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Defense of the Ancients: From mod to phenomenon

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In this report, I will look at DotA, otherwise known as Defense of the Ancients, the game as well as the genre of MOBAs in general, its history, cultural impact, and how it has taken the world by storm.

**Humble Beginnings**

Long before it became known as Defense of the Ancients, before it spawned the MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) genre and generated millions of dollars in profit, there was a custom map made for StarCraft called Aeon of Strife. Created with the very restrictive map editor on StarCraft I, Aeon64 simplified the RTS game of StarCraft down to a few powerful units facing endless waves of computer-controlled creeps down four different lanes. A second version was made so that four players faced off against each other in a 2v2 fashion. This map wasn’t played at all, but a few fans found the concept intriguing enough to port the map over to *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* when it released in July of 2002. Warcraft III included a much more extensive map editor, allowing players to gain experience, levels, and upgrade abilities in addition to gaining gold. Much of the design of Dota was decided during this period.

When *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne* was released in 2003, there were many versions of DotA running around, each differing in design, hero choices, and other game mechanics. At the same time as these mods were gaining traction, a few modders got together and created “DotA Allstars,” a compilation of the best of the best from all the DotA derivatives.

**The Guinsoo Era**

Steve “Guinsoo” Feak, one of the leading visionaries and original designers of DotA, always believed that the dota format could form a competitive game. He started participating in the scene around 2004, during a lull in the development of Dota when many of the original modders left to play *World of Warcraft*. Under his supervision, DotA’s gameplay shifted away from battling computer-controlled creeps to battling other players. More complexity was added so that players had more choices to make when playing the games. In addition, DotA’s competitive mode was established then stabilized, which led to the formation of many teams, clans, and similar competitive organizations around the mod. Guinsoo recruited some of his clanmates to help with the development of DotA. The combined efforts of Guinsoo, Neichus, and IceFrog led to the creation of some of the most iconic heroes that still persist to today, such as Tidehunter, Tinker, and Pudge. DotA became a staple among Warcraft III players; as a testament to how popular these maps were, cybercafés and PC bangs still feature them on their machines today.

**Valve’s involvement and Dota 2**

Gabe Newell, the founder and managing director of Valve, after discovering that several of Valve’s employees, including Robin Walker, designer of *Team Fortress*, programmer Adrian Finol and project manager Erik Johnson all played DotA competitively. Valve immediately hired IceFrog to lead a development team to produce a sequel, which was announced in 2010. During this time, the game was rebranded to dota to avoid potential copyright litigation. Blizzard filed an opposition against Valve in November 2011, citing ownership of both the term DotA and the *Warcraft III* map editor. The case has since been settled, with Valve retaining ownership of the commercial franchising rights to dota.

**Cultural Impact and Gameplay**

I discovered DotA very similarly to many other people: I stumbled into a group of people huddled around a computer during class. I asked what they were doing, and they introduced me to the world of DotA 1. I’ve played it on and off ever since.

DotA began as a little-played custom map and one developer’s dream for it to one day be accepted as a competitive game. In this aspect, Guinsoo has more than succeeded: Dota 2 is notorious for its steep learning curve and almost infinite skill ceiling. In China, the term “dota” is synonymous with e-sports, so much so that the Chinese Administration of Sport, the official sports authority of the Government of China supports it and broadcasts it on television, a feat unheard of for a “western” game. The US recognizes Dota and League of Legends as a sport, on par with NBA, NFL, and NHL so that pro players can get visas to come to the country for events.

The success of the genre is also very apparent: the current world championship has a prize pool of nearly $9.8 million dollars, $8 million of which was contributed by the community. The player base only ever seems to grow, and though the market seems saturated, it generates more and more money each year. Despite it’s