been more beneficial. Afterward, you can watch the replay in full view, and learn if your actions were correct and why. This way you will train yourself to make the correct decisions based on limited information.

Information

Information is a complement to knowledge; unless you have the knowledge to interpret it, the information is of no use. Obtaining information about your opponent will make you better prepared for an attack. Denying information to your opponent gives you the opportunity of an unexpected attack or different unit composition.

Early Scouting

With experience you will learn how to react to these situations to gain an advantage over your opponent.

Mind Games

The use of mind games is an advanced tactic, where you show a move or a piece of Tech to your opponent, while opting for something else. Hopefully, this will force your opponent to over-react or leave him with a unit composition which is not optimal for taking on your own.

[2] Improving your Macro

First and foremost I need to explain the necessity in choosing a singular civilization and sticking with it. This guide is about improving in an efficient manner, and if you want to play all six races, or perhaps more than one, then you will be unable to improve in as an efficient of a manner as necessary to be a competitive player. If you wish to play random as a competitive player, I still say the only way to start playing is by playing a single civilization. No if's, and's, or but's about it.

[2.01] My Philosophy

Having good macro is the most integral component of playing AOEO, by far. Mechanics are truly the most important thing in being able to play well, but in reality if you are reading this you probably possess the means to type and use a mouse; you have the basic mechanics needed to have both basic macro and micro. As such, I advise just working on macro first! Luckily macro is the easiest thing of all to improve (and arguably the most important). Macro is defined to be "Building, constructing, or queuing the correct things at the correct times and in the correct locations". In order to accomplish this task you are going to need the following:

1. An overall game plan or goal.
2. The finesse and familiarity with the plan or goal to execute it properly.
3. The experience to make slight adaptations and compromises needed to execute a build under the pressure of an opponent.

#1) Number one can refer to your "build". Your build encompasses both your opening, mid-game, and often times a loose and flexible end-game plan. A build can be as simple as a set of numbers detailing when to build what for the early game, a clear objective for the mid-game, and a follow-up for the end-game. If a player knows very little of Age of Empires Online, then it is impossible to learn all the popular builds all at once, and thus I now tell you as the reader that if you want to improve quickly, you need to focus on a single build at a time.

The reason I emphasize focusing on one build at a time is because the goal in doing so is not to simply learn your build, but to learn to macro. If you over-complicate step one (an overall game plan or goal) then you'll have an impossible time getting down step two or three. So, if you simplify step one by learning a single plan, you can much easier learn how to macro efficiently. Once you learn to macro efficiently you can apply that knowledge to any build, thus making all subsequent builds extremely easy to learn and apply during gameplay.

#2) Number 2 states you need to be able to execute. The simplest of execution involves the production of villagers and production facilities, houses, and necessary requirements to raise your supply cap.

Clarification: By a single build at a time, I actually mean one build in one match-up at once. Once you're comfortable executing the build properly with consistency against a live opponent, then move onto another build in another match-up. Once you have three builds going (one for each match-up) then stick with those three until you can execute those three perfectly you can start messing with lots of other build orders. For the longest time I only had one build per match up! Only now that I've entered the competitive field have I taken in multiple builds per match-up.

[2.02] How to choose your build

Hands down, the best builds for people to improve with are ones that increase the chances for learning moments to happen. It is my belief that these builds are ones that get the improving player a lot of information, are well-documented in the PVP section of the ageofempiresonline.com forums.

I don't want to focus on current trends or strategies. Just be familiar with fast second town centers, rushing from aggressive civilizations, and perhaps going all-out offensive in small maps.

[2.03] How to refine your build

In order to refine your build you can optionally set up some sort of benchmark or means to compare your play to what is "supposed" to happen. The best way to do this is to find a replay of a top pvp player executing your build. Now, you go ahead and execute the build yourself in a practice session, with no pressure, and save the replay. Once you have both of these replays (a VOD of a professional player instead of a replay can also work wonderfully) you have an easy way to check and see if you did things right!

Common macro-oriented mistakes that players make are: not having consistent villager production; forgetting to queue in unit for amounts of time; making too many villagers (due to the population limit); not constructing a building at the correct time, et cetra.

Quick note : if you don't know when too many villagers are too many, don't worry. It's much better for low-level players to just constantly be making worker units and make too many, than to not make enough. So just make a bunch and try to make them all game. Once you realize without a doubt that you simply have too many workers, then you can try to take note of exactly when too many was too many. I won't tell you how many is too many, because like I said, it's much better you both learn on your own, and much better to make too many than to make not enough. Some players argue 70+ is sufficient, while many top notch players have between 80 to 100 +/- 5.

Another common mistake would be not constantly producing fighting units for your army. Most builds call for this to happen, and if you can't you didn't construct what you needed and when you needed it!

Another common mistake is not being able to spend your resources fast enough. This often happens to newer players that start making enough worker units, but have a habit of spending an inferior income. If you cannot spend your money fast enough you didn't create enough production facilities ahead of time!

One great exercise to undergo is to load up a replay of a professional performing an interesting build you have chosen. Make sure you have never seen this replay before ever. After the game starts to pick up (scouting information is starting to be gained around the 2-4 minute mark), pause very frequently, every 20-30 seconds or so. During the pause, take a look at the player you want to imitate in such a situation. If you were in this situation, what would you do? Try and figure out the best choices to make within the next 20-30 seconds, and watch, then pause again. Compare what that player did to what you would have done. It's important to do this in order to quickly and efficiently rule out bad decisions that you more than likely would have made yourself.

In order to mimic professional players you can't simply place the right buildings when they did; you have to try to understand the decision making and the strategies and reactions that the professional players have. If you can do this then you will save yourself a lot of unnecessary practice and toil, thus improving your game quickly and efficiently by learning what other far more skilled than you have already figured out.

Often times a player without much experience won't be able to accurately figure out what the professional's decisions are and why they were made just from a replay. If this is the case, you can figure things out on your own. Every build that a professional player executes has a specific purpose and an overall goal in mind. First thing first is to try and figure out what the overall method of winning is. Is the pro planning on crippling the enemy early on to solidify a large lead and win later on the in the game? Is he trying to play a defensive style and slowly choke the opponent to death by containing them? Is that high-leveled player trying to exploit some sort of timing window where the enemy is weak during build execution? If you can understand the overall method of gaining an advantage of a build the pro is using, understanding how to play the game properly because much easier of a task.

How to Analyze your Replays

You should be analyzing every single game you have played with a keen analysis on flaws and areas of improvement. You must identify what you can do better, what mistakes you made, and how to avoid them in the future. If you skip this step you'll likely improve little to none and just waste your time playing games. Practicing is not only about quantity, but quality as well.

Third Person View:

If you can find a streamer who is willing to cast your game from spectator mode from the arena, it can often time become a bit easier to identify on what the true issues keeping you from being a better really are. For some reason if I watch a replay knowing that it was me playing, I'll think about what I was thinking in game, look at similar locations as I did, and my learning ability while watching declines sharply because I'm not in the correct mindset. Try to distance yourself from the replay. If you're angry from your ladder match, then you must take a break before hitting the search match button! Come back once you cool off, accept that the loss is your own fault and that you now have a wonderful opportunity to learn from your mistakes. There's no reason to stay angry or get down on yourself!

You'll learn best if you can try to spend as much focus on figuring out how to best spend your time. This means you want to find what your problems in your play are and figure out how to solve these problems. This task can be quite daunting, and hopefully the link above on analyzing replays can help! Many people turn to one on one coaching for assistance, but trust me: I've never purchased lessons and I myself have improved quite a bit. However I do have high level friends that give me some excellent advice; sometimes that third person perspective from someone that's truly a third person (and knows what the hell they are talking about) can help tremendously.

[2.04] Common pitfalls in improving macro

The most common pitfall I know of to improving your macro is to think your macro is fine. As Damien Rice says "It's easy to grow when you know that you just don't know." If you know you suck it's easy to see that differs from you and people that don't suck. If you can see the difference you should be able to figure out how to cross that gap. So be humble.

Just because you consistently win against your friends or against the random players doesn't mean you're playing right. In order to play right as a growing newbie you must play like those that are not a newbie. As a new player you cannot be devising your own entirely new and unique builds; you just don't have the skills or understanding of the game necessary to make anything that can compete at the top level. Stick to mimicking the pros.

With this in mind it may actually be difficult to see how a properly executed build should crush a non-standard newbie player. If you can get your hands on a replay of a good player crushing a lower-tier player with the build you are trying to learn that replay will be extremely valuable! Alternatively you can always ask for help in the ageofempiresonline.com forums!

Forgetting to macro during fights results in "floating resources". Hearing a lot of chatter and discussion about multitasking and "macro" is pretty common. The truth about high-level multitasking is that it's near bull-shit. It is impossible to do more than one task at a time in AOEO. So what good players do is they **cycle** through different actions, perform one at a time but shift between two actions to progress each one equally. For example in early game when controlling a scouting worker, you jump back to your base to construct a build, and then back to the worker. The crux of this is to prioritize where to focus your attention at any given time. Very good players nearly always focus their attention at the place in the game where it needs it the most. Just realize that if two things are going on and you're still refining your multitasking capabilities that you need to pick the most important decision, and do it. Often times when learning the most important decision you can make at the time is to simply do something; if you don't know which action you should currently do between perhaps a small battle and placing a barracks, then you better not stand there and do nothing! Do something in the least, not nothing. Often times the best decision is to simply make a decision while still learning to multitask properly.

[3] Improving your Micro

[3.01] Distinction between basic and advanced micro

The topic of micro should be divided into two sections. This is because there is a specific amount of micro you can do and benefit greatly in your play, while you are still learning your mechanics and/or macro. There is also a specific type (or level) of micro that can only be achieved once macro and mechanics are mastered.

[3.02] Micro with bad mechanics

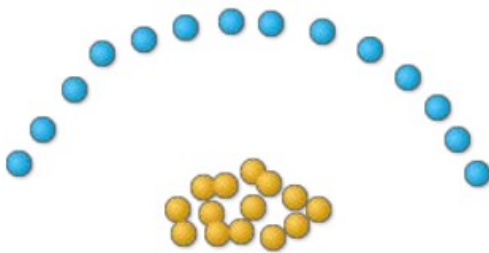
This section is intentionally going to be short. In all honesty you shouldn't be hardly worrying about micro much until your mechanics are extremely crisp. With this in mind, you only need enough micro to ensure that you don't lose the game for stupid reasons. The types of micro you should actually spend some time practicing would include general positioning of your army and basic pull micro.

Go ahead with a friend, and construct some armies and clash them together, each of you practicing what you think you are worse at. If you suck at slinger tagging, practice them! If you suck at spearmen rush micro, practice it! Once you feel comfortable you can just use the in-game circumstances on ladder as general practice of micro and just use the unit tester to hammer out things you feel you really have trouble with.

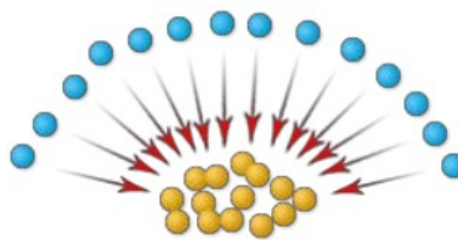
The general positioning of your army is very important. The general positioning of your army includes the formation of your units, and also the location on the map you engage the enemy. This includes during fights and even when no fights are occurring.

Battle Tactics and Unit Formations

A typical arc formation:

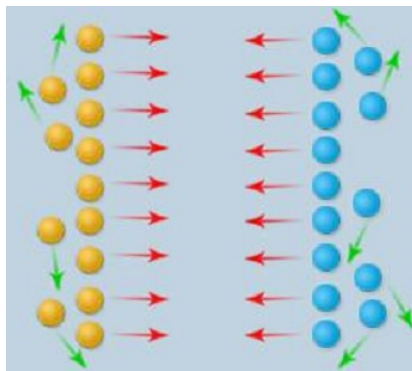


An attack formation:



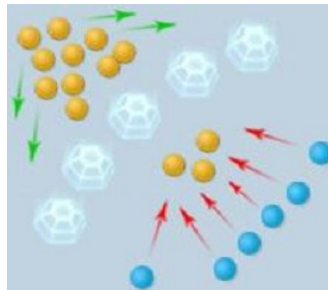
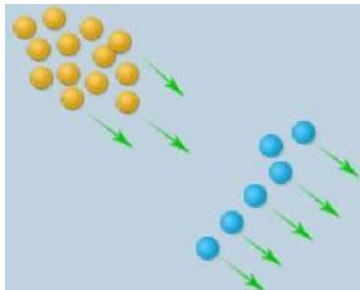
During any engagement you will want to maximize the amount of DPS being dealt to the enemy, at all times. You also want to minimize the amount of DPS that the enemy is dealing you to, at all times. The most simple and effective way to do this is to simply get your army to form a concave around the opposing player's army. If you can achieve a concave you have a few very relevant advantages. First, (assuming the ranged attacks of both armies are near equal) if you have a concave around an enemy army that is bunched up, most if not all of your units will be firing upon the enemy while a small amount of surface area of their army is firing back. Here is a diagram of an army forming an arc over another, and every red arrow represents a unit firing:

Now, the same army that is bunched up will have a very small amount of surface area (units within range of the enemy to fire back) and the resulting fire from the ball army will look like so:



Here is that same diagram, except this you can see which melee units would not be firing in the battle.

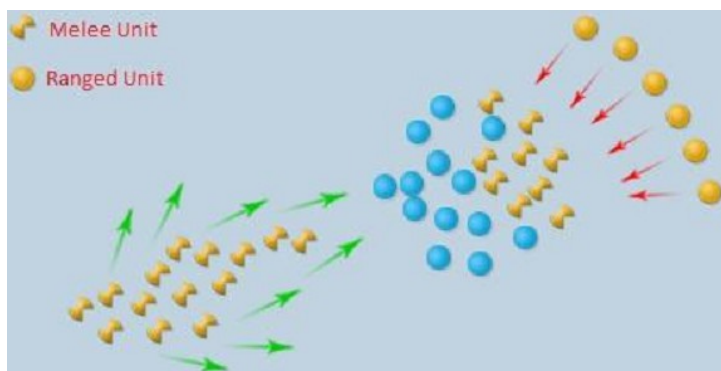
On certain maps with narrow chokes or in your base with good building placement.



During large battles when both armies just line up and shoot, only the first row of each army will be firing as the rest are out of range (assuming both armies have similar range). You can use this to your advantage as infantry by using meat shields! The goal of using meat shields (or tank units) is to minimize the amount of DPS the enemy will be firing at you, and maximize the DPS you will be firing at the enemy. The easiest way to do this is to cast your force fields in a slight arc cutting the enemy army in half, then proceed to back slightly away and re-engage the small force you isolated. This way you face a small amount of the army at once. However, if you do this in-game and forget to back up and re-engage often times the army behind the force fields will still be in range of you, and thusly will negate your force fields from even existing. Here is a quick diagram to show how to properly utilize force fields:

As you can see, the blue army will be engaging a single portion of the yellow army at a time. This allows the blue army to be firing 200% more in this scenario. Assuming it takes 6 shots for one unit to kill another, the blue army will kill off all three trapped yellow units suffering only a single unit loss.

Whenever your opponent engages, it's very important that: 1) their melee units can reach the enemy; 2) your ranged units can all be firing all at once. One of the easiest ways to achieve this is to flank your opponents' army. I recommend having your ranged units attack from one direction, and then go ahead and grab a good sized group of units and hide them somewhere on the side of the map. Then when an engagement happens, you can bring that group of units from the side and attack from the rear or from the side flank. Tactics 101 – got it?



As you can see in that diagram, flanking with another group of units does two things: 1) it puts your army into a position where you have a great concave -a near circle!; 2) prevents the enemy ranged units from kiting away from your entire army. This brings us onto the next topic of simple micro.

Kiting is the act of shooting, retreating a short distance, firing, and repeating.

There isn't a whole lot to say about how to kite. You simply need to familiarize yourself with the timings of both your ranged/siege/naval unit cool downs and possibly the speed of enemy units. Once you do this you can easily issue move and attack commands to try to fire at the enemy while running away.

I was slightly hesitant at adding in this paragraph, but decided to in the long run. Whenever an enemy unit is dealing splash damage to your army, it is best to mitigate this by simply spreading your units apart so that the splash damage dealer can only deal damage to a single unit at a time! This includes spreading units against elephants, champion axemen, champion champions, berzerkers, etc.

Pull micro is a simple form of micro. Pull micro is the act of pulling an injured unit out of range of enemy fire and allowing units with full HP to start taking hits. What this does is it allows your injured unit to continue dealing DPS instead of allowing it to die. Pull micro is very common in infantry match-ups, especially spearmen vs spearmen. Since it requires very little skill it should be done whenever you can spare the APM! Remember that keeping your money down and reinforcing your army is almost always going to be more helpful to winning the game than microing units, so only initiate pull micro when you don't have anything better to do.

[3.03] Micro with good mechanics

Microing with good mechanics becomes much more reflex and muscle memory oriented once the mechanics are nailed down. For newer players (this means almost everyone) they will have to either be thinking about fixing their macro or their mechanics before they can move onto anything else. Thus, this section becomes much more abstract due to the flowing properties of professional micro. Micro with good mechanics isn't something you can train as it comes from experience. Microing with good mechanics should be thought of as an emergent property in a player's actions that only arises once they no longer need to constantly consciously think about macro or their mechanics. Once a player is no longer learning to simply play AOEO, they can finally play against their opponent. Once this happens the split-second decision making and careful care and judgment calls made by high-end players starts to show.

Knowing when to blink forward to pick off a unit or two as the enemy is retreating, and knowing when you can do this without suffering any losses is a hard skill to master with any sort of consistency. Being able to perform successful raids drops with the ability to escape in the nick of time, or knowing just when to perform multi-pronged attacks is very risky because you can tell the other player isn't currently paying attention to the battle, all of these things become available to a player's disposal once their mechanics are refined to the point of being ingrained into muscle memory.

Having extremely good unit control isn't something anyone reading this guide should intentionally strive for. Like the topics previously mentioned before, the things detailed in this section will only come from a great deal of experience and understanding of the game. I feel that every player should figure out the intricacies of this particular micro by experience rather than hearing it from a document, as I honestly don't feel qualified to write much more about this particular section.

[4] Improving your Mechanics

What are mechanics? The performance of a skilled RTS player can be split into two major areas: Mind and body. The mind portion was covered above, and is labeled strategy (although tactics should probably be grouped in mind as well). The remaining body portion is mechanics. In essence, how well you control your hands are mechanics.

Surprise, surprise, I believe improving your mechanics is a mindset. Once you've improved your game sense to the point you know what you should be doing, the first step to improvement is convincing yourself that you can do it. There are no real tricks here, and people who tell you to spam to raise your APM are beyond stupid. It takes a concerted effort, telling yourself "I can play faster", to improve your speed. You will increase your speed in steps; making a conscious effort to play uncomfortably fast for awhile until that becomes routine, and you must again realize that you can play faster.

Mechanics must come after game sense, or you will be producing your units very quickly (in a form of spamming), but the wrong types. If I make a lot of bowmen because they have good DPS, but my opponent makes counter anti-ranged units, such as slingers, then I will most likely lose in an even numbered fight. As I continuously reiterate, I truly believe having good mechanics is a mindset, believing you can micro extremely well and breaking actions down to their most basic fundamentals. Make the appropriate counter-units, know good positions to place your forts and your army, et cetera. Often actions like these seem daunting during a hectic game, but if you break them down to their most basic actions it becomes manageable. Again, once you've mastered this it all becomes subconscious, but at the moment you are trying to improve, it must remain on your mind.

I suppose this is just an elaborate "You can do it" message, but it's true! Mechanics in AOEO, at their very fundamentals, are very simple. We can all play quickly and accurately, you may just sometimes need to be reminded that you can.

Sometimes newer players find mechanics difficult because they are "wasting" clicks on useless actions. Let the unit AI do its work. Newer players often fall into the trap of over-microing every battle, or even worse, watching all the battles. A quick way to become a better player is to realize that you only need to control a battle for a little while to use your main abilities, get a proper flank or positioning set up, or to target their key battle-changing units. Once that has been done, let the unit AI finish the battle while you return to macro. The losses you suffer while not watching your units as the battle trails off will be more than made up by the new units you are getting more often.

Mind and Body as One

Now it's time to bring both together and play to win rather than learn. Experience is the third component of a champion. Every win will be an assurance of your play, while every loss a reminder and learning experience.

There isn't much more to say. At this point I feel like there isn't much people will get from this, but I'm going to post it anyways in hopes that a few people learn to learn. Plus I've had this document open for about two months adding to it bit by bit, so it's time to get rid of it. AOEO is a fairly simple game, both mechanically and strategically. Hopefully you will realize why you aren't improving and how to change.

I want to end by saying that it's alright not to want to improve. Sometimes you just want to play a few games at any level to have fun. If you've already committed to improvement, you might as well know how to get the most out of it.

[4.01] Mouse Control

[4.01.1] Mouse Acceleration and Sensitivity

The idea behind having good mouse control is to be able to accurately click on what you need to, when you need to, as fast as possible. Before you can do this there are a few recommended settings I suggest you learn about. First things I want to talk about how the best place to set your sensitivity slider in AOEO as right at 51%. Percentages with multiples of 5, according to this thread results in pixel loss while moving the mouse. To fix this, set your slider at a percentage that is not evenly divisible by 5, like 51%. 51% on the slider will result in a 1 to 1 ratio of mouse to cursor movement. Note: you should have your Window's sensitivity slider at 6/11.

Next thing I'd like to mention is mouse acceleration. Mouse acceleration is a feature of newer Windows versions that adds in a second variable in determining mouse to cursor movement. The first variable is the distance in which the mouse actually moves; the farther your mouse moves the farther the cursor moves. If you have mouse acceleration on, then a second variable is added as well. This second variable is the speed at which you move your mouse; the faster your mouse moves the farther your cursor moves! This is bad for accuracy while gaming.

Imagine that your mouse cursor is sitting near the bottom left of your screen and needs to instantly jump near the top right. Would it be simpler for your brain to gauge only the distance your hand needs to travel, or the distance that your hand needs to travel along with the speed at which it needs to travel? The answer is that mouse acceleration makes it much harder to gain precise mouse movements during gaming. So we need to turn this darn thing off. If you want a higher sensitivity, then buy a mouse with variable DPI settings. This way you will have no pixel loss when moving your mouse. If you have a mouse reading at a higher sensitivity then your sensitive mouse movements will be highly accurate. If you have a mouse reading at a low sensitivity (i.e. a cheap mouse) and turn up a slider setting, then all the slider is doing is multiplying what your mouse reads by a constant (or a formula if acceleration is on), thus resulting in information loss and inaccurate precision!

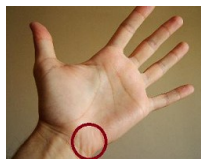
[4.01.2] Keyboard, mouse, and hand positioning

The most important thing about positioning of your peripherals is to be comfortable! So when reading this section just keep in mind that this section is written more so you can understand the different options out there; you don't need to go around and rearrange everything in sight.

Keyboard positioning is most important for how you hit 5a4a3a; how you order attack commands to your army is highly dependent on how your keyboard is positioned. I personally have my keyboard perfectly perpendicular to my direction of focus (parallel to my shoulders), and I hit 5a4a3a with my front three fingers (ring, middle and index) and hit a with my thumb. Be sure that whatever angle and method you choose gives you comfort and accuracy!

How you hit your ctrl button is dependent on how you rest your hand. I hit the ctrl button with the left side of my hand (the little bump right where my pinky connects to my hand), and can reach numbers 1-6 with my left hand while making control groups. Some people prefer to use their right hand to hit the numbers - use whichever you feel is most comfortable. I prefer keeping my hand on my mouse as often as possible.

The way you pivot your hand when using your mouse is very critical. The pivot of your hand is defined to be the stationary point at which the rest of your arm angles itself.



In the above image of a flashdrive, the pivot point is the round silver bit of metal surrounded by black plastic and can be analogous to your mouse hand. This way when you move your hand the muscle movement to hand movement ratio is small, thus resulting in easier to control mouse movements!

There are also a variety of different palm grips you should familiarize yourself with. You should familiarize yourself with the three types of grips. The palm grip usually is a result of a player using their shoulder as their pivot. This is (I'd assume) good for FPS playing. I know though that the palm grip is terrible for RTS play. RTS play benefits from being have to have precise movements, and if your pivot is all the way in your shoulder you will have a pretty hard time making precise movements.

The claw grip is great for quick actuation, but not very flexible. The inflexibility of the claw grip leads me to say that making wide sweeping motions with the cursor will become a bit difficult and require the user to use a high-end mouse with a high DPI setting to be able to effectively reach all points of the screen. It also causes fatigue in the wrist much more so than the other two grips (at least for me).

The fingertip grip supposedly can cause the most fatigue, but I believe it is absolutely the best for RTS gaming. This is because it allows you to place the pivot of your hand in the exact position as shown here:



The advantages of this positioning allows you have the most precise cursor movements, as the only mouse movement you will be doing is moving the mouse with your fingertips. This allows the user to box effectively in any direction, and allows for a very close to the mouse pivot point for a small muscle movement to mouse movement ratio.

[4.01.3] Mouse accuracy and practice games

You can now go ahead and practice being precise! Go ahead and load up a map by yourself and start playing a skirmish game in AOEO. Focus on making very precise movements; when you box your units make the box as small as possible; when you issue commands to your army, try to issue a single command instead of multiple successive ones until you hit the spot you want.

[4.02] Boxing

Boxing is making a drag-selection box over units. You should know where to place the pivot of your mouse movement. If you have this down, then it's easy to understand the most precise way to create a box selection. Dragging your cursor from the top left to the bottom right is the absolute best way to create a box for everyone but the professionals. If you are dragging the cursor towards your pivot, then the muscle movement to cursor movement ratio will get smaller as the cursor goes farther to the bottom right. This is exactly what you want! It means it's easier to end your box selection exactly where you want it if your dragging from the top left to the bottom right.

Whenever you box a unit you should always strive to make as small of a box as possible. If you strive to do this, then you will train yourself to not make excessive mouse movements, thus becoming more precise with your mouse movements. Whenever you see those players spamming and boxing on their workers and they select the whole screen, laugh at them. Laugh at them and realize they are hindering their play more than helping. Whenever you are boxing your workers be sure to create as small of a box as possible!

[4.03] Scrolling

Once you are ready to start heavily focusing on mechanics I suggest you train yourself to not use your mouse to scroll across the map at all. A great way to train yourself to do this, is to simply disable the ability to scroll across the map! Go into your settings and change your resolution to Windowed (Fullscreen), then turn the option for confine mouse cursor (in the controls tab) and set it to Off. This will force you to move your screen with methods other than scrolling with the mouse. After a few practice games you can resume normal play if you feel comfortable using the assigned group keys to quickly jump around.

[4.04] Hotkeys and Control Groups

My rule of thumb is that if you can use a hotkey to do an action, and you use your mouse instead..., then you are being inefficient. With this in mind, every time you can use a hotkey instead of your mouse, use the hotkey! It's as simple as that! Go into your AOEO settings, hit the Hotkey tab, and customize your hotkeys. This will display the current hotkey for everything you would usually click with the mouse!

Here's an example of my hotkeys for the Celts!

[4.05] Minimap Awareness

Minimap awareness is the awareness you have of what is going on in the minimap. It is key to be able to catch whenever you see that dot on the minimap of an enemy raid heading towards your base, or a Norse infantry unit moving on the outskirts to proxy a production facility or watch post. Training yourself to be constantly aware of the minimap is a pretty easy skill to learn, so long as you don't have to think about macro. A strong player will spot any movement on the minimap.

Every time you are doing actions that don't require you to stare at the rest of the screen, you should be playing with the minimap. Literally, anytime you can, you should glance down at the minimap. The only moments you shouldn't be glancing at the minimap is when you are laying down buildings, issuing precise move commands, or microing during a very important battle. Most other actions I can think of require you to just hit a key on the keyboard, which should NOT require your eyes to go astray from the minimap.

A great way to ingrain mini-map awareness into your game is to play without any sound. Did you know the greatest time to harass an opponent is when they won't realize it even exists? This means that during a battle, good opponents will drop a raiding group into your main base to kill off undefended villagers gathering resources. If you don't rely on the sound notification of minimap events, then you will have to rely on the visuals of the minimap to spot such instances. I suggest playing a series of games without any sound or with music on if you are consciously confident on focusing purely on minimap awareness.

[4.06] Tapping

Tapping is the cycle of actions a good player will go through to constantly make sure that all necessary actions are constantly being done. A general production cycle can look like so:

1. Produce villagers (70 to 100 depending on the map)
2. Spend resources (building, producing units, selecting appropriate tech upgrades)
3. Check minimap (for resources, vulnerable raiding targets, positioning of your opponent's army, etc)
4. Issue commands to army/ military units

Tapping like this should happen during every window of timed interval opportunities (let's say every 10-15 seconds). If you constantly cycle like this your army should be constantly active, you should never miss production cycles, you should always be spending your resources (macroing correctly) and should rarely miss anything that appears on the minimap. The benefits of this are immense: harass is much easier to deal with due to seeing it in advance; you can think about other things besides macro (since it should be ingrained into muscle memory at this point); your army is moving around and thus harder for the enemy to see/engage/predict.

Often times you'll see high level players spam a bunch of hotkeys, and their unit queues (top of the screen while playing AOEO) will display in arena's spectator mode. Often this isn't just useless spam; good players do this during step 2. They check all their production facilities to ensure everything they want to be produced is being produced. They also often times check to see how close something is to being completed, so they can prepare to produce the next necessary thing.

Making a mental note and conscious effort to tap like this whenever you don't have something to do is an incredibly helpful habit, though not a very easy habit to solidify. Once you do have this down, your play will benefit immensely. Once this tapping becomes second nature is when you start getting good at AOEO; your mind will finally be free to think about high-level actions and or strategies while your muscle memory takes care of everything else.

[5] Decision Making and Strategy

This section should be the most difficult for me to write. I'm currently still working on my mechanics, and as such I can't really delve too deeply into these categories. Shortly put, only very high level players are able to effectively come up with new strategies, and have consistent and excellent decision making and game sense.

I'll start with decision making. I feel that the best way to improve your decision making is to first rule out decisions you know would not work.

So, keep your mind open to all possibilities, but rule out the moronic decisions. The next step is to simply make decisions during practice. Not sure if decision X will work? Well, then try it. Not sure if this is a good time to attack? Then attack! Don't know if his army will defeat yours? Attack him! Curious to see how that same battle would have went if you had a better position, or he a worse position? Try it out! The best way to learn to make good decisions is to figure out which ones are bad. Practice which engagements are beneficial or which ones are highly risky and may lose you the game!

Good game sense arguably comes from experience. For example, I have solid sense in CvB (celts vs babylon) to where often times I can feel when the opponent just wants to make lancers, so I counter with spearmen champions and gradually horsemen. :D Game sense is an intrinsic understanding of the game developed through repetition and vast knowledge of the current matchup. I doubt there's much of a way to develop good game sense due to the extraordinary amount of time required to develop it, and as such most players just focus on other aspects of their game and let it develop naturally.

Game sense is the ability to subconsciously feel and perceive the plans, actions, and situations your opponent is going to choose or fall into, or try to make your fall into. I suggest not worry about acquiring game sense or a deep understanding of the game and let it come naturally to you, as there are other aspects of playing which need to be perfected with a higher priority before game sense becomes too relevant. Although if you insist, the best way to develop game sense is to look for subtleties in your replays that you can possibly look for in future games.

Similarly, strategies are extremely difficult to create. Hardly anyone ever creates a new and viable strategy besides the professional players, because the chances of randomly stumble onto a legitimate strategy are infinitesimal.

Often times you'll hear people claim that the only thing you should focus on is your "macro", or perhaps they call it "mechanics". The thing is that you cannot solely practice pure macro, pure strategy, or pure mechanics. You should be aiming to start your improvement with a single known strategy at a time, so you can rest assured that the strategy you are practicing is a solid one. This allows you to isolate just your mechanics or macro, meaning that I have actually told you throughout this document to practice both your macro and strategy both at the same time in an equal dose. Failing to properly pace yourself, or failure to start your practice with this simple balance will yield mediocre progress, and slow growth is not what we aim for. We aim for efficient growth!

The only way for those who are not professional players to find new strategies is to closely watch professional players play, and hope you stumble across something noteworthy and unique. So stay active not only in-game, but also in streams and casted videos!

[6 Dealing with Anxiety

[6.01] How it happens

This anxiety can occur for many reasons, most of which boil down to caring too much about one's 1v1 ladder rating. More so than in many other games, the perception in RTSes is that one's performance reflects one's intelligence. With no team mates to blame or fall back on, losing a 1v1 for many feels like a blow to their ego.

Regardless of the reasons for it, anxiety causes a "fight-or-flight response" in the body. Epinephrine (more commonly known as adrenaline) is released, directing blood flow away from the extremities and towards the major muscle groups. In actual danger, this allows you to immediately fight or run to save your life. But when there is no need to do either you are left with cold, trembling hands and feet, as well as an accelerated heart rate and breathing, all for no good reason.

[6.02] How to Deal with It

The tips and methods below are presented in four categories:

- Taking away the symptoms of anxiety.
- Taking away the anxiety itself.
- Taking away the cause of the anxiety.
- Preventing anxiety from occurring.

These four categories have a fair bit of overlap, and are not mutually exclusive. Take what methods you like from each and combine them into something that works for you.

Taking away the symptoms of anxiety

Counteract your cold hands and feet.

- Wear a sweater.
- Wrap up in a blanket.

Get your breathing and heart rate back under control.

- Make a conscious effort to breathe deeply and slowly.

Put the muscles activated by the adrenaline to use.

- Spam APM by repeatedly boxing your workers, etc.
Warm up your fingers and get them used to moving quickly. Don't stay still long enough to tremble.
- Twist a towel really hard.
- Do a set of stretches or push-ups.

Taking away the anxiety itself

Calm yourself down before, during, or after a game.

- Have a cup of tea.
- Have a beer.
This may hinder strategic thinking, but calming your nerves has a higher priority.
- Stay away from (too much) caffeine and sweets.
Caffeine makes the stress response worse, as do the artificial coloring agents in many sweets.

Do something else for a while.

- Take a warm bath or shower beforehand.
- Meditate. This takes a lot of practice and isn't for everyone.
There are plenty of online resources to get you started, from audio files that put you into a meditative state, to breathing exercises and mindfulness courses.
- Play different games for a while.
Play 2v2 or do quests

Set the right mood.

- Listen to non-vocal music.
The melody takes care of your nerves. Vocals would take your focus away from the game. Even if they are in a language you don't understand, your brain recognizes it as language and attempts to decipher it.
Video game soundtracks are one possible source of non-vocal music.
- Turn off the game sound.
-

Learn to control the anxiety.

- This is an advanced technique, and requires learning how to meditate first. It is usually used to manage chronic pain, but also works for anxiety.
First, explore the physical sensation of the anxiety. Figure out which muscle groups are involved in your trembling.
Then, alternatively try to intensify the trembling and then weakening it.
Eventually you will have full control over your anxiety.

Taking away the cause of the anxiety

Change the attitude with which you approach a gaming session so you no longer become anxious.

If you fear losing a game:

- Realize that every loss means you will meet easier opponents.
Any points lost will therefore be easier to win back.
In this way losing may actually benefit your ranking.
- It's normal to lose. Even the pros lose occasionally. Everyone has their moments of ups and downs.
- Losing does not mean you are worse than the other player, nor does winning mean you are better.
- Every game should be considered a win/win situation: either you defeat your opponent, or you learn to be a better player.
- It's not the loss that causes frustration, but handling the loss poorly.
Congratulate your opponent with a gg and leave the computer for a while.
When you get angry, do push-ups, sit-ups, or squats to exhaustion.
After several consecutive losses, watch your replays and take notes, or try a new tactic.
Save your losing replays with a brief description and compare your plays if you lose to the same strategy again.
- Learn to not play to win.
Play to improve your scouting, macro, micro, and multitasking.
Play to have fun!

If you fear for your stats or ranking:

- Spend a few bucks on a second account that nobody knows about.
Your stats will be invisible, in a sense.
- Try to think of laddering simply as practice.
It is not a tournament; there is no money on the line.

If you fear your opponent:

- Play as if they are just the AI.
- Play as if they are someone you are trying to impress with your play.
- Scout a lot, so you can be confident they won't do something unexpected.

If you are insecure about your play:

- Practice your build order and game plan to death.
If you have to think about every little action you won't be confident and won't be able to keep up with the speed of the game. Instead, make everything come naturally.
- Practice against every common strategy.
Your nerves are likely caused by not always knowing what to do; change that.

In short:

- Keep playing; after a few hundred games you won't be anxious anymore about playing the next.
This is an example of overcoming your fears by putting yourself in situations that cause them.
This can be hard at first. Try to press the [Find match] button immediately after a game so you don't have the time to talk yourself out of it.

Preventing anxiety from occurring

Become so deeply focused that there is no room for anxiety. When giving a presentation, if you are constantly thinking of what your next sentence should be, you won't be nervous. So when playing, constantly be thinking of the next step.

- Focus on the map and the match-up while loading.
Decide the build order you will be going for.
- Focus on your build and game plan while playing.
- Don't worry about a misclick, losing a few units, or getting tower rushed.
Focus on what you need to do to move on in the game.
- You can practice focus with just about anything.
Stare intently at a screw in the wall, for example.

Feeling nervous about playing is a bad habit. To prevent bad habits from re-occurring, replace them with good habits.

- Talk to yourself while playing.
Repeat your game plan.
Repeat the mental checklist.
Think out loud about what your opponent is doing and what you should do in response.

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...

These are just some compilations I have acquired over the internet. I hope it helps you as much as it helped me!

-BboyProfessor

Acknowledgments:

I would not have been a better player if it was not for the following people. I want to express my gratitude to them.

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Orktastic
Sir Lineador

And everyone else who has helped me on this journey.
Peace and Godspeed.