

Diablo III: Lord of the Auction House

L.O.V.E.....H.A.T.E.

This is how I would describe my relationship with Diablo III. At its best, Diablo III is filled with unparalleled hack and slash action, epic battles, and epic loot. At its worst, the repetitive gameplay puts me to sleep (literally). This on-again, off-again relationship is very similar to the relationship I had for some ten plus years with Diablo II. And say what you want, I actually *like* and *appreciate* this love-hate relationship. To understand, let me try to explain this yin-yang of Diablo III.

In game design circles there is a way of conceiving a game as consisting of *pillars*, which can be understood simply as areas of emphasis. While there is no one commonly understood set of pillars that describe all games, some of the more common pillars are sound, gameplay, character design, and narrative. What most game developers and publishers have come to realize is that it is better to excel in one or two pillars, and to be somewhat deficient in the others, rather than to be mediocre or even moderately good at everything. The idea is to push one or two areas in development and to heavily market those areas. Fans tend to react better to excellence in a few areas, and seek out excellence in other areas in other games. In the case of Diablo III, Blizzard focussed heavily on two pillars: action (gameplay), and items (loot). In terms of action, everything is more-or-less a continuation of the high emphasis on action found in Diablo 2 (yes, D3 has enhanced 3d graphics and sound, but it has fundamentally the same hack and slash gameplay). It is in the second pillar, loot, where things get very interesting.

To fully grasp the significance of what Blizzard has chosen to do, it is important to understand that with Diablo II a parallel economy evolved alongside the main game that allowed people to buy and sell the virtual items from the game. While there were item-for-item trade forums within the game, if you wanted to convert your items into cash (or vice-versa), you had to seek out 3rd party websites (including eBay until they eventually changed their policy). I was part of this economy, and made a few thousand dollars selling my best virtual items. The formula was actually quite simple: level-up until you could defeat the toughest bosses, add magic find gear, kill the bosses and sell the loot that drops. Do this over, and over, and over, and over, and over, and over again. For over a decade Blizzard was a bystander to this parallel economy. So, somewhat predictably, Blizzard chose to include an auction house as part of Diablo III. Not only that, but they included both a in-game *gold* auction house, as well as a *real-money* auction house. It is here that my love-hate relationship couldn't be more profound.

Blizzard takes 15% of every completed auction, and an additional \$1.00 from each completed real-money auction. Thus their business model is built into the game. And through careful manipulation of difficulty in the game, they constructed a system whereby you all but are required to use the auction house to complete the game on the highest difficulty level (INFERNO). You can defeat the first three difficulty levels (Normal, Nightmare, Hell) with relative ease, but the final difficulty level (Inferno) is a new game altogether. Without EPIC gear, you have virtually no chance of completing Inferno difficulty, especially the later acts. To acquire this gear, you *need* to use the auction house. It is at this point that players have three fundamental choices.

The first choice is to simply stop playing. The second is to be patient, use the gold auction house, and eventually, perhaps after months of playing, you will have gear good enough to defeat the game on the final difficulty. Finally, and this is where things get icky, just give in and use the real-money auction house to purchase the gear you need. For me, I have chosen door #2 (be patient), although the pressure to use the real-money auction house is profound when you find yourself spending literally months without making any significant progress. None of the

choices seem like the “right” choice, and it has left me with a bad taste in my mouth, at least for the time being.

So while I detest the ‘funneling’ of players to the real-money auction house to progress, I appreciate that there is no monthly fee to play. I have thusfar found myself loving the game for a time, getting bored, frustrated, or both, hating the game, putting it down, and then re-engaging when a new patch or new content is added. For the time being I’m into ACT 3 of the final difficulty. Once I finally gear up enough to complete Inferno I’ll be done, for a time. Love them or hate them, Blizzard ultimately knows how to please their player-base, and you can count on them to add new epic enemies and new epic loot. And while Diablo III will evolve and change over the next decade, one thing is for certain, the auction house is here to stay.

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