Unique Design and Gaming Experience of *Heroes of the Storm*

1. Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the unique design and gaming experience of Heroes of the Storm. Utilizing telephone interviews with players of varying skill levels, the study explores the game's distinctive mechanisms and gameplay elements. Despite the game's emphasis on teamwork and cooperation, the lack of communication tools and channels poses significant challenges for players. The research identifies and categorizes players based on Ken Blanchard's Situational Leadership II model, delineating various player types as Enthusiastic Beginners, Continuous Progressive Achievers, and Peak Performers. The discussions shed light on the positive and negative feedback in shaping players' experiences,analyzing the impact of the game's unique features, such as the talent growth system, shared experience mechanism, and quest system, on players of different skill levels.

1. Research Method

This article utilized telephone interviews to discuss with players of varying skill levels from different groups. While the sample size was small (9 players), the discussions were insightful. Because of the current status of the game *Heroes of the Storm*, which has a small player base and low community engagement due to the closure of the Chinese server, resources were limited. All participating players were or had been active users of *Heroes of the Storm*. While our research strives for objectivity, our affection for the game as enthusiasts may result in a slight inclination in our viewpoints and discussions, favoring its quality, evaluation, and overall experience.

*Heroes of the Storm*, as a team-based MOBA game, emphasizes player cooperation and teamwork. Players assume different hero roles and collaborate with teammates to face challenges from the opposing team. The team collaboration aspect makes the Situational Leadership II model applicable to the players of *Heroes of the Storm*. Ken Blanchard's Situational Leadership II model divides people into four stages: Enthusiastic Beginners, Disillusioned Learners, Reluctant Contributors, and Peak Performers.

When applied to the player analysis in *Heroes of the Storm*, there is no unwillingness among players to play the game because it is a game not a job. In addition, all mid-level players exhibit a growing process and self-development attitude. Players experience initial confusion or uncertainty but gradually adapt to the game environment through continuous effort and learning, striving to improve their skills and levels. These players demonstrate a positive learning attitude and a willingness to progress continuously, and they also need appropriate support and encouragement to overcome difficulties and improve their skills. Therefore, the Disillusioned Learners and Reluctant Contributors are integrated into one type, the Continuous Progressive Achiever.

Nine participating players were classified using this method. Peak Performers were community esports players or at least grandmaster players. The Enthusiastic Beginners ranged in skill level and game duration, and they still have incomplete understanding of hero characteristics and game mechanics. All the rest were classified as Continuous Progressive Achievers. Player 1-3 are Peak Performers. Player 4-7 are Continuous Progressive Achievers. Player 8,9 are Enthusiastic Beginners. The author is the player 1.

1. Main Theme Discussion:

The main theme discussion focused on some unique game mechanisms and experiences in *Heroes of the Storm*, discussing them with all participating players.

1. What's Fun?

When asked about what is fun overall, players immediately mentioned the core motivation driving them to play the game. Player 3 considered the anticipation of intricate cooperation with teammates as the main reason. Player 2 found the game's classic characters and IP to be the initial draw, followed by the quest for more game experience and skill improvement. Player 4 attributed the primary reason for opening the game to a particular hero (Whitemane). Additionally, all players believed that playing with friends was a significant factor.

Seasoned top players acknowledge certain game concepts during gameplay. They find the game highly playable and rewarding within such game rules. However, players at various skill levels also choose this game for socializing and playing with friends.

1. Positive and Negative Feedback

Positive and negative feedback play an important role in guiding and motivating players in the game. They help shape the game's pace and experience, encouraging players' continuous growth and development, thus enhancing the game's appeal and playability. A captivating game requires timely and appropriate game feedback.

When do players feel frustrated? Discussions revealed that players in higher level concern more about the game's process and whether it is in the correct way they envisioned, while other players focus more on result feedback. Player1, 2, 3, 4, and 9 expressed frustration when their ideas were not understood by their teammates, leading to a disorganized team and a lack of competitiveness against opponents. Additionally, Player 4 felt frustrated due to the team's poor performance in hero selection strategy, while Player 3 experienced frustration at missing opportunities to end the game, similar to missing a checkmate opportunity in chess. These players can be classified as strategic players, deriving their gaming experience from cooperation and game strategy. Other players can be categorized as experiential players, for whom the game's victory or defeat and the ability to defeat opponents determine their gaming experience. Player 8 suggested that if the game wants to attract players, it should strengthen the gaming experience of the winning side, even at the cost of the losing side's experience, meaning that the game should provide extreme excitement, allowing players' excellent performances in a particular game to have complete control over the match.

1. Talent Growth System and Shared Experience

When discussing positive feedback, I focused on *Heroes of the Storm*'s unique talent and shared experience systems.

As an MOBA game, *Heroes of the Storm* features a unique talent system and shared experience mechanism, which play a crucial role in the game's strategic and team-based nature. The talent system allows players to choose different skill upgrade paths(even ultimate skills) based on their gameplay style and team needs, adapting to various combat scenarios and opponents. This flexible talent selection mechanism encourages players to make reasonable decisions based on the situation, emphasizing the importance of team collaboration and strategic planning.

The shared experience mechanism also emphasizes teamwork. In the game, all team members share the same experience pool, and team members accumulate experience and level up through joint efforts. This mechanism encourages players to engage in teamwork and coordination, promoting collaboration and assistance among team members, emphasizing the importance of the team's overall strength, rather than relying solely on the individual abilities of a single player.

During the game process, heroes in the game will receive seven chances of choosing talents. However, all players believe that there is not strong positive reinforcement when obtaining a talent, let along a sense of achievement, as there is in other MOBAs where equipment can be acquired through the accumulation of currency. This is a problem with the talent system's insufficient positive feedback. In addition , Player 8 believes that unlike buying equipment, talents are not earned by oneself but automatically obtained upon reaching a certain level, lacking a sense of achievement. Several players after him agreed with his viewpoint.

Players' feedback on the shared experience is very similar to the negative feedback of the game. Strategic players (1, 2, 3, 4, 9) in section 1.2 consider this to be a feature and advantage of the *Heroes of the Storm* game. Experiential players feel that the positive feedback provided by this system is insufficient. Players 6 and 8 propose that an outstanding player cannot have the proper influence on the game situation in such a system.

Overall, the creative and unique talents and shared experience bring a completely new gaming experience but also come with significant issues. Insufficient positive and negative feedback will make players not understand the correlation between victory or defeat and their own actions. Players do not know what kind of behavior is encouraged. They are not clear whether their efforts are rewarded, while the slow improvement in game skills increases frustration. The pleasure and positive feedback obtained through cooperation, painstakingly created by the designers, can only be understood by seasoned hardcore players, who must also find a way to ensure such an experience.

1. Quest System

Some hero in the game quest systems, which aim to encourage players to complete specific goals in the game and get additional ability enhancements or rewards upon completion. The design of these quests provide players with different game strategies and gameplay, giving the game some developmental attributes.

The quests in *Heroes of the Storm* are mainly divided into goal completion and infinite growth. Goal completion quests require players to complete a limited number of designated events, after which they will receive a certain level of enhancement or additional mechanism. The infinite growth quests, similarly oriented toward completing specific events, can be repeated indefinitely, obtaining new mechanisms after completing a certain number of repetitions and unlimited growth.

All players expressed concerns about the balance of the quest system in the talent system. Unbalanced quests were opposed by all players. All hero in *Heroes of the Storm* gain talents and attributes through leveling up, and the quest system provides some heroes with a third currency resource in addition to experience and talent (Player 4 proposed). This itself creates an imbalance in the mechanism.

If quests do not lead to imbalance, Players 4, 5, 6, and 9 are inclined towards growth-oriented quests. They enjoy the process of improving and nurturing their heroes. Player 6 believed that the presence of quests could provide her with direction when she did not know what to do. Players 1, 2, 3, and 7 prefer completion-oriented quests. Player 3 believed that these quests are closely linked to hero mechanics (Kel'Thuzad), making these quests an integral part of the hero's mechanics, combining playability and design sense. Additionally, among players inclined towards completion-oriented quests, Players 1, 2, and 3 were generally dissatisfied with the quest system as a whole, believing that the system would alter the game's logic and purpose, leading players to pursue behavior deviating from the overall game strategy for the reward of quest , which provides misleading benefits. Furthermore, Player 2 believed that talents should provide direct benefits, while Player 3 believed that the quest system, due to its growth nature, would need to be weaker in the early stages and stronger in the later stages, sacrificing the early game experience of teammates for their own later game strength, which contradicts this player's pursuit of the game's spirit of team and cooperation.

Other Analysis

This discussion highlighted some interesting content and phenomena mentioned by players during the process.

1. Emphasizing Team but Lacking Team Support

Many of *Heroes of the Storm*'s designs emphasize teamwork, yet the game does not provide players with enough support. In the first three years of its launch (2015-2018), the game did not have a voice chat system. As a result, many players pursued a non-verbal understanding between players. Even after the voice system was introduced, many players were not willing to use it due to common social anxiety and privacy concerns among players and their reluctance to communicate with unfamiliar players.

*Apex Legends* is also a game that requires significant teamwork and communication, with crucial information, including opponents' health and skill situations, not accessible to players without their teammates. Apex features an in-built voice system, and its ping system is widely regarded as an effective communication tool, allowing players to achieve rapid and clear teamwork communication without voice communication. The system's design aims to enable players to communicate all necessary information through pings. It can notify teammates about enemy positions and critical information, such as enemy resurrection. It also allows players to mark resources, including armor, equipment, accessories, ammunition, scopes, and more, and specifies the exact type of resource. Moreover, it conveys game strategy intentions, including defense, offense, and alerts about specific areas. All these ping notifications are communicated by the player's operated character's voice.

For players who are unwilling or unable to use voice, this system provides a convenient and sophisticated communication channel, enabling them to closely coordinate with teammates, devise tactics, and deal with various combat challenges. The character's voice prompts also make these tag signals more immersive. In comparison, *Heroes of the Storm*, which emphasizes teamwork in all levels of confrontation, provides only limited communication signals like "coming" "retreat," and "defend," with similar sound cues, which significantly compromises the gaming experience under the premise of a cooperative goal.

1. Unique Support Heroes(or in this game, healers) and Innovative Designs

When discussing *Heroes of the Storm*'s support heroes, all players expressed their appreciation for the game's unique support-type heroes. Compared to similar games, the support in the game has higher healing, control, and damage capabilities, not inferior to DPS and tank-type heroes in one-on-one battles. This gives players in each position a strong and intuitive combat capability and participation. It allows players of all levels and types to clearly recognize and agree that all players in the team have equal importance in such a team game. Their behavior and strategies are equally matters.

Some players are pretty proud of their beloved game have unique game design. *Heroes of the Storm* features support heroes such as Abathur, who can Symbiote, Murky, who can resurrect quickly, and Cho’Gall, who is controlled two players, which many players appreciate in this game. "Why should every hero have a Blink? Some heroes can and should never Blink," was Player 3's opinion. Thanks to the imagination of the game designers and the unique game mechanics. The absence of a common optional skill pool allows heroes to display greater personality and differentiation.

1. Ill-Timed Forward Thinking

*Heroes of the Storm*'s uniqueness lies in its emphasis on the concept of teamwork, abandoning many basic repetitive game mechanics, and focusing players' attention on team cooperation and game operational strategies. However, for some top players, they may prioritize the unique experience brought about by cooperation in the game, which reflects *Heroes of the Storm*'s forward-thinking design concept. At the same time, it also exposes the designers' possible excessive bias towards their design concept, overlooking a large number of players' complaints about the game experience, indicating that more players tend to pursue direct sensory stimulation and control of the game situation rather than cooperative teamwork and strategic synergy, highlighting the deviation between game design and some players' expectations.

To address this issue, the approach may involve better consideration of different types of players' needs by the designers when balancing game mechanisms. However, as a massive fan of *Heroes of the Storm* since the every beginning, I anticipate, and also have a eager desire to see a shift in players' attitudes towards the game in the future. A good game can influence a group of people or even a generation's thoughts, and it can help players develop positive life attitudes and values through plot and game mechanics design, stimulating their creativity and imagination, guiding them to think and explore the meaning and value of life actively. In the future, players may seek higher levels of enjoyment, and games will no longer be just about offering simple thrills. At that time, they will appreciate more meaningful designs and higher levels of enjoyment, similar to appreciating a good novel, a world masterpiece.

References:

1. 杨直. "更像团体操的风暴英雄." *电子竞技* 9 (2017): 42-45. Web.
2. "奕言堂 风暴英雄的电竞困境." *电子竞技* 10 (2015): 6. Web.
3. Blanchard, Kenneth. "Recognition and Situational Leadership II." *Emergency Librarian* 24.4 (1997): 38. Web.
4. Thanks to the interviewee who had provided valuable assistance and feedback throughout my research.(BattlenetID)
5. 跨时代小送笔
6. Jerryhts
7. Wuenry
8. YvetteQAQ
9. 腦袋裝棉花
10. Ir1s
11. EverydayEula
12. lighting