An MDA Analysis of the game
Gwent: The Witcher Card Game

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Gwent: The Witcher Card Game (CD Projekt RED, 2018) is a turn-based, competitive, card game where two players take turns placing cards with the goal of defeating the other player in combat. In this essay, I start off by briefly defining the games formal components to establish the games rules. Thereafter, I use the MDA Framework (Hunicke, LeBlanc, Zubek, 2004) to analyse the games mechanics, before moving on to the dynamics that arise from these mechanics, and finally investigating the core aesthetics that are presented by both the mechanics and dynamics. Throughout I will also refer to the games data design as this is at the core of *Gwent*.

To start, we can look at *Gwent's* formal components in order to have an overview of the game and its system. As mentioned briefly, *Gwent* is an online competitive, turn-based, card game where two players are pitted against each other. The objective of the game is to have the most points on the board at the end of two, of the three, rounds. To gain points, players take turns placing cards, dealt randomly, into their hand from their premade deck. Each of these cards has a point value which is used as both the point system and the cards HP, along with different special abilities such as attacking (see figure 1 and 2 in Appendix) – showing the significance of data design in *Gwent*. On top of this, there are various other mechanics that the player can use depending on the players position in the game.

Next, we can look at some of the most important mechanics in the game, and the dynamics that arise from them – staring with the cards and deck. As with other trading card games, such as *Magic: The Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast, 1993) and *Pokémon: TCG (Trading Card Game)* (The Pokémon Company, 1996), players have the opportunity to build their own custom decks to use in combat. By allowing players to craft and buy new cards, they are given the opportunity to create their own specific deck – the data set – to be used during combat. This is crucial, as even though players are dealt a random subset of their deck to use in combat, it allows for more overall strategy. This creates the dynamic of players taking into account the cards different abilities, provisions, and overall number values in order to create decks that match different playstyles and situations (see figure 1 and 2 in Appendix).

Furthermore, we can look at the way in which the deck, our data set, is distributed for combat. In general, cards are used to hide and reveal information – both to the player and the opponent. Cards also allow a more precise control of data through card counting. In *Gwent*, the players deck is randomized, and players are given 10 cards to start, in addition to 3 more

cards each subsequent round. This distribution of cards results in the dynamic of players being able to strategize, and count, their cards. An example of a relevant strategy is players using 'thinning' cards – cards that play multiple other cards from the deck when played – at the beginning of the game to have more control over the cards available in later rounds.

Thereafter, it is important to look at the mechanics available during gameplay – specifically the lanes and passing mechanic. During gameplay, players place cards on two lanes – the melee and range lane. These lanes are important as most cards have different abilities depending on the lane they are placed in, adding to the intricacy of the data design. However, if a player either runs out of cards or chooses to stop playing cards for the rest of the round, they can then 'pass'. This creates an interesting dynamic as players now have to evaluate whether they are winning or losing in combat, and if they should pass the round in order to save their cards for subsequent rounds; or keep playing and chose a card and lane which makes the best use of that card's abilities, depending on the cards at play.

Hereafter, we can look at *Gwent's* two core aesthetics, starting with fantasy. While the game itself does not allow players to assume a new role like in role-playing games (RPG), its setting still presents the player with a fictional fantasy world in which the player can immerse themselves. Alongside this, the games cards also portray this fantasy element in their different abilities, types, and various live artworks in order to immerse the player further.

Moreover, another core aesthetic of *Gwent* is challenge. This is at the core of *Gwent*, and this sense of challenge is created through the game's competitive nature. Of the two players who are pitted against each other, only one will become victorious, so each player is challenged to find the best strategy from the hand they are dealt in order to win. Further, although the timer is mainly used to make sure turns always end, this timer also creates a sense of time pressure when making decisions each turn.

In conclusion, by using the MDA Framework I was able to analyse *Gwent's* mechanics, and see how its deck building, deck distribution, and gameplay mechanics result in interesting dynamics and data design. I also identified the core aesthetics as challenge and fantasy, and although some may argue that another core mechanic of *Gwent* is submission, I would argue against this as *Gwent's* complex data design requires active involvement in order to play and strategize, and as such a player is not able to merely play the game as a pastime.

Reference List:

CD Projekt RED. (2018). *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game* [Video Game]. Windows. CD
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Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., Zubek, R. (2004) *MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and
    Game Research. In Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI.*
    Available from https://users.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf

The Pokémon Company. (1996). *Pokémon: Trading Card Game (TCG)* [Card Game].
    Windows. The Pokémon Company

Appendix:

Figure 1:

Player Health /Point Value →

Provisional Value ←

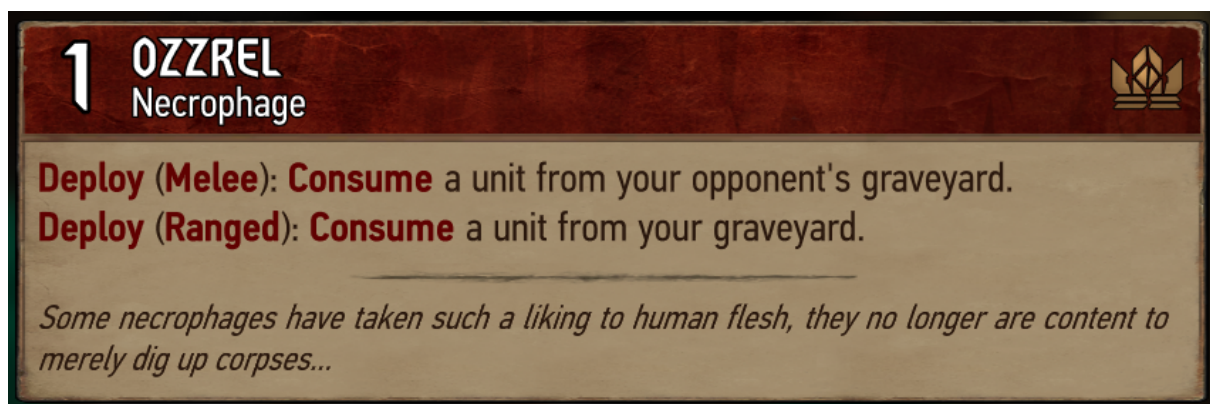Figure 1: Example of a *Gwent* Card (CD Projekt RED, 2018; explanation added)

Figure 2:

Figure 2: Example of a *Gwent* Card Abilities (CD Projekt RED, 2018)