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The Unlikely Success of *League of Legends*

In order to understand how a game as popular as *League of Legends* rose to its

position, one must look at the games that came before it. In 2003, Blizzard

Entertainment released their RTS game *Warcraft 3*. Not long after its release, a modder

known as Eul released a 10 player alteration of Warcraft called Defense of the Ancients,

or DOTA for short. It utilized the item and level mechanics typically seen in modern

MOBAs as well as the lane pushing objective. DOTA, while not the first game of its kind,

helped pave the way for MOBA type games to rise to popularity. Starting as only a mod

for an already existing game, DOTA only caught the attention of a small portion of the

video game community. Fortunately enough for the modern gaming scene, Marc Merrill

and Brandon Beck, Co-Founders of *League of Legends*, were among the few that

became interested in the Warcraft mod back in 2005.

Merrill and Beck started Riot Games in 2006, about a year after they became

interested in the concept of DOTA. With little resources and limited manpower, Riot

Games began work on a project they called Onslaught. Based strongly on the

mechanics and ideas of DOTA, Onslaught was starting to look a lot like a knock off of

DOTA instead of an entirely new game all together. Merrill and Beck were unhappy with

the direction that their game was going and ultimately wanted to create new and original

mechanics for the project instead of essentially copy and pasting DOTA and changing it

up slightly. A majority of Riot's design team at the time were not as ambitious as the

company's creators and left the company and project altogether in quick succession. The spontaneous loss of people working on the game left Riot with a lot to tackle and way less brainpower to do so. Merrill and Beck decided that this new era for Riot and their project should have something to show for it, and project Onslaught became *League of Legends: Clash of Fates*.

The loss of members on its development team was not the only setback that Riot faced in its early days. Merrill and Beck were committed to releasing their game on a business model Washington Post refers to as "freemium." Essentially the freemium model meant that the game would be released for free to all players and the company would then make their money through in-game purchases that the players could choose to spend their money on if they so desired. According to the Washington Post, "While the freemium model was starting to gain traction in Asia, it really hadn't yet been proven in North America." This would prove to be an issue for Riot Games, a California based company, and their search for investors. In the eyes of an investor this model is more volatile and shows less promise of making their money back than a typical business model. Merrill and Beck, aware of the importance of league's public debut, asked one of their original interns and now head of the champion design team, Jeff Jew, to double the number of projected champions for release. Not only did they up the champion count from 20 to 40, but the Riot founders needed Jew and his team to create alternate champion models known as "skins" for each champion. These skins would be a large source of the games income and Riot needed to prove to investors and prospective players that they could deliver skins worth spending money on.

As the market goes, Riot was faced with competitors attempting to put out similar games at the same time as them. Frostburn Studios and S2 Games were attempting to create a similar game to rival *League of Legends: Clash of Fates*. The unfortunate twist for Riot was that their original development team had not only left, but defected to S2 to help them create their rival game *Heroes of Newerth*. Riot was up against some tough competition, a fully operational game studio would prove to be a formidable opponent in a race to create a fully developed game. S2 had a much more promising start to their project than Riot, however, Riot's unusual business plan began to show its potential. When both companies released their games S2 was pulling in more players than Riot. It wasn't until the two released their business plans that Riot Games began to attract more players than ever expected. The players much prefered the free game over having to pay to play, a superior marketing strategy for creating a large player base. Being one of the first users of the "freemium" model in North America, Riot was able to capitalize on the fact that most of their demographic has not experienced this before and pulled in an unbelievable amount of new players. With their player base rapidly expanding, Riot was able to make enough money off of their in game sales to keep their company running. With the solidification of *League of Legends* in the gaming world, Riot could focus more on developing their game further and moving into the competitive scene. Their first ever "world" championship was held in Sweden in 2011 at the DreamHack celebration. The reason that this championship is labeled as "world" is because it was essentially a tournament between North American and European teams. Without teams from a majority of the world attending, the championship became a battle between NA and EU.

Regardless of the participants, the tournament drew in an outstanding amount of spectators for Riot Games at a staggering 1.6 million. The game was rapidly increasing in popularity all over the globe. A year after the DreamHack championship Riot decided to hold their own world championship in their home city of Los Angeles, California. This time teams from all over the world participated in the event, marking the games first step in becoming a global phenomenon. While Riot was now growing and capable of sustaining their game, their technology and budget were still on the lower end. The tournament suffered many technological errors that led to game crashes and an ultimate shutdown of the event on the first day. Riot quickly responded to the issue by hosting the tournament on their own on-site system the following day. The passion that Riot showed for their players and their game helped to bolster their relationship with both casual and pro players alike.

With the games community quickly growing at an unprecedented rate, Riot had to take the reins in order to make sure their player environment was at the level they wanted it to be. Riot saw a potential issue with the community, toxic players. With a screen and a username to hide their identity, many players choose to be rude and aggressive towards others online as they have little punishment to worry about. Riot decided that this was not going to fly in the League community. The company put a system in place in 2011 called "The Tribunal." The Tribunal consisted of players of a certain level, to show game experience, and good standing with the company. Players could log in to the tribunal and review up to 20 report cases a day and offer a verdict as to whether or not they thought the player on trial should be punished. A punishment or

pardon was issued based on the majority of votes by the tribunal. Players that repeatedly voted against the majority lost their Tribunal privileges as Riot saw them unfit to act as a jury member, whether purposeful false judgement or just a bad decision maker. In 2014 Riot shut down the tribunal and replaced it with their own judgement system for player reports. After the Tribunal was done away with, the company began work on more effective ways to clean up their community and make a better environment for their players.

In 2018 the company released their most recent system for community upkeep, the honor system. This system goes hand in hand with a loot system that Riot released in 2016 to reward players for playing the game and doing well. The company decided that giving players an occasional reward for good sportsmanship and good play without them having to spend money on the game would be a great way to make players feel like they are accomplishing something. When the honor system was released in 2018 Riot made a few changes to their reward system as well. As of 2018 players could choose to honor a teammate after the game for being a good shotcaller, for staying cool during tilting situations, or even just a "GG" because they made the game more enjoyable. Players that received a lot of honor would gain progress in their honor level towards the eventual high of honor level 5 checkpoint 3. The system started players at honor level 2 but ultimately scaled from honor level 0 to 5 with 3 checkpoints at each level before moving up. If a player was punished for any reason, be it a mere chat restriction to a temporary ban from the game, their honor level would drop to 0. A player's honor level determined the likelihood for them to acquire loot from the game

and the amount and level of loot they can pull from the loot drops. A player at 0 honor is also more likely to receive a stronger punishment for following offenses, or even a permanent ban from the game. This system increased the overall happiness of players and incentivised fair and sportsmanlike players at the same time as punishing toxic players. Ultimately the combination of loot and honor heavily cleaned up the League community and made it much more enjoyable to play.

As a company, Riot pays close attention to the experience that their players are having in and out of the game. Being run by a company that cares this much about the community and their product makes League even more iconic than the game is on its own. The symbiosis between the developer and the game creates an experience that draws in players and keeps them happy enough to continue playing and support the company that made their favorite game. While wanting to keep the overall idea of the game the same, Riot wanted to push constant updates to keep the game interesting and modern. Each year, after the annual world championship, Riot disables ranked gameplay for about 2 months while they push massive game updates that change the flow of the game and the way that players can interact with the map and the creatures and players on it. The overall objective and lane pushing theme of the game stays the same during these changes, but the company makes significant updates to the game to keep old players interested and give new players a way to catch up to the veterans. With new rule changes and ways to play the new players have the ability to learn the new mechanics at the same time as the old players, giving them equal opportunity to rise through the ranks.

Not only does Riot focus on the game itself, but the universe they created for it. The company releases lore about the League world through events, paragraphs of champion background stories, music videos, and even cinematics that feature a plethora of playable characters from the game. The immersion into the League universe that Riot created and constantly updates for their players is outstandingly detailed and gives players more than one way to interact with their favorite champion or faction. They understand that a game is not only about gameplay, but a community. There are fans of League out there that may have never played a second of the game itself, but immerse themselves into the amazing world that the development team created. With the massive fanbase that Riot created, they decided that there was more that could be done with the game. In October of 2019, Riot announced plans for a TV series based on champions from their game that would be released in 2020. The company saw the positive response to forms of entertainment outside *League of Legends* from their community and wanted to create an even deeper tie between League and its fans.

The game has drawn in such a large fanbase that Riot began development on about half a dozen new projects to cater to all types of video game players across all types of games. With the announcement of the League TV series Riot released plans for the following games: *Teamfight tactics*, *Legends of Runeterra*, *League of Legends: Wild Rift*, *LoL Esports Manager*, Project A, and Projects L and F. *Teamfight Tactics*, which is already on PC and coming to mobile, is a strategy game based on placing champions to fight automatically. *Legends of Runeterra* is a *Hearthstone*-like card game. *League of Legends: Wild Rift* is essentially *League of Legends* for mobile players. *LoL Esports*

Manager is Riots version of Fantasy team building, which allows players to build and manage fantasy teams of pro players. Project A was released with less information but will be in first person and have different objectives than *League of Legends*. Projects L and F have little to no released information other than the fact that Project L is possibly going to be Riot Games's version of a fighting game. All of these new projects are all based off of the League universe and are designed to bring all types of gamers together to make one large community all based on the game that started it all, *League of Legends*.

From humble, and almost fatal, beginnings to the gaming giant that it is today, *League of Legends* has left a huge mark on the gaming community that will be documented in history for a long time. The impact that the game had on esports as a whole, the entire video game market with the popularization of the "freemium" business model, the absolutely massive universe that spawned from the game, and the unification of video game players into one large community have brought League and Riot to the forefront of the gaming world. Many developers look to Riot for all types of inspiration and ideas for how to better their games and communities. Players enjoy the various forms of amusement that League has brought them through the game itself and the countless offspring that the game has inspired. League has become a staple of modern gaming, for its many aspects of player immersion and entertainment.

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