

With 32 million player accounts and 4 million active monthly players, the growth of League of Legends in 2011 was felt around the world. This is why, to me, it is one of the year's top stories in the strategy genre. The rise of the MOBA as a genre really hit its stride this year, with games like Rise of Immortals making their debut, and Heroes of Newerth switching to a more open free-to-play model. The little mod that could, Defense of the Ancients, has been propelled into the mainstream with the games it has inspired. The list is soon set to include DoTA 2, in conjunction with Valve.

While StarCraft II remains a stalwart and at the top of global competitions, the fact is that the new kid on the block is fast gaining a lot of ground. Thinking about which games had the most impact this year, it was clear to me that LoL was that game, even over a huge title that people would even consider synonymous with RTS, like StarCraft II.

Why is League of Legends so successful? Well, it really isn't the new kid at all, having launched back in 2009, but its growth since then has shown that this is a game that can really hold attention and inspire competition at the highest level. So why is it so successful, both among average players and competitive ones?

It's accessible.

Accessibility is a major buzzword in the gaming industry right now, and for a good reason. Many games have gone social, and the rise of social and cooperative gaming has led to barriers of entry being lowered across many genres.

When World of Warcraft made its debut in 2004, the MMORPG genre was thriving, but not huge, and MMO gaming was widely the subject of jokes about its devotees being the nerdiest of basement dwellers and socially awkward individuals. In short, the genre was niche, but post-WoW, which took elements from other games and made them accessible to many, the result was global domination of the MMORPG market, and a so far lasting influence on the genre as a whole. Nowadays, MMOs have gone mainstream. Ten years ago, those of us that played MMORPGs probably never imagined the day that we could talk about and share the genre with most of our friends, let alone massive marketing events like the one we're seeing for this week's release of Star Wars: The Old Republic. But all of this boiled down to accessibility, which brought more people into the genre and took the cloak of 'weird' and 'niche' off for good.

League of Legends has done the same thing for the MOBA. While the original DoTA has had its fans for years, with dedicated players around the world still logging in regularly, and competitive play having lasted a long time, it was definitely a niche game. It was based on a Warcraft III mod and never had any sort of marketing push or reach toward the mainstream. It was loaded with heroes, many of which had balance issues against each other and mastering the game meant knowledge of heroes, the map, items, and gameplay. There is an intensity there that doesn't exactly lend itself well to newbies, and this passes to the community as well. The rules are complex and extremely nuanced. What League of Legends did was streamline the gameplay a little bit, eliminate some of the weirder elements like consuming trees to heal oneself, and eliminate gold loss on death, among other changes. Matchmaking based on elo attempts to give players even competition. There's also a lot of personality to the champions, with phrases, dances, voice acting, and taunts, as well as skins available

to customize the experience. It's a game you can play casually and get to like a champion for more than just his or her gameplay and lore.

StarCraft II also has that nuance, and the accessibility issue as well. With the devoted audience the game has (a recent study showed that some of the more advanced and competitive players can make up to five moves per second), it can perhaps be a bit intimidating for newbies.

While I have no doubt that 2012 will be a huge year for StarCraft II, with the Heart of the Swarm expansion coming, to me, this year is League of Legends' time to shine in the hearts and minds of casual and competitive strategy gamers alike. With Season Two currently underway with a \$5 million purse at stake, it's only a question of how far Riot can take its juggernaut.

While both games have their high level competitions and most skilled players, their outlooks seem to be different for different reasons. LoL attracts a casual and a competitive audience. StarCraft II has its dedicated audience, but isn't something that generally comes to mind when one thinks of casual or easy to pick up. There is a demo version of the game on Battle.net, but does this attract the newbies very well? I'm honestly not sure. But StarCraft II doesn't have a "jump in and play" reputation. While someone can pick up the basics, especially if they've played other strategy games, the game has that much potential complexity and so many extremely skilled players that it might intimidate a few people.

League of Legends is no slouch on the strategic gameplay front, but a rank beginner can pick up the game after a couple of matches, with the intricacies of champions, items, and other nuances like jungling to come later. It's also free, which is another invitation to come and play, unlike StarCraft II, which requires a purchase to get the full experience. Riot charges for things like new champions, skins and runes in its store, but items can be purchased with points you earn while playing the game, making patient players able to grind through the entire content without paying a dime. Once again, that buzzword, accessible, comes to mind here.

League of Legends also introduced Dominion this year, its first major game expansion, to fanfare and success. Dominion lets players play shorter games with a focus on PvP, but with the same flavor and teamwork extremely necessary. I've taken a shine to Dominion, mainly because I can play three or more matches in the same time as one match in the older modes.

While 2012 is set to be a huge year for the steady favorite that StarCraft II, League of Legends proves that huge growth is possible with the right combination of factors. Its streamlined gameplay brings the DoTA-style game to a mass audience, spread successfully to Europe with an eye on China, and is entertaining millions each night. The introduction of Dominion shows that Riot isn't just resting on its success, doesn't want a one-trick pony on its hands, and is dedicated to moving the game forward. What might come in 2012 for LoL? I predict that it will still be the top MOBA, but StarCraft II may have center stage if some other big releases like End of Nations haven't swooped in and stolen our gamer hearts by then.