# Growing Pains

## Broadening a Genre While Retaining Its Soul

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# Overview

To be successful, we sometimes try to take a fun "hardcore" game and broaden it – without losing the community.

# The Basic Challenges

Unfortunately, this isn't easy.

- A mechanic that is a barrier to new players is often a tool of 'pros.'

- Replacing a complex feature with a simple one eases learning curve for new players... But adds learning curve for old ones.

# How Do We Solve This?

We found three principles to be critical:

- When you simplify, be aware that even bad mechanics often have an important purpose.

- Don't change the UI without a great reason.

- Explain to hardcore players the benefits of your actions.

# League of Legends – A Case Study

- League of Legends is heavily based upon "Defense of the Ancients" (DOTA), a popular Wacraft 3 Mod.

- Amongst popular, competitive multiplayer games, DOTA is among the most complex, adversarial and inaccessible.

- Our Challenge: Excite DOTA players while attracting other hardcore gamers.

# But First… A Bit About DOTA

- DOTA is a game of it's own genre – We call it MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena), others call it RTS Arena or Action-Strategy.

# But First… A Bit About DOTA

The concept:

- Play one champion who has unique abilities

- Progress RPG style (levels, items) w/ PVP & PVE

- Team-oriented games of <1 hour
  - Stomp your opponents for fame and glory

# Team Hate – Problem 1

DOTA is plagued by 'team hate' due to it's incentives and mechanics.   New players aren't keen on this.

# Team Hate – Problem 1

In particular:

- Dying 'feeds' enemies, allowing them to snowball to a win.

- Rewards are given on kills, not on assists, so kill stealing is rampant.

- Friendly fire is possible in some scenarios.

- Physical DPS characters have a "carry" snowball role, so dying to them is especially bad.

# Team Hate - Fixes

We implemented several changes to mitigate team hate:

- Diminishing returns for repeatedly killing a player.

- Added on-kill-assist rewards.

- Massively reduced the amount of abilities that could 'friendly fire' in some way.

- Evened out the viability of spellcasters late game through an ability power system to focus results on the team and away from a narrow slate of 'carries' which could win/lose the game.

# Team Hate - Results

Our changes were largely successful:

- Players loved caster scaling and assist rewards.
- But... it became harder to occasionally dominate the game – a key experience to making the game sticky. *Memorable emotional highs are key – We reduced them and made the game a lot less fun.*
- And... some veterans accused LoL of being "too easy". (We took this feedback with a grain of salt)
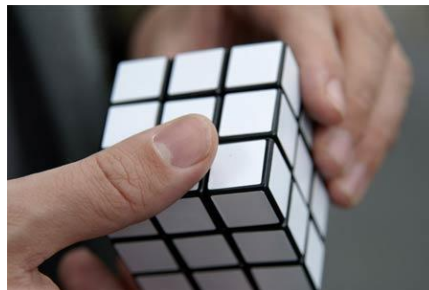
# Team Hate - Iteration

In response to feedback, we:

- Focused rewards such that it was a bit more possible for an individual to carry a game.

- Added new 'snowball' items that assist a high performing individual in occasionally carrying a game.

- Added more difficult-to-master champions.

- Added a death penalty – a big mistake we removed. Positive individual snowballing works, negative or team-based snowballing is poor.

# Controls and UI – Problem 2

- WC3 controls are optimized for a multi-unit RTS, NOT a single-unit RTS.



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# Controls and UI – Problem 2

- Minimap doesn't accentuate heroes well, in favor of a broader view appropriate for WC3.

- Players can easily deselect their hero.

- Crowd control effects block command input.

- Default hotkeys often followed WC3 mnemonic pattern (i.e. Death Coil = C)

- Various hotkeys related to multi-unit control seemed inappropriate for DOTA.

# Minimap - Fixes

- Moved minimap to the lower right for map flow reasons early in development.

- Heroes are hard to spot in Warcraft 3. We replaced dots with Portraits:

Huh?

Easier…

# Minimap – Results & Iteration

- Most players vastly preferred the new minimap

- But... *Expert players sometimes found the new map harder to read* because they had mastered the WC3 Map.  Others complained that LoL's map was 'too easy'.   Massive improvements were still resisted.

- And...  veterans found the map on the right slightly off-putting.  When we have time, we are going to default the map left, and add a flip option (existing users will default right since they've learned).

# Controls and UI – Misc. Fixes

- We made it impossible to deselect the player's champion.

- We allowed CCed characters to queue some types of command input.

# Controls and UI – Misc. Fixes

Re-mapped hotkeys:

- Abilities QWER, Items 123456

- A and S = Summoner spells  (new LoL feature)

- We replaced double-F1 and double-1 with double-spacebar to center on the player's hero.

# Controls and UI – Results & Iteration

- Players generally liked the broadening of order acceptance & no-deselect rules – this just made the game feel better and didn't hurt nuance.

- Players missed having complex pet characters (our single-hero controls don't support pets well, so we avoid using them).  We are currently developing much better pet UI to support this better.

# Controls and UI – Results & Iteration

- A and S caused huge backlash because they are key functions in DOTA(attack and stop).

- While not important to LoL this gave people a rough entry.  We reverted these changes.



DO NOT WANT

# Controls and UI – Results & Iteration

- QWER ability remapping went over well. Because DOTA hotkeys are random, players had no expectation.

- 1,2,3,4,5,6 item-use went over well.

- Some veterans missed double-f1 – so we re-added it as an additional default keybind.

# Juking – Problem 3

- In Warcraft 3, trees can individually block line of sight.  When you lose vision of a target, you stop your casts, attacks and movement.

# Juking – Problem 3

- DOTA has many narrow paths of trees and individually placed trees.  This allows expert players to:

    - Hit and run targets to death by dancing around trees

    - Escape in otherwise impossible situations.

# Juking – Fixes

- We removed single-tree "Juke points" – sharp twists and turns around individual trees that disrupt line of sight and glitch out the ability of heroes in DOTA to follow, cast or attack.

- We still had terrain, it tended to be a lot less 'sharp'.

# Juking – Fixes

- We added some other escape mechanics – but they tended to be a lot simpler

- We tweaked how orders work to allow you to move to near where someone popped into fog of war before aborting the order.

# Juking– Results

- Removing juking was a big mistake without a replacement, as it was a major source of skill differentiation and allowed expert players to evade or win in otherwise lethal situations.

# Juking– Results

- Players had far fewer tools to escape – in an out-classed situation, either you could beat someone's CC and escape, or you died.

- *This was another case of hurting the game by taking away emotional high points – its VERY fun to escape an impossible situation by the skin of your teeth.*

# Juking– Iteration

- Added Brush mechanic (loosely based on Wall of Grass from Starcraft 2) to enable 'juking' and additional ambush and hiding moves.

# Juking– Iteration

- Sped up Fog of War update to help evasion and created limited juking in some situations.

- Added additional hero types that could manipulate existing terrain better.

- Added items that allow nuanced escape.

- Tweaked Summoner abilities to enable more nuanced escapes.  Example: Summoner Flash, which can pop projectiles and leap over terrain.

# Denial – Problem 4

- DOTA has a mechanic where you can kill your own units and buildings to 'deny' your opponents the rewards of killing them.

  - Allows control of how close to your towers you fight (by slowing down your own troops), a very advanced skill.

  - Allows additional skill differentiating actions in general (timing the last hit, harassing away opponents to prevent last hit/deny).

FRIENDLY FIRE

It isn't.

# Denial – Problem 4

## But…. We felt this mechanic was:

- Counter-intuitive & weird

- A key tool in allowing defensive early-game play to the exclusion of aggressive organized play vs towers or players.

- Not terribly fun in and of itself.

- In short – We wanted to remove it.

# Denial – Fixes

- We removed the denial mechanic in all forms.

- We increased the number of minions spawned in order to increase the number of times a player needed to do a 'last hit' to kill an enemy minion.

- We re-balanced abilities to be both 'spammier' and balanced so that players could stay in the field a lot longer while using them.

- We added a number of team incentives.

# Denial – Results

- We got a lot of backlash from the hardcore DOTA community about the removal of Deny. This resulted in players either leaving, or learning to like the change inside 3-4 games.

- Expert players felt there were less skill differentiation opportunities early game.

- The game lost its balance between 'pushing', 'farming', and ganking.

# Denial – Iteration

- We explained why we removed deny to the community.  A group of users latched on to this post, and evangelized it effectively.

- We optimized early game survivability to enable more ganking, and add more pvp-based skill differentiation.

# Denial – Iteration

- We carefully tuned tower mechanics and rewards to balance out pushing vs. conservative play vs. ganking.

- We added more team incentives.

- Overall, this was pretty successful, but... Some players tried LoL and never came back.

# Closing Thoughts & Upcoming Goals

- If we did it all over again, we'd change less things (A/S hotkey, minimap side), and change others more carefully (juke points, deny).

- We have found that now that we have the trust of an audience, we can innovate with a lot less risk – we get the benefit of the doubt.

- We are now building alternative map types like Cap & Hold that are different enough from DOTA that we think we will get an open mind on new features contained within.

# A Few Other Thoughts

- Can you simply sidestep with a 'classic' mode which you funnel veterans to, and then push a broader mode to new players?

- Some advocate 'give players game options'. I think this is dangerous with multiplayer as your community may pick less fun/sticky options which then become 'default'

- Maybe you can do what SC2 is doing – broaden in one place (Single player) while stay more true to the genre with multiplayer.