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Game Development

Immersion in Hearthstone

In a game as simple as cards, there is a great challenge to implement a sense of immersion, as it involves building a world around everything, which is often much more complicated than the simple game. However, this is exactly what Blizzard did with their own card game Hearthstone. It would be incredibly easy to put a fantasy filter on the game and call it a day. That would be rather engaging, yes, but lonely. I remember in the early development of the game, it was rather quiet. They still had the tavern theme, and the worn, rugged aesthetic, but it was lonely, and in a game centered around community, it felt out of place. As the game developed, however, the game grew into a wonderful little sidebar out of the World of Warcraft, thanks in part to the audio team, and the design team.

The audio team in Hearthstone is one of the secret weapons of the company that subtly provides immersion and welcoming themes throughout the game. Even when immediately launching the game, the player is greeted by the jubilant innkeeper with lines such as “Busy tonight, but there’s always room for another!” and “Boys! Look who it is!” It feels welcoming, like the player belongs there, even if it’s their very first time launching the game. The sound effects of a crackling fire, a muttering crowd, and a soft, not so distant band playing off in the corner, the player really feels like they just sat down at a table in a local tavern to play some cards, and that’s just the menu screen. Opening the shop tab plays a little bell sound effect, like you just opened the door to a real shop. Playing the game provides even more immersion, from the lovable characters with unforgettable lines when their cards are played, to the crowd cheering when a huge minion is dropped down or a big hit is landed. You can almost feel the crowd huddled around the table to watch this riveting game. The sound team are the unsung heroes of immersive gameplay, because without them, it’d just be playing cards on a screen.

The other, more subtle point of immersion that the game provides is actually playing a deck, built around a certain archetype. I hadn’t noticed until recently, but the classes and deck archetypes line up almost perfectly in the game, to a point where subclasses in WoW or Dungeons and Dragons follow a similar pattern. For example, the rogue class has a few options available to them. At first glance, this class seems pretty general, play some smaller minions, hit them with some unexpected combos, and finish them off with big spells. However, these can be broken down even further. One such rogue deck involves stealing cards from your opponent’s deck, and using those cards against them. Certain cards provide bonuses for playing cards that you should not have. This is rather reminiscent of the thief subclass of rogue in other RPGs: stealing what your opponent has and using it to your own advantage. Another archetype involves combo cards. Combo cards are initially undervalued, but if another card was played on the same turn, they gain an additional affect. These can be used to decimate your opponent by piling up combos that broadside the enemy and leave them spinning. This lines up almost perfectly with the trickster archetype. The trickster uses slight of hand and deception to make the opponent think they have the upper hand, then destroys them when they least expect it. The final archetype I will discuss is the spell power deck. These decks involve playing minions that boost the damage and power of your spells in order to unleash a flurry of normally weak spells, boosted to lethal proportions. The assassin rogue sublclass is very similar to this, waiting for the perfect time to strike, then killing the opposition before they even have a chance to notice. Hearthstone put an incredible amount of attention to these small details, and how their deck archetypes line up with actual RPG classes. As I looked into other classes, it only further proved my point. This provided a subtle immersion, allowing the player to choose what kind of rogue they wanted to be, honing in their skills (cards) on a single path and going out to face new foes with these abilities.