



MDA- COMMUNICATION AND UI ANALYSIS- HEARTHSTONE

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Introduction

The game of Hearthstone was originally produced and developed by Blizzard Entertainment, being released in 2014 as a free-to-play card game that carried on the lore of the Warcraft games. The game specifically played for this paper is the PC variant, downloaded through *Battle.net*. We will delve into the design of the game using MDA as analysis framework, with a focus on the Aesthetics, looking at communication and UI primarily.

Aesthetics

Using MDA we take a look first at the Aesthetics of the game, the most prominent aesthetic components being Challenge and Fantasy.

Challenge comes in various forms here. The direct challenge to the player is the enemy, the indirect challenge comes in the deck building aspect of the game, and creating a deck that can work across the board, or creating specifically powered decks, such as minion decks with a purpose of overwhelming with numbers rather than power. Here, the primary obstacle is attaining victory.

The Fantasy aspect lies in the primarily in the narrative content of the game. Hearthstone using both the lore and characters from the *World of Warcraft* series of games, also developed by Blizzard Entertainment. The game incorporates various items as ability cards, different species as playable characters, as well as some of the game's characters becoming from the *World of Warcraft* becoming the unique Heroes in Hearthstone.

As we look at aesthetics it is necessary to consider the UI as that is how communication takes place between the game and player, resulting in a bad UI giving undesirable emotional responses from the player. The UI of the game does not fall short however.

The game itself attempts to clearly display all currently required stats during a game. This functions extremely well as there is a ton of complexity to *Hearthstone*. With each Hero acting as a class, with monsters with various effects and abilities, it becomes necessary to clearly communicate possible actions.

When it comes to the cards, the game makes information easily accessible to players, as a simple hover over, provides the player with all necessary info. Effects and type can be confusing, especially with the large amount of them (taunt, rush, deathrattle, etc.), but the game makes it easy as each card indicates the type in bold which can then be hovered over to explain the effect. The cards also clearly indicated attack, health and mana using easy to understand images. Health and damage values can also increase and decrease, shown by setting the numbers gold for an increase and red for a decrease (a white number 2 will become a red 1). In addition to this, the cards act very dynamically to player input. Cards on the field are highlighted green when they can attack, as well as showing "zzz" to indicate they are sleeping and cannot currently attack. Beginning to drag a card with attack available also indicates to the player what is currently available to attack, and popups

appear if this is affected by anything such as a taunt(forces the player to attack specific cards first).

When it comes to mana, the game also highlights which cards are currently playable from the hand, outlining them green, and making it easy to immediately look away from too expensive cards. Mana crystals visuals spawn on the bottom right each turn, and the mana counter is always within view of your cards, making it even easier to manage your cards.

Turns can also move very quickly, depending on the player, but hearthstone makes sure that you never lose track, as there is a simple log on the left side of the screen, depicting card placements as squares, and attacks or effects as rectangles with an appropriate logo(sword indicates attack). This simple feature makes it easy to go back and see what you missed, especially when cards have effects and can be missed when played if the player is not paying attention.

In terms of the states of the game, changes are easily understood. Characters begin to say lines of dialogue to indicate to the player that maybe they should hurry up, followed by a burning fuse running across the screen. Turn changes cover most of the visible screen, making it impossible to be confused, or at the very least, highly unlikely without being blind or dyslexic.

Looking at feedback, the game provides plenty. Each card is fitted with different animations, some more unique than others, that indicate when an ability or attack is made. Spell cards like freeze, fully cover the minion cards with ice when used, Secret cards have a magical effect when used, fireballs shoot from either player towards the card target. When cards engage combat they also move towards each other, bumping to simulate combat in a way. There is also a large amount of dialogue feedback due to the small catalogue of heroes. This allows for the AI to talk back and forth depending on the state of the game. Damaging a character will sometimes result in them shouting "You'll regret that," or responding to specific card types being played. The fact that all actions in the game are accompanied by an animation, not only makes the game look good, but also gives the player time to process the events as they occur, keeping a nice pacing.

The game scene itself functions extremely well, conveying all necessary info while also keeping it to mouse only interaction, making it a very nice casual sitting experience.

Now that the game itself has been dealt with, we move onto the UI for the card manager and menu. The menu is simple enough, however the lack of "escape" as a key to go back is odd given the standard norms around it. Once again, the menu displays almost all options with text as well as hover popups. The transitions are also very satisfying, as the menu is a book that scrolls through pages and opens as it is used.

The collection menu is one of the most crucial components, as it is here that players see their cards and can edit their decks to suit their playstyle. The collection nicely separates every class restricted card making it much easier to pick cards by avoiding the hundreds that you can't equip to the class anyway. There's a full search bar as well as mana filter settings, and all cards are displayed in full, the same as in-game in the player's hand. When editing the deck itself, the game clearly indicates the max amount of cards per deck, max amount of a specific card per deck, the amount of duplicates you have acquired, and then keeps the current cards listed permanently on the right of the screen, allowing players to easily drag, drop and compare cards and stats.

Overall, the game does an exceptional job in communicating all actions and possibilities to the player, while having a ton of character and being absolutely beautiful visually.

Dynamics

Hearthstone handles dynamics very specifically, as many of the cards, and abilities thereof, are linked to specific character classes (such as Mage or Warlock). Each Hero character in the game acts as its own class, giving each character its own unique ability, and cards based on the lore of the character. Many cards do sit under the neutral category, making them universally usable.

The different character classes force drastically different play styles. Certain characters will focus on a spell based deck, using those to boost cheap or low characters. Alternatively, some Heroes will have more of a focus on high damage and health cards, while others will focus on winning not through power, but sheer overwhelming numbers. How the player chooses their cards and heroes, ultimately effects their entire playstyle as well as what the enemy's attention is being drawn to.

The game itself is very dynamic, forcing the player to adapt to situations. This is where the player must understand the dynamics of other decks, to better build theirs. Building a specifically focused deck can sometimes result in an outright loss from opposing deck types. This allows players to form their own playstyle, through choosing their own Hero and cards, while forcing the strategic element onto the player, as it is a necessary factor to high level progression. The game does have characters that are much easier to use in others, such as the tutorial character, as these are broad and basic for the most part, allowing casual players to easily comeback without committing countless hours to researching a character and strategies for it to be useful.

The game consistently releases new packs, adding cards with new abilities, resulting in a change in dynamics of the gameplay occasionally (as the balancing is essentially altered) and keeping players coming back in the long run, and preventing the game from stagnating.

Mechanics

The primary mechanics of *hearthstone* are Card Drawing and Playing, and attacking/engaging. Drawing cards is fairly self-explanatory, but the mechanic has effects in-game. Many effects are linked to this simple mechanic, for example, certain cards will boost a stat on card draw, or deal damage, etc. Given that there is also no hand limit, and only a deck size of 30, variety in the player's hand is a huge plus, even though it might get a bit cluttered.

Attacking is simple, until it isn't. Basic attacks function easily, when an attack is declared, both minions attack each other's health with their damage. If they match, both die, if not, one dies and one survives. The nuance comes when abilities are added. Certain cards have specific abilities that activate on attack, defend, spawn or death, and these add a ton

to consider. For instance, attacking a minion may trigger another minion's effect that defends it, or the Taunt effect .

Lastly, is the act of playing cards. This can be broken down into many sections, looking at each type of card, and how they function differently. Spells for instance, usually do not stay on the battlefield, and either have immediate effects or lasting ones, whereas minions do stay on the field, and can sometimes have spawn abilities, such as Rush(can attack in the first round), or Battlecry(specific action on spawn) .

The game also incorporates crafting, allowing players to earn resources through matches and achievements to create cards that can be added to their deck. This allows players to improve their decks overtime, regardless of the deck they play with, as resources are universal. It also gives the player more reason to play, as they would probably love that overpowered card that requires a 100+ hour grind.

Conclusion

Hearthstone, is a brilliant card game. With its brilliant UI and Communication, it is extremely easy to pick up, understand, and play. It does a brilliant job of providing a casual game for those with little time, and an extremely nuanced statistic based game for those willing to commit.