
AION™ GAME ANALYSIS

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This document will be analyzing the gameplay of Aion™. Aion™ is an MMORPG that is aimed at Teens and developed by NCSoft. Originally released only in Korea, Aion™ took the Korean market by storm, surpassing the former front-running MMOG in Korea, Lineage 2™ (another property of NCSoft). After experiencing much success in the Korean market, Aion™ was later released in the US and Europe in the fall of 2009.

Aion™ is a game that is described by NCSoft as a “PvPvE”. In other words, it is a game that focuses on conflicts with both artificial intelligence monsters and against other players at the same time. The setting of the game is a fictional planet that has been shattered in half. The game is split into two factions, the Elyos and the Asmodians. There are many visual differences between the two races. The Elyos live in the half of the shattered planet that is constantly covered in light. Everything is colorful, vibrant, and visually engaging. The Asmodians live in the half of the shattered world that is in constant darkness. Their world is dark, bland, and gloomy. Visually, the atmospheres fit the respective races perfectly. This is also displayed very adequately at the character creation menu.

The character creation screen is visually appealing. There are 8 options available, although there are only four classes total. This is because the screen gives the player the option of male or female and gives a visual demonstration of the difference in their respective armor. The character appearance customization tool is the most in-depth part of the game itself, providing so many minor customization details that each character in the game itself looks like a unique player.

The user interface is very clean and presents the user with the information pertinent to him. It shows the user’s health bar (HP), mana bar (MP), and divine power bar (DP). This is all stored in one box that is in the lower left corner of the user’s screen by default. The user can opt to put this box into the upper left corner instead. As a damage dealer, the user interface is functional and performs its job. As a healer, though, all of the health bars are kept on the left side of the screen. This is not an optimal spot for health bars from a healing perspective, as they must redirect their attention from the heart of action (the middle of the screen).

It also has a single action bar, along with the option to increase the number of action bars to a total of 6. The targeting frame shows the target’s name, the target’s level, and the target’s difficulty. Information on the target’s difficulty is conveyed through a combination of three visual displays. The first, and most obvious, is the width of the health bar. A health bar that is wider than the standard health bar is a boss fight of some variety. The second, and also rather obvious notation, is a draconic design on the left end of the health bar. The third indication is contained with the left part of the health bar. It is a series of 1 to 6 dots in a circular pattern.

Now, while this system seems obvious once an individual has experienced the game enough, the exact definition of these designs is never truly explained to the player. A player will need to experiment for himself to find out whether a “1-dot elite” is harder than a “6-dot non-elite”. This lack of explanation does not add to the depth of the game and only obfuscates the user interface to the newcomer. It is also only bound to create frustration in a player who has no experience with the game or MMOs in general.

Onto the gameplay itself and right out of the gates, Aion™ has a slightly agitating issue to a veteran of the MMO genre. The keyboard and mouse commands are slightly delayed, perhaps by around 150 milliseconds. It could best be described as input latency. This sluggish feeling can cause the player to become frustrated in

situations where immediate reactions are required. Another major issue with movement in this game is in regards to instant abilities. Some abilities that have no cast time have an elaborate animation. During this elaborate animation, the character is unable to move (and it will stop them if they already are moving), giving these abilities an almost “phantom” cast time. Players will need to keep mental notes of what abilities have a phantom cast time. This phantom cast time adds a very clunky feel to an already sluggish movement system.

The player will quickly level through the first 20 levels. The player will be flooded with new abilities in these first 20 levels. In these early levels, the player will start getting abilities that can't be activated under normal circumstances. Aion™ has a feature it calls “chaining”. A “chain” is an ability that can only be used immediately after the ability specified. The “chain” tends to provide utility or burst, but not both. Most of these abilities have a situation where they are useful, but very few are universally useful (raiding, 5-mans, soloing, small scale PvP, and large scale PvP). These “chain” abilities (along with the 30+ other abilities a player will have) being used properly, or improperly, act as a way to separate the good players from the bad players. This is a very important aspect of Aion™. A player can distinguish himself, either positively or negatively, by how he uses his abilities. In some instances, a person will want to stack multiple debuffs onto their enemy before putting up an important debuff in order to protect it from being dispelled.

When the player gets to level 20, he will begin unlocking “Stigma Slots”. “Stigma Slots” are filled by “Stigmas”. “Stigmas” are dropped by monsters or purchased from a vendor in the player's respective race's hometown. “Stigmas” and “Stigma Slots” are a way for the player to customize his character's abilities slightly. This is the first place that an individual's choice for race (whether Elyos or Asmodian) can make a large difference. The Elyos and Asmodians tend to have at least one “Stigma” unique to their race per subclass. At level 45, the player will unlock “Advanced Stigma Slots” and “Advanced Stigmas”. “Advanced Stigma Slots” can be fitted with a “Stigma” or an “Advanced Stigma”. “Advanced Stigmas”, though, can only be fitted into “Advanced Stigma Slots”. “Advanced Stigmas” also have specific prerequisites that require one or two specific “Stigmas” to be equipped at the time. While an individual can remove a “Stigma” or “Advanced Stigma” at no cost, they both have a small cost to equip in the form of a currency called “Stigma Shards”. “Stigma Shards” can be acquired a multitude of ways. The exact amount of “Stigma Shards” required to equip a “Stigma” or “Advanced Stigma”, though, is not displayed until an individual talks to the vendor who helps the player equip the “Stigma” or “Advanced Stigma”. This is another case of a nuisance that either requires the player to pull up an external resource to see the exact numbers or spend a lot of time running back and forth between the vendor who equips the “Stigmas” and the player's bank.

The “Advanced Stigmas” build up like a tree, eventually reached a penultimate “Advanced Stigma” for that specialization. While the “Advanced Stigma” at the end of the tree tend to be very, very useful, some of the “Stigmas” and “Advanced Stigmas” that are prerequisites for said abilities are subpar and do not serve a purpose to the player outside of allowing them to unlock their desired “Advanced Stigma”. Such an example would be the stigma “Zikel's Wisdom”. “Zikel's Wisdom” increases the magic boost of the sorcerer by 300. It is required if the sorcerer wishes to proceed towards the “Advanced Stigma” that generate immense amounts of damage per second. “Vaizel's Wisdom”, on the other hand, decreases cast time by 25%. “Vaizel's Wisdom” scales much better with gear than “Zikel's Wisdom” does.

As players become higher level, they will gain multiple ranks of the exact same ability. This also applies to “Stigmas”. Each rank is slightly more effective, more efficient, and better scaling than the last. When the player approaches 55, he will sometimes have a dozen versions of the same spell in his spell book. While there is a button that allows the user to show only the maximum rank of all abilities, the question remains why the user is able to cast lower ranks of abilities. None of the lower ranks provide a bonus that is not overwrote by a higher rank. The healing abilities also do far less healing by a substantial margin and, at the maximum level, healers have

access to enough mana and mana regeneration abilities that they do not need to cast lower ranks of abilities to save mana.

Perhaps one of the strangest parts of the game is grouping. Only one instance of ability can be active on a single target at a time. This lowers the demand for classes that are dependent on damage over time effects or heal over time effects. On the other end of the spectrum, classes that do instantaneous damage or healing will always be in high demand. To further complicate the matter, the number of negative statuses that can afflict a single target is very limited (8). When a 9th negative status is applied, it removes the chronologically oldest negative status, and then the negative status (which would have been the 9th) is applied. This further punishes the individuals who need to keep status effects on the target to optimize their damage. It also boosts the demand of the individuals who need minimal status effects on the target. The "Spiritmaster" is a subclass of mage that is very dependent on damage over time effects. They have a lot of negative statuses that they need to keep on monsters to optimize their damage. This causes the "Spiritmaster" to struggle in larger scale encounters, as their abilities are frequently bumped off by other players' negative statuses. The encounters are balanced around this, in a way.

In large scale encounters, the limit on negative statuses causes the game to rapidly push these statuses off the monster. This lowers the maximum amount of damage a large group of people can potentially do to a single target. This gives NCSOFT some freedom, as they do not need to balance encounters around the idea of needing enough health to survive potentially fighting 300 people at once. Instead, the large scale fights are balanced around the idea that there will be around 40 total people participating in the encounter. With this negative status limit, NCSOFT indirectly adds diminishing returns to the number of people beyond a certain point.

As the player advances through the world, he is presented with a bushel of stats. These stats have very generic tooltips inside of the character's portrait and will leave the user generally wondering what each stat does. "Spell Boost" sounds important for a mage, but the game gives no explicit indication of what it does. "Magical Attack" is another stat that sounds important to a mage. If the player is truly interested in what these statistics do, he will need to reference the internet in an attempt to uncover what it does or how it functions. "Spell Crit" is another great example. Until patch 1.9, "Spell Crit" existed as a stat within the game, but spells were unable to land critical hits. Without referencing an external source, a player would not know that "Spell Crit" was a completely useless stat. While "Spell Crit" is now a useful stat, "Magical Attack" still exists in the game. "Magical Attack" not only has a very generic tooltip, but it also falls into the category of useless stat. The stat increases the amount of damage the mage does by attacking with his spellbook in melee range. The description provided in-game for "Magical Attack", though, would lead an individual to believe that it increases the damage of all magical abilities. The ambiguous stat tooltips add a step of frustration to the player. This ambiguity would lead an individual to believe that "Magical Attack" and "Spell Boost" do the exact same thing. Without the aforementioned external research, this player is going down a bad path that may impact his character's future.

Another problem with the tooltips in Aion™ is in regards to how much benefit an individual is getting from a certain stat. There is a limit to the amount of cast/attack speed reduction a player can get from gear. It is possible to get more cast/attack speed reduction gear than this limit, though, so only through careful testing and research will a player discover that some of his precious gear is, in fact, not helping him. There is also a second limit to the amount of cast/attack speed reduction a player can have. The second limit is in regards to abilities and consumables being used. In other words, an individual can be at the limit with gear, but if he doesn't use his abilities that increase his attack speed and pop the attack speed scroll, he may not actually be capped out. The tooltips within Aion™ do not, at any point, indicate a limit. The tooltips also do not adjust to your current gear in any way shape or form. The only way to tell a difference in how much effect you are getting from a cast speed is to manually time it with either 3rd party software or with an actual stopwatch.

Perhaps one of the most frustrating parts of Aion™ is the itemization. Originally in Korean beta, spells were able to land critical hits. After long testing, NCSOFT decided that it was overpowered, so spells were no longer able to land critical hits. The big problem with this, though, is that none of the items with "Spell Crit" on them were modified. The stat "Magical Attack" also remained in place, despite being neutered in the Korean beta to a state of virtual uselessness. Despite these massive changes that took the punch out of the "Spell Crit" and "Magical Attack", items with these statistics polluted the game. After the changes in 1.9, though, "Spell Crit" became a very pertinent and strong stat for mages. The same mages who read up on their class and avoided "Spell Crit" are now being punished with lower damage throughput. Meanwhile, stats such as "Magical Attack" remain useless.

As for the leveling process itself, this is one of the game's major issues. The number of available quests is limited, and the experience reward from the quests is low in relation to the amount of experience required per level. This, in turn, creates lulls in the higher levels where an individual has access to no quests, but needs a lot more experience in order to level. While this creates an influx of groups hunting monsters that give good experience, the influx is only temporary. The influx only exists when all of the active players have been given access to a new level cap, which happened at the beginning of Aion™ and upon release of the first expansion. As the game drifts further from the beginning of a new leveling period, groups become harder and harder to find. This is problematic for the game as it makes it more and more challenging for new players to progress through the game in a timely matter.

Another problem when it comes to the atrophy of the group hunting experience is that certain classes are capable of soloing, while others are not. Two of the classes that are strong at soloing are clerics and sorcerers. Clerics are the strongest healing class for groups, and sorcerers are the strongest crowd control class. Given that these classes are very integral to a strong group and it is possible for them to bypass the need for groups almost entirely during the leveling process, the remaining classes that have to group up are left with far less optimal groups that makes their leveling experience even less enjoyable.

Aion™ has a very punishing death system, at least to the newer player and poorer (in-game) player. When a player dies in Aion™, he loses a portion of experience permanently. He also loses a portion of his experience temporarily, receives an increment to a hidden counter, and temporarily moves at half speed. The counter tracks how many times the player has died since he last paid a soul healer to heal him. As the counter gets higher, the amount of time that the player moves at half speed is increased, maxing out at 3 minutes. The counter, though, continues counting beyond that point. The cost to have the soul healer reset the counter is multiplied by the counter. Thus, having 25 deaths since the last soul heal makes the soul heal cost 25 times as much. When a player pays to have his soul healed, all of the experience he lost temporarily is also restored. The reason that this is more punishing to the newer player and poorer (in-game) player is because a player who is a veteran with a lot of money will not hesitate to pay for soul healing, but a new player or a poor player may lose a good portion of their money simply paying off a debt earned up through deaths.

Instances at maximum level are extremely popular within Aion™. Instances within Aion™ have a cool down time, ranging from 30 minutes to 46 hours. The instances themselves are unique and the monsters (both bosses and trash) tend to have special features that are thematically fitting to the instance. This makes each instance fresh and different than the other. The lower level instances have two issues specific to them, though. The instances below maximum level give very little experience (relative to the amount gained by killing group monsters in the world) and have a rather sizable cool down timer between potential runs. This limits their viability as a method of leveling up.

An issue that plagues all the instances, both low level and high level instances, is the rate that loot drops from monsters (both trash and bosses). Items are not guaranteed to drop from bosses. Sometimes a boss will not even drop money. This is particularly aggravating in instances that take a long commitment. While the best loot in the game should not always drop, the final boss of an instance will sometimes die and not even drop a single, low-quality item. NCSOFT has progressively made this better, though, but they still have not guaranteed items dropping off of bosses. This issue (drop rates) is also an issue in world drops, making the prices of items in the economy unforgivingly expensive. Later in the game's life cycle, NCSOFT added vendors that sold some of the world drop items to place an artificial price ceiling on them. This has lowered the price of some very vital items, but some items are still exorbitantly expensive due to their low drop rate.

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