

Blogs as Whetstones: The External Resources of Warcraft's Raiders

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Abstract

World of Warcraft has become one of the largest Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMO) with some of the most complex game mechanics out there. To conquer and become the best in World of Warcraft one must use a variety of resources to achieve this goal. While research has been done into the structures and interactions of raid teams and the general idea of add-ons, there is little to be seen about the resources found outside the game which raiders use to improve themselves. Theorycrafting and unofficial forums are heavily utilized by this community and reflects how much effort can be put into something people are passionate about.

Introduction

Since its release in 2004, World of Warcraft has grown to be the most successful subscription based Massively Multiplayer Online game of all time, holding 36% of the MMORPG market share in 2014 (SuperData Research cited in Pereira, 2014). One of the well-known features of the game is the ability to team up with other players to participate in raids, which are massive challenges with very specific fights created by the game developers, each one culminating in a series of fights against a single, incredibly powerful enemy commonly referred to as a boss. In its early days, raiding was a part time job, requiring that players work in concert with a 40-player team for hours a week in the hope of progressing before raids reset on Tuesdays. In the ten years since, it has become much more accessible. In patch 1.9.0, released January 3rd 2006, the first 20-player raid was added to the game, opening up the way for future raids to

require fewer and fewer players to run. In their first expansion, the Burning Crusade, Blizzard divided every instance, that is raids and their smaller equivalents, dungeons, into normal and heroic difficulties, allowing players of many levels of commitment to try their hand at raiding. The implementation of Looking For Raid, which matches players at random for a toned down version of the raid, and Raid Finder, which allows raids to search cross-server for players to fill in their ranks, has made it easier to find the players needed to face the challenge. A system which fluctuates the stats on various monsters based on the number of players in the raid has made it more inclusive for groups ranging in size from 10 to 30 players. Throughout these changes, the game has maintained dedicated raiders who work hard to conquer these challenges. This study will seek to understand just how much preparation players go through outside of the game to improve their skills.

Even as Blizzard makes raids more accessible to players, it remains important that anyone looking to raid be prepared and able to handle the challenges posed while staying at the top of their game. To this end, many blogs, add-ons (Third-party software which alters the game interface), social media groups, and countless other resources exist to help players improve. Alexa, an Amazon system which produces analytics for websites, shows that Icy Veins, one of the most popular blogs available for Warcraft raiders, is ranked 2,142nd in the US for site traffic, indicating that there is a thriving community of individuals looking for ways to improve themselves. Curse.com, a website used to find and download add-ons for World of Warcraft, lists Deadly Boss Mods(DBM), which assists players in managing dungeons by overlaying timers and warnings relative to the current fight on the player's screen, as the most-downloaded

add-on at over 2 million downloads per month. While this metric is slightly skewed by updates, each download of updates to the add-on contributes, this implies an immense number of players are using DBM to improve their play. These details show that a large portion of the Warcraft community, a population estimated to be over 7 million (Statista, 2015), has developed an incredibly active ecosystem outside of the game to share ideas for raid content alone.

Bardzell et al (2012) looked into the behaviors of raiders in two different raiding environments and their approach towards raiding as a whole. The study found that middle-tier raiding guilds tend to choose between two different approaches when progressing through a raid. *Farm progression style* focuses on gearing up by repeatedly killing bosses the raid can handle, allowing progression to happen at a slow and steady pace. *Achievement progression style* relies heavily on player skill, often skipping loot opportunities for the chance at killing a new boss, which results in sporadic progression, commonly attempting as many bosses as are available if there's even the slightest possibility the boss will be killed. While these findings indicate that skill is an important factor in mid-tier raid groups, especially in groups oriented towards achievement, there is no insight as to what means players employ to become more skilled in between raids. On the other hand, Wenz (2013) looks into how players develop knowledge about the game and its mechanics to understand the most efficient means of playing. It concludes that the process of theorycrafting (observing large amounts of data to find statistical results from the game) not only has the expected surveillance results, but also has very direct effects as the process of theorycrafting causes changes in the system. What it does not explain is the direct applications or the popularity of the system. The first of

these pieces very thoroughly analyze behaviors of raiders and the second delves into the methods external sources use to develop their suggestions, yet neither seeks to understand what resources players actually use or how effective those resources are. This paper seeks to fill this gap by analyzing which external resources, that is add-ons, blogs, and other such community resources, players use to improve their play, and what similarities can be found among players who use the same method.

Methods

Participants- Survey

A total of 53 participants took part in this study. Participants in this study were World of Warcraft players recruited through a survey link posted on various social media websites.

Participants- Interview

A total of 15 participants took part in the interviews. The majority of the participants were from North America servers Thrall and Kel'Thuzad. Thrall and Kel'Thuzad are US WoW Realms both in the top 20 for population. Thrall is a PvE server and rank 12 in progression out of all US WoW Realms (Wowprogress, 2015). Kel'Thuzad is a PvP server and also rank 12 in progression (Wowprogress, 2015). Progression refers to how many bosses a server's top raid team has defeated in the most current content, how recently they defeated that boss, and how high the average gear level is for active raiding teams.

Interview-Design, material, and procedure

An online interview was conducted using World of Warcraft's in-game chat system and the WoW addon Prat 3.0. The interview contained six open ended questions related to raiding.

Data was copied directly out of the in-game chat channels and posted into an online document. This was the most efficient means of conducting the interviews while maintaining an accurate transcript.

Analysis-Survey

Participants were contacted through Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit's sub-forum. Participants were informed they were free to share the database and produce works from the database. The participants were also told they could modify, transform and build upon the database as long as they follow the specific licensing. The anonymous survey was administered through the Qualtrics application, and a link was posted on select internet forums and Twitter. The survey was kept active for 1 week and had fifty-three usable responses (excluded responses included those who reported under 18 years of age and respondents who did not complete the majority of the questionnaire). The contents were analyzed through deductive coding.

Analysis-Interview

Participants were contacted via in-game private whisper (a direct message to another player). The participants were searching for raiding members in global chat channels. They were asked for their time and notified that by typing their character name they granted consent to allow their responses to be used. Answers to questions were cut and paste directly from the client into a word document.

Details of participants views about alternate means to improving raiding skills were assessed through deductive coding.

Results:

All participants reported using external resources to improve their raiding skills. The majority of the participants reported always using add-ons as their best resource for increasing their raiding skills (42%). A majority also reported often using websites to help them (50%). The most popular of the websites was IcyVeins, used to help players improve on class strategies. One interviewee, however, said, “websites like icy-veins are terrible websites with low quality content.” This person also reported being a hardcore raider, that is to say a player who puts enough effort into raiding to be among the best players on their server, defeating bosses as swiftly as possible. The hardcore players reflected what was seen in the survey data collected, that theorycrafting was their method of choice. Theorycrafting was the least popular resource used by raiders that were surveyed and interviewed, however, 33% of participants saying they “never” use it and another 33% saying they “rarely” do. However, in our survey results, participants who said they used theorycrafting always had the highest item level ($M = 686.75$) of any of the other resources, with the next highest being websites commonly referred to as logging websites ($M = 684.11$), which collect raw data from the game and make it available to the public. Interestingly, average item levels went up the more players reported using theorycrafting as well. Participants surveyed who reported they “never” used theorycrafting only had an average item level of 661.7 and, as mentioned previously, participants that “always” used it had an average of 686.75, with the item

levels going up the more often it was used (see Table 1). This is a strong correlation between using theorycrafting and having a high item level.

Table 1

Theorycrafting app/program (e.g., simulationcraft)

Average Item Level	<i>Answer</i>	<i>#</i>
661.7	Never	17
663.2	Rarely	17
668.8	Sometimes	6
676.1	Often	8
686.8	Always	4
		52

We did a gender analysis of the methods used to see if there was any distinction between what resources males preferred over females. Using a likert scale for frequency, with 5 being “never” and a 13 being “always,” we found that there was very little distinction between genders. Overall, the averages of how often each gender used the methods were very similar and practically no distinction. The numbers used were the average answers put on a numerical scale, with 5 being “never” and a 13 being “always”. The only slight pattern we can notice in the survey data is that generally, males use more methods more frequently but only with a higher average of a point or two. This could just be a variation on the data due to the survey being comprised mostly of male players.

When looking at survey data separated into groupings based on how long the participant has been playing WoW, we see both 0-2 year and 2-6 years of playtime

have "add-ons" as their most used resource, whereas participants with 7-10 years of playtime have "other forums", such as Wowhead and Elitist Jerks as their most frequently used resource (See table 2). Gamers who have been playing the least amount of time (1 month-2years) use Training Dummies the least and mid-length gamers (2-6 years) use Official World of Warcraft Forums least often.

Table 2

	Male	Female	1mth-2yrs	2-6 years	7-10 years
Asking Friend	11.17	10.33	10.66	11.04	10.88
Official Forums	10.31	9.26	10.16	9.73	10.00
Other Forums	11.69	11.13	11.58	11.47	11.58
Logging Websites	10.91	10.93	10.16	10.91	11.47
Theorycrafting	9.40	8.33	8.66	9.60	8.47
Add-ons	12.03	11.20	11.91	11.91	11.52
Training Dummy	10.11	9.57	8.08	10.18	10.41

Interviews

The interview data provided a more nuanced understanding of the raider's preferences for resources. For example, most of the players typically follow WoW players over social media. A large majority of the interviewees said they followed players to learn from their experience in-game and to get a glimpse at future boss encounters for themselves. But even more specifically, they watched players who run the same class and sometimes spec as they do, that way the content they watch would be applied to the game better. However, the best of the raiders we spoke to said, "occasionally, I will watch people on twitch, but more for a social aspect than actual

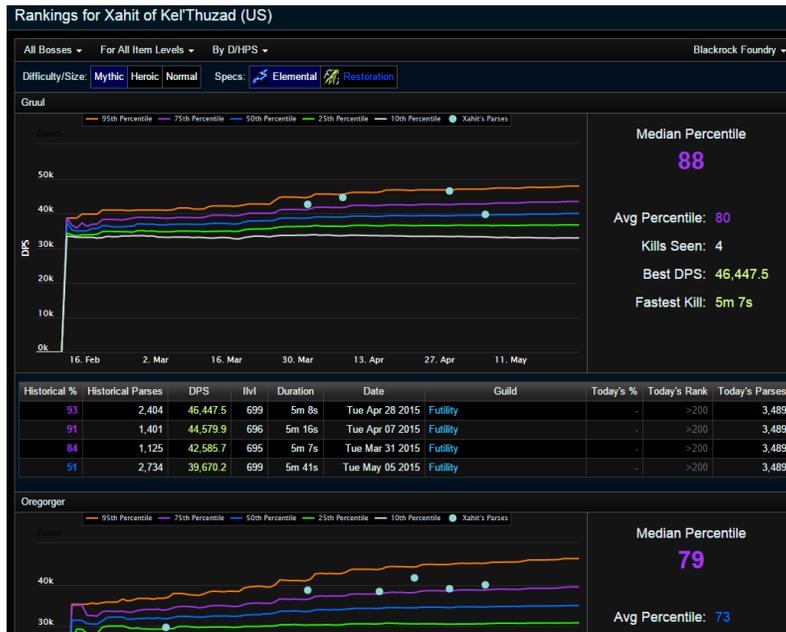
improvement.” These higher tier, or hardcore raiders as they said in their interviews, typically don’t have any certain build or person to follow. They forge their own paths and there is no need for using social media sites, “there is literally nothing i could learn from someone else playing and I already think that i play at 100% potential of the class.”

Another resource used by raider is patch notes. Unlike the other sources used by raiders, this is something provide to them through official sources, i.e. Blizzard Entertainment. Of all the players interviewed everyone utilized patch notes in some way. The hardcore players also kept a close eye on not only their class changes but, “to know how to manage my raid, what cooldowns are affected or what has changed for me to be effective at my role leading raids.”

There are other resources being utilized by the raiders found inside the game. Each of the raiders in their guild had some sort of class leader setup. The casual players had someone or a few people who would help direct players despite being a different class, just a general raid leader. Players who identified as ‘semihardcore’ had, “something called a ‘War Council’ - it consists of a melee leader, a healer leader, and a ranged dps leader - along with the general raid leader”; the goal of this is to help improve the raid groups potential but not all groups had a ‘war council’. The hardcore players had a different view, “ you’re supposed to already know how to maximize your full potential. Although there are no “technical” support structures, you’re supposed to get with other people in the same class and theorycraft possible ways to improve or cheese certain encounters”; they have gone past the stages of handholding.

Raiders were asked how they tracked how successful they have been at raiding. The casual players responded with a simple no, saying they didn’t take raiding that

seriously. The semi-hardcore and hardcore raiders shared the same responses; they used a third party site Warcraftlogs. The raiders said, “WarcraftLogs to study the guild's performance...and to see how players are ranking” this was the only site mentioned for tracking personal and guild progress.



Discussion

Add-ons were by far the most popular resource utilized by raiders to improve their skill. As mentioned in the introduction, the most popular add-on in World of Warcraft is Deadly Boss Mods, (Curse.com, 2015). Deadly Boss Mods isn't the only add-on used by raiders, but gives an example of what specific features an add-on might offer. Add-ons are very individual and usually focus on assisting the player by either making changes to the interface or interpreting data from the game which the player can't easily monitor. These add-ons are one of the primary resources which enable another resource which our research indicated to be very effective: theorycrafting.

Websites such as Icy Veins and Noxxic were most popular amongst mid-range players. These websites are known for providing generalized suggestions for players as far as talent choices and gear priority. They also provide class guides which teach players effective skill use and how to handle different types of fights. While these guides are very effective at introducing new players to their class and teaching them the basics, they tend to be catch-alls written towards a general audience. As a result, players who learn from these sites often lack the refined skill of players who develop their own strategies. On the other hand, the websites tend to prove much faster when improving than developing from scratch.

Theorycrafting was the least popular resource used by raiders that were surveyed and interviewed. This method is known for being very time-consuming and meticulous as it requires large amounts of time to be spent in game gathering data and even more time spent outside the game processing that data. Since we were interviewing casual, semi-hardcore and hardcore players, we expected that we would get mixed response to this method. Our research indicated a low tendency for players to engage in theorycrafting, which is to be expected considering the time dedication required. On the other hand, it was notable that players engaging in theorycrafting had notably higher item levels than their peers. This is understandable; a large commitment of time results in improved skills, allowing a player to progress further into the game. Theorycrafters gain the benefit of having personalized data into what changes to their build and gear will make them most effective. Because of this individual data these players achieve higher effectiveness than players who rely heavily on websites for their builds.

Another method that wasn't mentioned in the survey but came up frequently in interviews was the use of leadership structures in guilds to promote improvement. Guilds assign officers and class or role leaders who are available for other members should they need advice. These players tend to give more specific advice pertaining to an individual or to a certain fight, making them more effective than impersonal websites. These structures are less common in higher tier guilds as players are expected to handle optimization and improvement on their own so that time in game can be focused strictly on progression.

Social media proved a popular resource for most of the raiders we interviewed as well. This method allowed raiders to watch other players performing the same task as they do, giving them a better idea of what is expected of them. This prepares players before the content, allowing them to see what will come with the fight before they are actually engaging the boss. More casual players tended to use various Youtube channels to help learn dungeons, raids, and class skills. The more experienced and dedicated players tended to have specific individuals they looked to, though it was more commonly used for player vs. player content. The most experienced players often only used social media to interact with the community rather than to directly improve themselves, as they often understand current content well enough that assistance is unnecessary.

When it comes to tracking personal stats and guild statistics, it seems World of Warcraft's fan base only recognizes one website. From interviews, Warcraftlogs was the only statistic tracking website mentioned. When it came to builds and strategies, there are several websites that track raider's statistics, but when it comes to comparing who is

better there is only one. This reflects the competitive nature of World of Warcraft's raiding community. They recognize this one website to size each other up and that's exactly how it should be.

Neither gender nor amount of time they've played the game had much effect on what resources that they preferred to use. There were just slight variations based on our sample size and breakdown.

Overall, our findings demonstrate that while there is a degree of similarity in what players use, each individual has their own method for improving. Hardcore players are far less likely to rely on anyone else, and this may be the result of ego as much as the value of their own experience. On the other hand, casual players are very likely to take any advice they can get. This combines to make a very fluid environment in which hardcore players do the work to develop strategies effective for themselves. Casual players then look to these strategies and create patchwork methods that combine what is effective and what is convenient, developing wild and unexpected strategies. This makes for a community filled with a variety of unique and interesting methods, each one useful in its own right.

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