

Theorycraft in Practice:

Death Knight Versatility

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Introduction

With over 11.5 million subscribers worldwide, World of Warcraft (or WoW for short) is the largest Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). (Billard, 11 May 2009). If you were to take all of the players from World of Warcraft and give them their own state, players would be part of a community that was the 7th largest state in the United States, just below the population of Pennsylvania. (US Census Bureau, 05 May 2009).

World of Warcraft is a dynamic virtual world with a storyline which never ends. The game itself is constantly being updated. Patches, which include changes to the game in order to fix bugs, exploits, and the game mechanics themselves, are released every single Tuesday. Blizzard has also released two expansion packs to the World of Warcraft to add brand new content to the game. In its most recent expansion pack, The Wrath of the Lich King, Blizzard introduced the all-new Death Knight class. The class itself is locked by default, and you actually need a level 55 character before you can roll the Death Knight class. To compensate for this, each Death Knight starts at level 55 and all Death Knights start off in the same zone.

Because there is no end to the World of Warcraft, the main motive of the game is character progression. In other words, the main goal is to make your character the best it can be by outfitting it with high-level items, earning gold, learning and mastering your character's abilities, and distributing your character's talents points just right. In the World of Warcraft, each class has three separate talent trees (such as: Blood, Frost, and Unholy for the Death Knight class). After your character reaches level 10, your character is awarded one talent point per level. At max level (level 80), a character has a total of 71 talent points that can be

distributed amongst the three talent trees. Glyphs are also another aspect to character progression and specialization that were introduced with The Wrath of the Lich King expansion pack. A character at max level can have a total of three major and three minor glyphs. These glyphs enhance specific abilities possessed by your class. Minor tweaks to a character's talents and glyphs can ultimately be the difference in winning or losing a fight.

Method

In order to come up with a unique research topic, I thought of what past researchers had completed and then attempted to fill the research gap. When one searches the internet for advice on a PvP (Player versus Player) talent spec (short for: specialization) for any class, there is little or no information on the subject. Although there are websites with information regarding the best spec for each class, such as the Elitist Jerks (elitistjerks.com), these websites only crunch the numbers and report on which talent spec produces the highest DPS (Damage Per Second), the most efficient healing, or the most efficient tanking ability (ability to take high amounts of damage). These all focus on the PvE (Player versus Environment) side of the game. To fill the research gap, I conducted a quantitative and qualitative study on the three Death Knight talent specs to determine which is the absolute best for PvP combat.

Subject

For this research project, I will be using my own Death Knight character, named "Dystroya", to evaluate the three Death Knight talent specs. Throughout the rest of this project, I will refer to the subject as "Dystroya." My character's description, in full, is a level 80 Blood Elf Death Knight. Blood Elves are a particular race of the Horde faction in the World of

Warcraft which were introduced during the first expansion pack, The Burning Crusade. Among other minor differences, the Blood Elves possess their own unique spell named "Arcane Torrent" which "silences all enemies within 8 yards for 2 sec and restores 15 Runic Power." (Wowhead, June 09). "Silence" means the player is unable to cast spells, and "Runic Power" is a type of energy used specifically by Death Knights to cast their spells. Therefore, I chose to be a Blood Elf Death Knight because this spell generates additional runic power and the spell proves very useful in PvP combat.

Here is a link to "Dystroya" on the World of Warcraft Armory (wowarmory.com) which provides a list of my character's current set of weapons and armor.

<http://www.wowarmory.com/character-sheet.xml?r=Mannoroth&n=Dystroya>

I would rate my Dystroya's gear as "moderate" for the up-to-date version of World of Warcraft. It's not quite top of the line gear, but it's nothing terrible either. Dystroya has a resilience rating of 737, which is quite decent for the updated version of WoW. Resilience is a type of stat placed only on PvP gear, which reduces chance critical strikes are made on you, the damage taken from critical strikes, and mana-draining effects.

Death Knight Resource Mechanics

Death Knights are a bit different than every other class; they use runes and runic power to use their abilities. "Runes are the primary resource mechanic for Death Knights. It's a very new concept (somewhat) that can be compared to Energy. Runes have a set regeneration period, which is 10 seconds. A Death Knight starts with 2 Blood Runes (B), 2 Frost Runes (F) and 2 Unholy Runes (U)." (Elitist Jerks, June 09). There is also a fourth type of runes called death

runes which serve as any type of rune and are generated with either Blood Tap or through talent spec. "Runic Power is the second Resource Mechanic of a Death Knight. You could compare it to a Warrior's Rage, as they are somewhat similar. Runic Power is generated through using abilities which require a Rune. There are set values for the amount of Runic Power generated, depending on the amount of Runes said ability requires." (Elitist Jerks, June 09). All Death Knight abilities require either 1, 2, or 3 runes, or a set value of runic power.

Approach

Like I stated above, I will be evaluating all three Death Knight talent specs to determine which is the best for PvP use. First, I will evaluate the Unholy spec, simply because Dystroya is already specialized to Unholy. Next, I will evaluate the Blood spec, and finally, the Frost spec. I will refer to Elitist Jerks for advice with the Blood and Frost talent specs, but I will not follow the guides exactly because I am taking into account versatility as well as DPS.

As far as glyph sets go, I will be only be substituting two major glyphs between each talent re-spec (short for: respecialization). The reason is because the three minor glyphs Dystroya currently has are the three absolute best minor glyphs a Death Knight can possibly have, all-around. These three glyphs are Glyph of Pestilence, Glyph of Horn of Winter, and Glyph of Raise Dead. The major glyph I will not be substituting is Glyph of Strangulate, which "reduces the cooldown on your Strangulate by 20 sec." (Wowhead, June 09) Strangulate is an ability which "Strangulates an enemy, silencing them for 5 sec." (Wowhead, June 09) Strangulate is the longest silence castable by a player in the entire game, and silencing in

general proves very useful in PvP combat, so that's why this glyph will not be substituted throughout the course of this experiment.

Procedure

I participated in 15 battlegrounds total in order to fully evaluate each talent spec. I chose to evaluate by entering only Warsong Gulch (capture the flag), Arathi Basin (territories), and Eye of the Storm (mixture of capture the flag & territories) battlegrounds because in the larger battlegrounds, there are too many variables involved and individual participation is worth much less compared to the strategy of the group as a whole.

To measure the PvP combat versatility of each Death Knight talent spec, I took note of my kill/death ratio and my overall DPS from each battleground. To calculate overall DPS, I divided total damage done by the elapsed time of the battleground. Since each separate round of each battleground can last different amounts of time, I figured that simply measuring by total damage done would not produce consistent results. I also measured DPS using a DPS-tracker add-on.

The last thing I will do is discuss the pros and cons of each Death Knight talent spec in a PvP combat sense. This is what sets this experiment apart from the Elitist Jerks; I will specifically discuss what is gained and what is lost from each spec, what combat is like for each spec, and which classes are easy and which are tough to kill for each spec.

more details, visit the link above. For my set of glyphs for this spec, I used Glyph of Frost Strike and Glyph of Obliterate on top of the other 4 glyphs common to all specs.

Battleground	Kills/Deaths	DPS
WSG 1	5/3	844
WSG 2	6/1	955
WSG 3	7/4	831
WSG 4	11/8	989
WSG 5	7/7	978
AB 1	10/4	994
AB 2	4/6	820
AB 3	4/7	811
AB 4	8/2	1,016
AB 5	12/8	899
EOTS 1	5/6	826
EOTS 2	8/6	876
EOTS 3	10/3	1,005
EOTS 4	9/8	940
EOTS 5	11/7	968
Averages	1.95/1	859

So, with the Frost spec and glyph set, I averaged 1.95 kills per death and 859 DPS.

Discussion

After several battlegrounds spent with each spec, the Unholy spec achieved the highest kill/death ratio and average DPS, followed by Frost and Blood. According to the results I received from this experiment, the most versatile Death Knight talent spec for PvP combat is Unholy.

Significance

The Unholy talent spec is widely known and accepted as the PvP spec for Death Knights. Talents in the tree help reduce the cooldown on Death Grip, which pulls the target to the Death Knight. The Unholy tree also provides the Death Knight with a permanent ghoul pet which can remotely stun the target for 2 sec. every 15 sec. Unholy-specialized Death Knights are granted 3 diseases instead of the standard two, which is very often overlooked when calculating damage. The talent Desecration throws down an AoE (Area of Effect) slow that slows targets in the affected area by 50% each time you use Plague Strike or Scourge Strike. The main damage-dealing ability of Unholy Death Knights is the Scourge Strike, which deals extra damage per disease as shadow damage. Unholy-specialized Death Knights can also run slightly faster than other classes, moving at a 15% increased movement speed if talent points are distributed correctly. You no longer need to be in Unholy Presence to gain this bonus, so I stay in Blood Presence for the flat 15% increased damage bonus.

Unholy offers a lot of utility to the Death Knight; a pet that stuns, 3 diseases instead of 2, faster run speed, etc. The remote pet stun helps a lot against rogues and paladins who open up with a stun move. When the rogue or paladin stuns you, you can stun them back with your pet even though your character is incapacitated. Keeping certain targets snared and close to Dystroya was somewhat of a challenge. Unholy Death Knights are stuck with just Death Grip, Chains of Ice, and Desecration to keep their targets close by. If Death Grip is on cooldown, survival hunters usually pose a big threat because a lot of their damage is not magic-based (caster classes pose little threat to Death Knights, considering DK's come equipped with Mind

Freeze, Strangulate, and Anti-Magic Shield, on top of the Blood-Elf racial Arcane Torrent).

Restoration shamans posed the biggest threat; my pet's small melee hits would cause their Earthen Shield to proc too often, healing them, and their totems and frost shocks would slow down Dystroya and cleanse all diseases.

The Blood talent spec is widely accepted as the PvE raid spec, considering that Blood Presence offers a flat 15% damage bonus. (Elitist Jerks, June 09). Blood provides a lot of damage-dealing talents in contrast to the Unholy tree being based on utility. Such talents include Blood Gorged (increases damage done by 10% if your HP is > 75%), Heart Strike which uses one Blood rune to cleave 2 targets, and Sudden Doom which gives you a 15% chance on your Heart Strikes to launch a free Death Coil at the target.

With the recent nerf on Glyph of Blood Boil, Death Knights no longer have the warrior Piercing Howl equivalent; DK's can't snare large groups of enemies (unless targets are affected by Desecration) and can no longer snare targets who are out of line-of-sight. Instead, this glyph was replaced with Glyph of Heart Strike, which causes your Heart Strikes to snare the enemy by 50%. This helped keep my targets close by, as I could use a Blood rune, a Frost rune, or Death Grip to snare my targets. Druids and Hunters were easier to kill, but rogues and Paladins proved to be fairly big threats because I no longer had a pet which could leap and stun. If Icebound Fortitude (grants the Death Knight immunity to stun effects and reduces all damage taken by 20%) was on cooldown, I would have no abilities to defend against a stunlocking rogue or retribution paladin.

The Frost talent spec is widely accepted as the Death Knight tanking spec. Tanking, like I talked about earlier, is a character's ability to take high amounts of damage. This comes useful in PvE, with heroic dungeons, raids, etc. This explains why my kill/death ratio was better for Frost than for Blood, but also how my average DPS was the least. Frost has talents like Hungering Cold, which freezes all targets within 10 yards for 10 sec, Frost Strike, an instant attack costing runic power which cannot be dodged, blocked, or parried, and Howling Blast, which simply deals a large amount of damage to all targets within 10 yards.

The first thing I noticed with Frost spec is that my survivability shot up; I could take significantly more damage and I had higher maximum HP. The frost talent Chilblains snares the target by 50% for 10 sec. when affected by frost fever, so keeping targets close was also made a bit easier. The only problem here is that Icy Touch and Chains of Ice both cost a Frost rune, so you can snare a total of 2 times before your runes are on cooldown as opposed to 4 times if you were Blood-spec. I noticed also that a lot more abilities require runic power, and I found myself "runic dumping" a lot more often. Hungering Cold helped control and lock down large groups of enemies; freezing them and inflicting them all with Frost Fever. I found it very tough to keep targets near me unless Hungering Cold was available. Again, rogues and paladins proved to be tough if my Icebound Fortitude was not up, and Hunters were especially tough if my Death Grip was on cooldown. All caster classes remained easy to defeat, but healers were a bit tougher to defeat simply because my DPS was lacking.

Limitations

In the results section, if I did really well in a particular battleground and received zero deaths ($x/0$), there was no way to add this information to produce an average ratio since $x/0$ is undefined. Thus, I simply stated that these data were outliers and I did not use any $x/0$ ratio in calculating the average kill/death ratios.

I feel that the results I received from completing this experiment are based somewhat on the skill I have with each talent spec. I actually ended up getting approximately 1.5 kills-per-death more with the Unholy spec than any other spec after that. I have played the Unholy spec for quite some time now, which could very well have been a contributing factor to the results.

Implications

All players can choose what type of server they want to play on, be it PvP, PvE, or RP (Role-Playing) and that server type is generally the aspect that the server is most concerned with. There are an awful lot of PvP realms within the entire World of Warcraft. The information I have gathered has proven which talent spec serves the player the best in PvP combat. Sites like Elitist Jerks offer information regarding the best possible spec for maximum DPS, which are only useful for players concerned with the PvE aspect of WoW. Sites like Arena Junkies simply are not updated enough; talent spec advice on Arena Junkies' site has not been updated since the latest changes to the talent trees.

Now that I have done PvP-type research to fully evaluate all three talent trees of a single class, others should pick this up and create reports for all of the other classes. Every time there

are updates to talent trees or glyphs, interested individuals should create new reports discussing which spec for each class is best for PvP and why. Others should discuss which classes are easy to defeat and which are tougher to defeat with each spec, the general pros & cons, potential problems, DPS and kill/death ratios, etc.

Works Cited

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