FED UP WITH UPKEEP
A loving critique of *Warcraft III*

By: Damon Tabb

To paraphrase a famous quote: The best laid plans of orcs and men often go awry...

While the *upkeep* feature in WC3 is envisioned as a balancing mechanic to discourage players from pursuing a strategy that many consider frustrating, namely "turtling," it's implementation in-game seems heavy-handed and not fully-conceived, stifling rather than encouraging player-driven strategenesis (formation of new strategies).

A few notes about turtling: Turtling describes a strategy in which a player builds up massive defenses in and around his/her primary base and tries to weather the inevitable onslaught from other players. While this can often be frustrating to would-be attackers, it is a viable emergent strategy derived from the constraints and allowances of a game's mechanics.

In my experience, turtling is usually not an effective winning strategy, as nearly all of one's resources become tied up in fortifications rather than expansions, which typically leads to a sudden and catastrophic loss of resources for the "turtler" when their immediate resource flow depletes. Eventually, an attacker, bolstered by having explored more of the map and having located and secured more resources, will break through the turtle's "shell." With this disparity in resource flow, victory soon follows for the more aggressive player.

The exception to this rule, and what I believe is a major impetus for Blizzard implementing upkeep, are situations when there is one turtler on a multiplayer map; the other players often attack one another instead of the turtler, depleting their resources fighting and eliminating each other, while the turtler grows increasingly stronger. In this situation, if one or more players don't focus their efforts on defeating the turtler early- to mid-game, the turtler can often outlast his/her opponents, who, at a later stage of the game when resources are scarce, might be unable to muster the forces required to successfully "crack" the turtle's shell. And of course, a game in which there are multiple (or all) turtlers is usually boring as hell and can last forever.

So, this is definitely a valid reason for Blizzard wanting to motivate players not to turtle. But upkeep, at least as implemented, is just punishing, and pressures players, regardless of which race they choose, to all adopt a similar strategy: expand slowly, suddenly build quickly, and then slow down again. This is like coasting down a highway, suddenly jamming on the accelerator, and then slamming on the brakes. If you don't hit the brakes just when you get to a fun cruising speed, you'll immediately get pulled over and fined heavily by the "resource police." This became for me more frustrating than dealing with turtling, the problem upkeep was intended to address in the first place.

Blizzard may have had another reason in wanting to artificially deflate the size of players' armies in WC3... heroes. In this version of WC, Blizzard introduced hero units, which have certain special abilities in combat. However, Blizzard appears to be of the mindset that if a player has a large army, the impact of a single hero unit would be diminished, and that, conversely, a hero in a smaller force would be more powerful. That said, I think there are ways around this particular problem that don't require as drastic a measure as upkeep. For instance, a hypothetical property called *morale* could be attributed to all units, and heroes could automatically increase the morale of all or certain units within a set radius around the hero, which in turn could have any of several beneficial effects, both militarily and even in resource or unit production. Some heroes could also lower the morale of enemy units, or even increase the radius of effect for other heroes. The possibilities for a system like this I believe are far more interesting than a blanket tax on gold.

So, what exactly is upkeep? As envisioned, upkeep itself is a highly innovative feature, cleverly based on mimicking politics that drive real-life societies and economies. The basis for upkeep is that, the larger one's military, the more gold the military would skim off the top to maintain itself, leaving fewer resources to sustain the rest of the economy. At first, since it makes logical sense, and is in fact historically based, a player might think, "Hey, this is really cool!" But I think this is one of those situations where attempting to imitate real-life in a game environment falls short of its intentions and potential. There are three levels of upkeep: none, low, and high. The high level of upkeep is very punishing, taxing something like 60% of your gold intake. When a player's army reaches certain size thresholds, upkeep will automatically kick in. The only way to lower upkeep is to lose your troops in combat (or, as I'm often forced to do, kill them off yourself).

Given how far-reaching upkeep is, it's truly more of a game system than simply a feature. Therein I believe lies its biggest problem, that it's implemented at such a high governing level in the game. Had it simply been incorporated as a lesser or mid-level feature, or better yet, as a modifiable system, it could have retained its unique and innovative qualities without forcing players to change how they play RTSs, and conform essentially to how Blizzard wants them to play. For instance, maybe the Night Elves race needs less upkeep than other races, and the Undead don't require any at all? Perhaps players could research certain technologies that mitigate the impact of upkeep? Or certain heroes or artifacts could counter upkeep when placed near gold mines? Perhaps Blizzard could have added pre-game settings that allows players to select whether to play with upkeep on, or to choose from several upkeep presets, or possibly even expose those upkeep settings to allow customizable low and high upkeep thresholds.

To my recollection, the only plausible counter to upkeep in the game is the *pillage* ability possessed by the Orcs, which allows them to earn gold every time they destroy an enemy building. There's also a neutral Goblin unit that can replace several lumber gatherers. However, since players typically build more military units rather than move the lumber harvesters to mine gold, this generally *increases* upkeep, given that the ratio of a player's military to non-military units swings more towards military.

There are a few other ways for the various races to earn gold in a pinch, but they often come at a steep price. Heroes can sell their items; the Undead can unsummon their buildings; Orcs can research Pillage (as mentioned above); and there are usually "Creeps" guarding gold mines. These methods of earning gold are not necessarily intended as means of recouping resources lost by upkeep, but rather as stopgap measures to acquire relatively small amounts of gold at any time during the game. Basically, once a player hits high upkeep, the only surefire ways of increasing gold intake again are the loss of a significant number of military units (usually through combat) and exploiting additional gold mines (which are also taxed).

By treating upkeep as a static system rather than a modifiable one, WC3 lost an opportunity to integrate what is in fact a very clever, innovative, and intuitive feature into several game systems. Had Blizzard taken a different approach to upkeep, I believe its impact could have been enhanced without sacrificing the objectives Blizzard's game and systems designers had intended for upkeep to resolve.

In the interest of full disclosure, I asked several of the top players on battle.net what they think of upkeep, and their reactions were mixed, but mostly *in favor*. I think the reason for this, as I touched on earlier, is that upkeep fosters a more aggressive playing style, which expert players are better at or have mastered. But many don't appreciate that Blizzard has essentially imposed an overarching framework that forces a specific style of play. These players are often the ones who try to invent new strategies and approaches. For them, the game started to become one-dimensional, and they began to lose interest after a time.

In any case, while upkeep is an annoyance, it is by no means a deal-breaker as far as playing WC3, which I still regard as one of the best RTSs of all time. And, as a level designer using Warcraft 3's world editor, there are ways to mitigate the impact of upkeep in one's own maps if one wants to. I've played WC3 for several years alongside one of my other all time favorite RTSs, *Age of Mythology* (Ensemble Studios). Eventually, though, at the time of this writing, I've switched over almost entirely to AOM, partially because I love its campaign editor and I got heavily into AOM scenario design.