

GANKSTAS

A Brief Survey of Grief Play in World of Warcraft

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Introduction

As the video game culture grows and expands, so too does scholarly interest in video games grow and expand. Perhaps one of the most asked questions in these new scholarly endeavors is what draws so many people to play video games, most especially Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, which are fast becoming a phenomenon among video games. MMORPGs can offer copious choices to the gamer, among them the potential to explore the world of the game, to socialize with other players, to understand the nuts and bolts of how the game functions, and to achieve various levels of accomplishment. With this last potential choice comes two principal paths – a player may choose to advance to high levels via the structures provided by the game’s creators (“questing” and “raiding”), or a player may choose to advance by competing with other players. When a player chooses the latter advancement, called Player versus Player (PvP), potentially undesirable factors will inevitably join the mix, namely grief play, which is what will be discussed here. With the data collected from our surveys, interviews and discussion group, we hope to explore the connections between PvP and grief play, as well as take another look at what it means to grief.

Part 1: What is Grief Play?

While the definition of grief play may shift from player to player, situation to situation, a common thread among gamers defines grief play as “Playing for the sole purpose of preventing others from enjoying the game.” Foo and Koivisto [1] elaborate that: the griefer’s act is intentional; it causes other players to enjoy the game less; the griefer enjoys the act. Lin and Sun [2] expand the definition to include “break[ing] the laws (codes and rules of conduct) of their game worlds, violate the norms and etiquettes of their communities.” One interviewee described it as “Mainly just to be an asshole.” These are rather vague terms, however, so we will now look to real instances of griefing, the most prominent of which in WoW is called “ganking.” When asked to describe occasions where they had grieved or been grieved, the most common response was to a time in which they ganked¹ or camped², or had it done to them.

[T]here is a road that goes from a neutral town through a horde town to an alliance camp. It was in the range of low 30s to high 40s, so there were tons of griefers. One guy waited for three hours over my body.

My poor mage got chain camped for about two hours on end by like four 60-70's.

In Darkshire I would never walk on the path for fear of being grieved. I spent a lot of time there, and I memorized the paths along the hills that I could take, because otherwise I would get ganked.

Quite often, players mentioned that they would grief for vengeance, acting only in retaliation or self-defense as it were.

When I got to 40s, I would sometimes go to horde starting zones to ‘return the favor’ and kill the noobs. I would never have done that until I got grieved so many times.

Someone grieved me, but then we killed him. We were like mid-20s but he was 40, and we managed to kill him. But then we couldn’t kill him again. Good times.

Player-killing, as described above, can only occur in a game like WoW where the rules allow it, either in PvP servers, in Battlegrounds³ or when a character has been “flagged” for PvP.

¹ To kill another player, usually a significantly weaker one.

² To wait for a player to respawn in order to kill them again.

³ A type of area in WoW where players compete for control.

And while this is perhaps the most prominent method of griefing, eliciting annoyance from the victim, players mentioned other forms of griefing that indirectly affected other gamers. Interviewees mentioned killing NPCs vital to other players, such as auctioneers, merchants and flight masters, or rare monsters required for quests. One player even mentioned that he would sometimes, with other players, “lay waste to an entire town.”

Other interesting forms of griefing are the non-violent kinds, such as ninja looting⁴, kill-stealing, using the chat system to annoy others (perhaps with requests to buy gold, join guilds, or general harassment), using /emotes to taunt and pester, and exploiting glitches in the game’s coding. As one might expect, these types of griefing occur in Player versus Environment (PvE) settings more often than player-killing griefing. And yet if ganking and camping are the primary forms of griefing, and can only be truly found in a PvP setting, are players going to PvP servers for the sake of being able to grief?

Part 2: World PvP & PvE

There are a few large differences between a PvP server and a PvE server. The first major difference is the level of competition and difficulty on a PvP server as opposed to a PvE server. On a PvE server, leveling a character is much easier due to the fact that on a PvE server, factions cannot kill each other whenever they want, but they can on a PvP server. When a survey participant was asked, “Do you feel that there are different atmospheres on a PvP vs. a PvE server?” they answered, “People on PvE servers do not target the other faction to attack. On a PvP server I get ganked all the time by the other faction.” Another major thing that PvE game play lacks is the sense of faction pride. A PvP player commented, “Another thing that has struck me on the PvP server is the faction pride there which seems to lack a bit on the PvE servers. It

⁴ Taking loot that was earned by another player, by speed, guile, or a cheat. (Foo and Koivisto 5)

becomes almost like a home team atmosphere” (Melibourne). In a PvE server, since it is not possible to attack the other faction whenever, there is less pride in faction because of the lack of competition between them. There is no motivation to go and attack the other faction, unlike PvP where it is a necessity to play the game.

These differences mean that certain players will enjoy different worlds according to their personality. In a PvP server, due to the level of competition and difficulty in leveling, often draws in people that are more individualistic, because the player has to be able to protect themselves from the other faction. As one survey answer said, “PvP players are often more experienced in solo play.” Players that want the tougher world will choose PvP. As Viola said, “I guess the weakness of the PvP servers for me is due to leveling issues” (Viola). It is also important to note that it is easier in a PvP server to gank, and grief play, due to the fact that factions can attack each other whenever they want.

PvE players naturally do not want this much competition and difficulty. Choosing to play a PvE server means that the player wants an easier experience that is often times much less frustrating, since they will not be killed by the other faction every time they want to go somewhere. This in turn also means that it is harder to player-kill and grief play is often times not seen as much. As one PvE player said in the survey, “I don't like people attacking me for no reason when I have no chance of survival.” And another PvE player said in an interview, “When I think of a PvP world, I think of mass continual ganking” (Forcense). The type of person who plays a PvE server is looking for different sources of enjoyment in the game, as opposed to a PvP player.

So how does the server-choice affect the amount of griefing that occurs? Due to the fact that in a PvP server there is so much more competition, and danger, it allows for people who

want to gank to come to a PvP server and do just that. People who enjoy a PvE server more than a PvP server will naturally be less likely to grief, simply because that is the nature of a PvE world. There is less contact and fighting with the other faction, and therefore makes it a lot harder to grief others. A PvP server is a perfect place to grief other players because, a player can, for the most part, attack another whenever they feel like it. As the player Viola said, "I favor a more quiet environment [-] my focus being on PvE content because of the creative/imaginative aspects of the game." A PvE server is quieter, and focuses on different things than competing against other players (not to say this does not happen). What it comes down to is that players in a PvP server have the easy access and temptations to grief due to the way a PvP world functions.

Below is a sampling of the questions asked and some responses:

- *Do you feel that there are different atmospheres on a PvP vs. a PvE server?*
 - *People on PvE servers don't openly try to engage the other faction*
 - *Yes, PvP players are often more experienced in solo play*
- *Specifically what are some actions taken by you, or others, in a PvP world that you would not do or expect to see in a PvE world?*
 - *One word, Gank*
 - *I always have my track humanoids on*
 - *Extreme ganking*
 - *Corpse camping*
- *In a brief sentence, describe your understanding of what grief play is.*
 - *Ganking random people for no reason*
 - *Playing with the intention of ruining someone else's game play experience*
 - *Ganking and camping Alliance, good times*
 - *Corpse camping*
 - *Intentionally interfering and ganking others*
- *Which type of server do you prefer, and why?*
 - *PvE, it provides a clear sense of accomplishment and it let me play with my friends*
 - *PvP, I like fighting with others*
 - *I prefer PvE because it is easier to level*
 - *PvP, people can't just unflag to get away from you*

Part 3: PvP & PvE Preferences

Not all players enjoy World of Warcraft for the same reasons. There are several different ways of playing the game, the main two categories (as we've already discussed) being separated into PvE and PvP play. But what attracts players to actually be a part of these specific areas? What does the game offer to players in each respective category? By interviewing a group of players on their PvP and PvE preferences, we investigate the reasoning behind what drives a player to certain areas in World of Warcraft. We used a series of ten questions, some of which explore the player's mindset on PvP/PvE differences, and why they do either.

The first question of relevance asked players how often they play PvP in comparison to playing PvE. Keeping in mind that most of the questions were directed towards players in a guild based on PvE, the answers may be slightly more biased. Player responses still had a wide variety however. Similar responses received were that some players play PvE around four times more often than they play PvP. The reasoning behind this is because of PvE raiding. A more extreme response we had was from two other interviewees. They claimed that their PvP experience was only about 1/50th or 1/60th of their PvE experience. A notable comment made by players was that their answers would not have always been the same as now – at times their responses might have been entirely inverted (a “1:50 PvE:PvP ratio,” or “about one minute of PvE per hour of PvP”). One player said that “Just until recently I used to do almost non-stop PvP. But with my friends in the same guild as me now, I much prefer to PvE.” Other players claimed they play PvE only slightly more often, while one even said he did nothing but play PvP. The last selection of interviewees said that their PvP experience happened during weekends, when there was no major PvE content to play. From this it is possible to tell that even in a PvE guild, there are still some factors tied into PvP which attract players.

The next question asks, “What interest do you hold in PvP? What is your experience?” Answers here were quite varied. Some said PvP to them was a good way to get gear for the game; sometimes they said PvP even could gear them up for PvE content. Many said they enjoyed the challenge of what PvP had to offer. When asked in further detail what PvP had that PvE did not have to offer, our answers became much more detailed. Also, we found many more similarities in player responses after being more specific. The majority of players interviewed seem to believe that PvP has a strategic element to it which PvE simply cannot offer. The reason that PvE cannot offer this is that it has scripted events – or rather, pre-planned, programmed events which never change. Player influence has no effect on PvE content whatsoever. However in PvP, players will always experience something different. Their opponent may be slow witted and all around bad at World of Warcraft, or they may be excellent, swift thinkers, who act in new and original ways to achieve victory. There is never the same fight twice. Other responses from interviewees claimed that high-end gear is much easier to get than in PvE. For example, when doing arenas (a private, “instanced” battleground that allows for only 2v2, 3v3, or 5v5 combat between players), it is possible to get high class weapons quickly, whereas in PvE it may take months to get a weapon of equal or lesser value. Only the best of the best can acquire weaponry better than what PvP has to offer. Another response was that the interviewees like the fact that they are able to kill things without the assistance of 24 other people (such as in a raid setting). In PvP, they have the ability to take on many foes on their own, or with a smaller group of five to ten.

Interesting responses from players about what they enjoy in PvP were the ones who claimed they enjoy “slaying noobs⁵” or being able to kill griefers in revenge of their own death. We have found that griefing other players in world PvP was also a factor which was brought up

⁵ A weaker, less experienced, or lower level player.

more than once in player responses. We asked the players about grief play and received further interesting answers. To players, grief play is frequently the act of “camping lowbies,” or rather killing a lower level player over and over again, sometimes to an extreme degree. This process is pleasing to the interviewees for multiple reasons. “Curing boredom” was a frequent response in reasons for griefing. Revenge often is the most well known reason for griefing other players. Players claim that if they had their lower level “alt,” or alternate character camped, they will often log on to their high level character and grief the player who was griefing them. For example, one player said that “I have griefed before, but only in retaliation to being griefed. I was questing on a low level alt in Ashenvale⁶ and someone starting ganking and corpse camping me. So I got on my warlock and killed their town.” The interviewees claim that griefing can be both good and bad, however when they are the ones doing the griefing, they always consider it good. Griefing either puts a player in his or her place, or allows for the players to spend time together and kill boredom. Since world PvP is one of the large factors pointed out in player preference as to how they like to PvP, you will see a large connection in griefing as a factor of why or why not they might PvP as opposed to PvE, or vice versa.

Conclusion

In most any game, players are generally content to stay within the boundaries set out by the game, most especially when the rules not only prohibit certain conduct, but when the coding of the video game itself only allows for certain actions. Nevertheless, when confronted with boundaries it is almost human nature to push them to the end, to make the most from what the confines allow. In a PvE server, the coding of the game is such that players cannot attack other faction members at any given time, only when such attacks are deemed acceptable. In a PvP

⁶ A forested zone in the World of Warcraft, property of the Alliance.

server, however, there is no such rule (with a few exceptions). Data collected from interviews, surveys and a discussion group all point to players choosing PvP servers in place of PvE servers, not only expecting to be grieved, but also to commit grief themselves. As the coding of the game changes to allow this behavior, it would be only logical that many players would push this as far as possible, committing grief as they see fit, all the while expecting others to do exactly the same.

Works Cited

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