

Participant Observation of Griefing in a Journey Through World of Warcraft

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Abstract

Through the ethnographic method of participant observation in *World of Warcraft*, this paper aims to document various actions that may be considered griefing among the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) community. Griefing as a term can be very subjective, so witnessing the anti-social and intentional actions first-hand can be used as a means to understand this subjectivity among players as well as produce a thorough recount of some of the toxic behavior in this genre. The participant observation was conducted covertly across several years and expansions of World of Warcraft and the author became familiar with many griefing related actions; although some of these were perceived by the author as acceptable gameplay elements.

Author Keywords

Massively Multiplayer Online games; MMORPG; Participant observation; griefing; Warcraft; WoW;

Introduction

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a popular and well-known Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), which peaked at 12 million monthly subscribers (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010) and just recently reached its 13th anniversary (Blizzard Entertainment, 2017). The genre that WoW resides within has a very strong global population that continues to grow beyond its billion-dollar industry (Boudreau, 2008). Due to the mixture of competitive and cooperative social play, a varied demographic, and the anonymity available to players, griefing has become quite pervasive in MMORPGs (Achterbosch, 2015).

Chesney, Coyne, Logan & Madden (2009) identified that griefing is a relatively new area of research and a subset of the more well-known cyberbullying. It is hard to pinpoint an exact definition of griefing, but generally academics refer to it as an anti-social action intentionally performed by one player to disrupt another player's game experience and cause them grief. The instigator is called a griefer, and their deliberate action brings them pleasure knowing it caused others pain (Achterbosch, Miller, & Vamplew, 2017; Achterbosch, Miller, Turville, & Vamplew, 2014; Bartle, 2012; Foo & Koivisto, 2004; Lin & Sun, 2005; Mulligan & Patrovsky, 2003). Due to the ever expanding repertoire of different actions players employ in MMORPGs to disrupt

another player, the term griefing has become quite ambiguous (Akrivos, 2009; Bakioglu, 2009) and also subjective among the genre's players (Achterbosch, Miller, & Vamplew, 2013). One player's accusation of griefing, may be another player's claim of playing the game the way it was intended, or perhaps the result of a misunderstanding between players.

Due to its popularity, WoW was the focus of this participatory observation in which the primary author took part in the game through his avatar within the game world, while observing actions which some players may consider griefing. This observation was to assist with a much larger study (Achterbosch, 2015), and experience first-hand what may or may not be considered griefing.

Methods

This study conducted participant observation as a means to embed the primary author into the MMORPG community of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) and so become a part of the griefing phenomenon being studied. Research states that this type of ethnographic method can be used as a means of understanding and describing different cultures in some detail (Wood, Griffiths, & Eatough, 2004), and it is a method widely used in game studies due to the emergent gameplay and unpredictable player actions (Boellstorff, 2006). During participant observation, the chat interface and all public channels were monitored as was the three-dimensional visual display of the virtual world and its inhabitants.

This project was considered to be exempt from ethical review due to the following points in Australia's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2015): Research that can be exempted from ethical review is research that (a) is negligible risk research (as defined in paragraph 2.1.7); and (b) involves the use of existing collections of data or records that contain only non-identifiable data about human beings. For clarity, paragraph 2.1.7 states that "Research is 'negligible risk' where there is no foreseeable risk of harm or discomfort; and any foreseeable risk is no more than inconvenience. Where the risk, even if unlikely, is more than inconvenience, the research is not negligible risk." Due to meeting these exemptions, the ethnographic research was conducted with no formal informed consent. In this way, the observations remain truly accurate, as the witnessed in-game activities remain uninterrupted (Williams, 2007). If players were aware they were being observed, their behaviour may be altered (Hine, 2008) and the griefing phenomenon being studied compromised.

Recordings of any occurrences related to griefing were written in a notebook with a detailed report. The identities of the community involved were protected by removing all avatar names during recording of the data, and instead replacing them with anonymized names. In some cases the names used incorporated indicators of their in-game character's race, class or role, where such information was relevant to the incident being described. The events described are not sufficiently unique to allow the identification of any player. If at any time a player was to somehow ascertain that they were being observed, the author was prepared to speak about the research and emphasize that they could request to be removed from any recorded notes. This never occurred.

The observational journey that follows transpired from character creation of the author's avatar, all the way to the maximum level of 110. This took them through content of all six expansion packs. In particular, the bulk of the journey took part in 2013 during the fourth expansion, *Mists of Pandaria* (MoP). The journey was revisited during 2014 for the fifth expansion *Warlords of Draenor* (WoD) and in late 2016 in which the current expansion *Legion* provides the newest content. The entire journey is written from the first-person perspective of the primary author of the paper, with the additional authors providing assistance to the written piece. The amount of time spent playing the game is recorded in game via a typed command (/played). Executing this command revealed that the primary author spent 20 days, 11 hours, and 32 minutes on the avatar used for this study, or just over 490 hours.

It must be noted that the primary author is a relatively experienced MMORPG player, having played multiple MMORPGs within the last thirteen years, including (but not limited to) *World of Warcraft*, *EverQuest II*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Age of Conan*, *Final Fantasy XIV*, *Elder Scrolls Online*, *Blade and Soul*, *Guild Wars* and *Guild Wars II*. From experience the author was not handicapped by regular barriers to entry such as complex game systems and user interfaces (Adinolf & Turkey, 2011; Cornett, 2004), and was able to adapt to new experiences fairly quickly.

Observational Journey

Newbie

The following "Newbie" section was conducted during 2013, when MoP was the most up-to-date expansion.

After installation of *World of Warcraft* (WoW), I ran the game file and logged in to my account. As I had previously played WoW, I decided to try out the new race that players could pick as their avatar in the MoP expansion. This new race is a humanoid version of a Chinese Panda, and is called *Pandaren*. With Pandaren chosen as my avatar's race, next was to choose a gender. In this instance I choose a female Pandaren and then experimented with a few customizations such as hair style and fur color until I was happy with my choice. Next I had to select a character class.

Your chosen class represents what your character will be capable of performing during combat in relation to their strengths and skills (Shen, 2013), such as priests, warriors and warlocks to name a few. I picked the new option available with MoP, the Monk, as this class could excel in melee, defense and healing. Finally, I had to represent a WoW faction, the *Alliance* or the *Horde*. While factions in WoW are more sophisticated than simply 'good versus evil', I chose the Horde that is generally considered to be the evil faction, made up of races such as orcs, trolls, undead, and goblins. The Alliance has more traditional 'good' fantasy flavored races such as humans, night elves, dwarves and gnomes (Billieux et al., 2013; Orr, Ross, & Orr, 2012). These factions have unique stories and game content, and often end up in battles against one another during the course of the game. I hit the 'Accept' button on my newly defined character and the game began.

Level 1-10 (2013)

My Pandaren Monk 'Ling' entered the world with a Chinese styled name to suit the race and class (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Newly created Pandaren Monk 'Ling'

During my time on the island for newly created Pandaren, I encountered many other players that generally kept to themselves, appearing to be content on progressing beyond the starting area. There is no form of Player versus Player (PvP) combat on the island, as every Pandaren player is actually faction-less until leaving the isle to support the faction they chose during character creation. It seemed there was little opportunity for griefing, as much of the game is locked away and the player is restricted to the island until completing a set of tasks by around level 10.

Occasionally, I would encounter a player that was killing all the enemies that I was tasked to defeat, hindering my progress. Due to this game design feature, I had no option but to wait for enemies to respawn (re-appear in the game world), or try to beat the other player to the punch. A third option would be to band together in a 'party' to accomplish goals together, but at this early stage most players tended to favor progressing individually and autonomously.

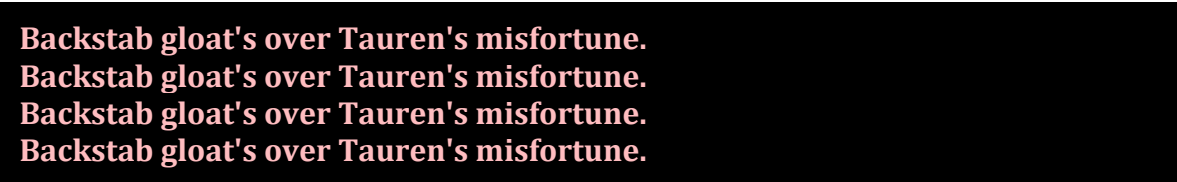
Level 10-20 (2013)

Leaving the island and joining the Horde in *Orgrimmar* finally opened the wider world to me. Here is where you can see what massively multiplayer really means, with large amounts of players congregating together in the capital city of this persistent server; trading items, bidding on auctions, conducting friendly duels, and many other actions available in the game (Achterbosch, Pierce, & Simmons, 2008). It was here where I saw my first case of griefing,

known as ganking. Ganking refers to when a player intentionally kills another player that is at a severe disadvantage with no hope for victory (Achterbosch et al., 2013; Foo & Koivisto, 2004; Goguen, 2009; Reynolds, 2007).

I was leaving the capital city to embark on a series of adventures in an early levelling zone. At the entrance gates to *Orgrimmar* many players engage in friendly combat duels. The fight will last until one player is reduced to one percent of their total HP, at which point they are considered defeated (Thompson & Thompson, 2010) in a friendly contest of skill. I was watching some players duel and one player claimed victory over the other. The defeated player, a Tauren, said, “Good one” to the victorious player, but before they could sit and rest to recover their HP, an Alliance rogue appeared behind them and backstabbed them to death with a single blow. Beforehand, the rogue was nearby in stealth mode waiting for opportunity. Once they had performed the killing blow revealing themselves, they reverted back in to stealth mode as quickly as it happened. Stunned Horde players in the vicinity started a manhunt searching for the Alliance player called 'Backstab', shooting off magic spells and swinging wildly in an attempt to reveal the hiding rogue but without result.

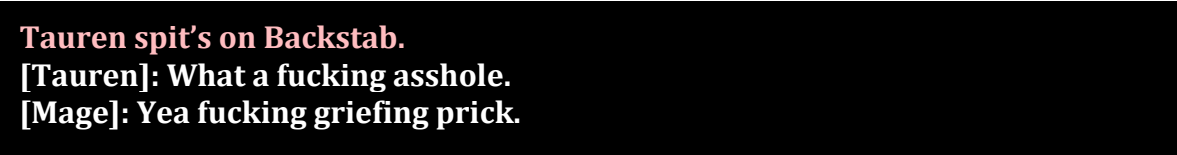
After a few minutes, the duels resumed and one match ended with a victor that was barely alive himself. Once again the rogue 'Backstab' appeared out of nowhere and performed an attack that could hit multiple opponents, from which the duelists were killed. The Alliance rogue performed a series of in-game emotes (that appear in the chat channel to all nearby players) rubbing salt in the wound as they once again vanished from sight (Figure 2).



Backstab gloat's over Tauren's misfortune.
Backstab gloat's over Tauren's misfortune.
Backstab gloat's over Tauren's misfortune.
Backstab gloat's over Tauren's misfortune.

Figure 2: Chat interface; Emote output

This time a Horde mage was quick to respond and blindly casted a wide area damaging spell that injured the rogue forcing them back into visibility for all Horde to see. The group of Horde players present rushed in and slaughtered the Alliance rogue. Figure 3 is a snippet from the various emotes and speech in the chat channel that followed:



Tauren spit's on Backstab.
[Tauren]: What a fucking asshole.
[Mage]: Yea fucking grieving prick.

Figure 3: Chat interface; Close proximity chat

From my perspective as a witness, the Alliance rogue was having fun killing players from the opposing faction. However, I could tell that most of the opposing faction in the area were annoyed that someone was interrupting their friendly contests, especially those on the receiving end of the blade.

Moving on, I was almost ready to enter the *Northern Barrens* when I read the following over zone wide chat (Figure 4):

[1. General] [Tauren]: He is back again...backstabbed me...

Figure 4: Chat interface; Zone wide general chat

Entering the *Northern Barrens*, I fully expected some chat related harassment to occur during my time there. Back before the third expansion *Cataclysm*, this zone was famously known for its colorful conversations due to many players converging to level-up from level 10 to 20 across a large barren landscape (Nardi & Harris, 2006). On the WoW Wikipedia website it quotes,

Barrens chat is like a stupid centrifuge, distilling the unexpurgated banal thoughts of a thousand morons into a hardened impenetrable lump of smacktardery, spilling endlessly across the bottom of your screen.

(WoW Wiki, 2016)

However, since *Cataclysm*, the land was divided into northern and southern zones with not so bleak a landscape, and many other areas and ways for Horde players to level. My time in the Barrens was relatively uneventful and I made it to level 20 in peace.

Levelling

Level 20-60 (2013)

In many MMORPGs (WoW included) the co-operative nature of the game is built around the concept of ‘the holy trinity’. The holy trinity is what players use to describe the three common roles for players in Player versus Environment (PvE) content. These roles are the Tank, the DPS (or sometimes known as damage dealers), and the Healer (Green, 2009; Kirschner & Williams, 2014; Myers & Haas, 2009).

Early on, I decided to specialize my monk as a Brewmaster which is a tank specialization, and started joining groups for instanced PvE dungeons, which are instanced adventures that separate your group from the rest of the world (Miller & Crowcroft, 2009). Generally, groups expect the tank to lead them through the dungeon as the tank must take the brunt of the enemies attention (Golub, 2010; Kirschner & Williams, 2014). Having never played as a Horde character before, the early Horde dungeons were relatively new to me. At times I would ask my group which way to proceed, and the reply was often friendly and helpful. But sometimes the reply was not (Figure 5).

[Party] [Meatcleaver]: Really?? What a n00b!
[Party] [Wiseguy]: Get a clue.
Flynt is terribly bored with Ling.
[Party] [Doctordeath]: ...wtf just look at your map fucking idiot.

n00b = new player, usually used in a derogatory manner (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014; Kramer, 2014)
wtf = What the Fuck

Figure 5: Chat interface; Party chat

It could be frustrating knowing it was my job to protect these people that have just thrown random verbal abuse at me for a simple question, but I kept going and completed the dungeon. At level 30 I gained the ability to specialize in a second role for my monk. For my second specialization I picked the Mistweaver, which is a healing specialization. I was now able to change my specialization between tank and healer at will. Playing as a healer in a group dungeon changed the dynamics in that I was able to follow the tank around and just do my job of keeping everyone alive. Occasional frustration could occur though when you team up with a tank incapable of performing their role of keeping the enemies' attention on themselves. So when the tank isn't performing well, the enemies may attack the other players instead (Golub, 2010). It can be very frustrating when this occurs, and I occasionally saw these tank players berated just as I had been previously.

Return trips to *Orgrimmar* also resulted in seeing some ugly types of spamming in the trade chat channels. There was an ongoing joke in the chat channel that I observed on multiple occasions while levelling, in which a player would say the word "anal" followed by a link to one of their abilities, achievements, and/or quests. *Figure 6* shows some actual examples:

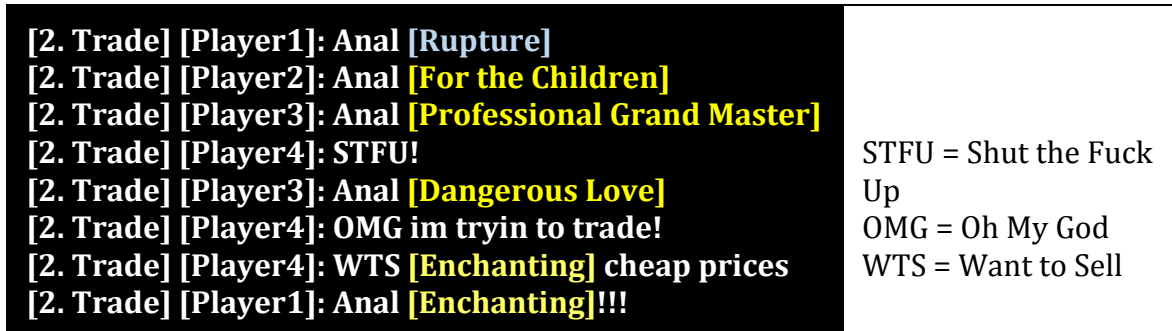


Figure 6: Chat interface; Trade chat

On certain occasions, spamming in the trade channel continued for as long as I remained in the city. Players wanting to trade items became aggravated by the spamming interrupting their notices of sale. Other players not even trying to trade anything were also getting irritated that their chat interface was filled with nonsensical and possibly offensive gibberish. This observed case is unlike earlier examples that were perhaps subjective as to whether those actions are considered griefing or not. Spamming in particular is much more obvious, as there is no in-game reason for this action. According to Achterbosch (2015) and Achterbosch et al (2013), 86.1% of the respondents to their survey (n=1028) rated spamming as a form of griefing with 42.7% of those who have been subjected to spamming rating it of high intensity. Spamming was also the most pervasive type of griefing, with 20.9% indicating they were subjected to it multiple times per day. Due to the high amount of spamming occurring, it is easy to see why I witnessed it quite often, and why other players were getting frustrated.

Back out in the world again, there were common episodes such as described earlier where many players are tasked with killing the same enemies. Once again it felt like a possible game design flaw when you are forced to compete with an allied faction player to kill similar enemies. In past

research, this type of behaviour has been identified as ‘mob camping’ and is a form of grieving called greed play (Foo & Koivisto, 2004). Note that at the time this event was recorded, players were forced to compete for (or join forces to receive) the kill credit. When *Legion* was released in 2016, players could instead share the credit for a kill regardless of their alliance. Mob camping itself seemed pretty harmless, and according to Achterbosch et al. (2013), many players’ perceptions seemed to support this conclusion. In that survey, 35.7% of respondents said that mob camping was not a form of grieving, with only 14.6 % suggesting that it was. The remainder fell in between saying mob camping could only sometimes be considered grieving. Of those subjected to this action, many (84.5%) felt it was of low to moderate intensity (Achterbosch, 2015).

Level 60-85 (2013)

Upon reaching level 60 I was tasked with entering *The Dark Portal* which teleported me to the *Outlands* for players of level 58 and higher to continue questing. This seemed like it should have been an easy task. I arrived in *The Blasted Lands* where *The Dark Portal* was located and rode my horse towards the portal. It seemed the area next to *The Dark Portal* was a common camping ground for max level players. They knew that anyone intent on progressing past the first world into *Outlands* would have to pass through this area. It’s the equivalent of a gang of bandits holding the only passable bridge hostage to travelers. Needless to say, I was killed for sport before I could enter the portal. Upon returning to my corpse as a ghost (which was a good waste of my time) I re-spawned to make a rush for the portal, only to be killed again. There were maybe three or four Alliance members ‘camping’ the path to the portal, and now camping around my corpse. In my next attempt I managed to re-spawn inside a tent, slightly hidden. When my corpse disappeared the alliance knew I had re-spawned and started a search for me. At the best opportunity I made a run for it and crossed the portal’s glowing threshold. I made it to *Hellfire Peninsula*. I was now safe...or was I?

The frustration of a higher-level player corpse (or spawn) camping me and not allowing me to proceed was pretty high, to say the least. I had no hope of retaliation or defending myself as the level difference meant my attacks would be like hitting a person with a toothpick, whereas their attacks could kill me in one blow. The frustration was not to end, as it turned out that *Hellfire Peninsula* was another location in which high level players seemed to enjoy extremely unbalanced fights against low level players. It seemed everywhere I went in this area a level 90 (maximum level at the time of recording these observations) Alliance player would fly down on a dragon, gryphon, or some other creature, dismount and pummel me. My progress halted dramatically, and I couldn’t escape these players as they had much faster flying mounts than were available to me at level 60.

These actions of corpse camping and ganking in completely one-sided circumstances fit the definition of grieving in every way. They are both actions intentionally performed by a player to disrupt another player’s game experience and cause them grief. In this case my experience was disrupted, and it did make me angry, especially because of the loss of time. It had to be assumed that these deliberate actions were being performed for pleasurable motives. They enjoyed the power and their disruptive anti-social behaviour, as has been discussed in prior research (Achterbosch, Miller & Vamplew, 2017). With my progress hindered, I decided to pursue a new

avenue to level-up: player versus player (PvP) battlegrounds. These battlegrounds are instanced areas with a balanced amount of players per faction of similar levels participating and competing in the goals of the battleground (Miller & Crowcroft, 2009). This was a good way to gain experience points to level, while *Hellfire Peninsula* remained bombarded by ganking and corpse camping. Note that in WoW each faction has their own chat channels to communicate with members of their faction. Opposing faction players can try to converse with each other using proximity-based chat, but the words will appear in an unreadable language. During my time in PvP battlegrounds the combat mostly appeared fair between factions, with each winning some and losing some. During a win, most players encouraged each other in the chat channel cheering with excitement. However, when we were obviously losing, players started blaming each other, yelling at particular people for ‘sucking’, and other hostile remarks.

Mixing up PvP with some more instanced PvE dungeons felt like a good way to progress past *Hellfire Peninsula* and beyond. The instanced nature of battlegrounds and dungeons took you out of the world and into your own little pocket of space in which the griefers could not target you. However, it also had the effect of taking away the *massively multiplayer* feel, as battlegrounds are capped at 40 versus 40 players, and dungeons are five player co-operative groups.

While levelling in multiple dungeons I came across one incident of abuse directed from the tank to one of the damage dealers. The group had just defeated a computer controlled ‘boss’ enemy that required group tactics to overcome (Bardzell, Bardzell, Pace, & Reed, 2008). In this instance the kill awarded our group with a good ring with attributes suited to tanking. One DPS in the group acquired the loot instead of the tank, who decided to unleash his rage upon this player (Figure 7).

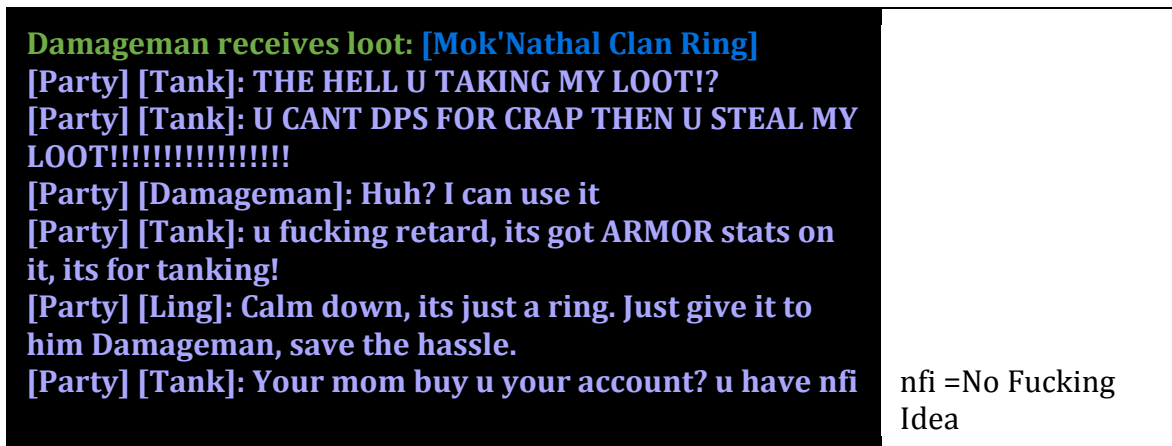


Figure 7: Chat interface; Party chat after looting a boss

At this point the tank was simply abusing the other player. It was definitely a form of deliberate harassment with the intention to cause grief to the receiver. Unfortunately, this type of verbal abuse is quite common. According to Achterbosch et al. (2013), over 90% of survey respondents claim it is indeed griefing though it is not as pervasive as spamming, with only 19.0% of survey respondents indicating that verbal harassment had never happened to them (Achterbosch, 2015). It is also considered one of the most intense types of griefing that can occur, with 39.4% of Achterbosch’s (2015) survey respondents claiming it is of high to extreme intensity.

Rather than discuss the situation and try to correct it (as it is quite easy to trade an item before equipping it), the tank then decided to rush in to engage multiple groups of enemies (too many to handle), drag them back to the group and let us all be killed. Figure 8 shows the aftermath.

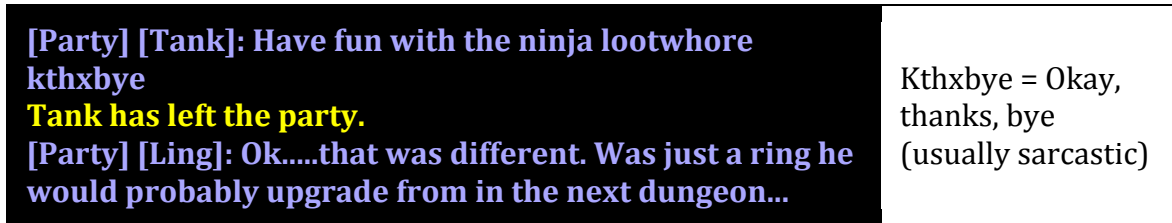


Figure 8: Chat interface; party chat rage

I didn't understand why the tank took it to the extreme of disrupting the entire group. If they had just asked nicely stating that the ring was more suitable for their role, the DPS player may have handed it over to them. Instead the tank got us all killed and then abandoned the group. Now they had not only abused the player accused of theft but had also dragged the rest of the group into their grieving incident. Once again, it was intentional, its purpose was to disrupt and presumably they performed this episode of team disruption in order to gain some satisfaction by getting us all killed. Reflecting these observations, Achterbosch et al. (2013) discovered that team disruption was considered grieving by 90.3% of their respondents.

I kept rotating between battlegrounds, dungeons, and the standard worlds, levelling through the content of each expansion. Occasionally I would encounter players getting angry or upset over incidents like those described above, some that were minor and some that felt overboard. I also came across Alliance players that would gain the drop on me, attacking while I was engaged in combat. As long as we were of equivalent levels, I felt this was fair game and if they got the upper hand and killed me, I would usually revive safely and attempt to retaliate against them. To me it was healthy competition.

Rarely, I would return to *Orgrimmar* to conduct business of selling items I had acquired. On one occasion there was a scam going on that I had seen before near a busy section of the city. This scam was a player run casino. There is a function in WoW that you type into the chat channel to produce a random number; /roll or /random. Using /roll 100 or /random 100 would output a random number from 1 to 100 in the chat channel. The scam went as follows in the chat interface (Figure 9):



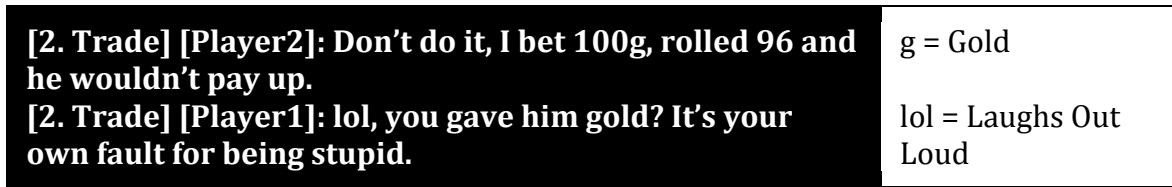


Figure 9: Chat interface; Trade chat with a player using the yell function

Many players were sucked in; I could see the rolls in the chat interface. Even if the scammer decided to pay up, the odds were against the gambler, and scamming players of their virtual goods is against WoW's Terms of Use (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016). Each of the players could be banned. Scamming itself has been identified in multiple instances as griefing (Bartle, 2005; Rubin & Camm, 2013) as the instigator is using deception to gain monetary value and possibly power (Achterbosch, Miller, & Vamplew, 2017). According to Achterbosch et al. (2013), 87.7% of a sampled community believe it constitutes griefing. The scammed player at some point realizes they have been deceived and therefore their experience in the game has been damaged.

Level 85-90 (2013)

Travelling to the continent of *Pandaria* was the start of the MoP expansion. Each faction started somewhat apart here, and I did not encounter any griefing until moving past the first area on this continent. I was travelling within a busy town (at the time of conducting this part of the observation in 2013) called *Halfhill*, in which players can obtain their own plot of land to perform the growing and harvesting of crops. A game mechanic called phasing is used in order to deliver a plot of land to every player (Braithwaite, 2015; Quandt & Kröger, 2013). When a player enters the farm area, they switch into their own phase of the farm, where they only see the progress of the crops they have made, while other players are in their own phase tending their own crops. Some players were exploiting the phasing technology as a means of griefing.

In towns you are protected by town guards that are Non-Player Characters (NPCs). This does not mean that the enemy players cannot attack you, but should they attempt to, the guards are programmed to chase them down to their death unless they manage to escape. The perfect escape involved exploiting the phase of the personal farms. During my first visit to *Halfhill*, an Alliance paladin player was attacking Horde players of a lower level than himself and when the guards responded he would enter his farm. I got attacked by this paladin as well, and on a few occasions I was killed. The town guards pursued the paladin, but they entered their own phase of the farm where none of us, including the guards existed. In their phase they were able to recuperate and step back out into the town, leaving their phase and performing the same unfair tactics. It wasn't until he had disrupted multiple Horde players that we all ganged up into a group (myself included), waited in our own farm phases for this player to harass another player then all lunged forward to attack. We eventually killed the player but not without losses, and the guards finished us off, but it was worth it, to see the paladin call his dragon and take off in some other direction. I was part of a mob, and it was kind of fun. After all, people had been ganking me all along. This retaliation to griefing has long been occurring in video games but has never been thoroughly explored until recently in a proposed taxonomy of grievers (Achterbosch, Miller, & Vamplew, 2017). In this, many self-proclaimed grievers and those subjected to griefing considered retaliation as a motivation for griefing, as the player (or players in my case above) are

intentionally disrupting another for the pleasure in doing so and the power they feel in humiliating another at their own game.

In the next area I visited in *Pandaria* called *Kun-Lai Summit* at around level 87 to 88, there was a place called the *Temple of the White Tiger* in which some of the NPC faction leaders of both the Horde and Alliance were negotiating with the *Pandarian* gods as part of the story. A friend and I formed a group and entered the temple, where an Alliance player was speaking to their leader. We began our own quest with our own leader, and at one point the *Pandarian* god *Xuen* was speaking to *Anduin Wrynn* of the Alliance (Figure 10; scripted dialogue between NPCs for the quest).

Xuen says: It is decided. I will open the gates. The Vale of Eternal Blossoms will be open for all.
Anduin Wrynn says: Thank you, Master White Tiger. You will see. I believe that my people - and the Horde - are essentially good.
[Party] [Friend]: Yeah the horde is essentially good!
Xuen says: I will consult the others. Meet me at the gates.
[Party] [Friend]: Watch this!

Figure 10: Chat interface; NPC dialogue and party chat

My friend thought the statement that “the Horde are essentially good” was funny as he often liked to engage in griefing, and turned towards the unsuspecting Alliance player who was in the middle of the conversation, and charged towards them, axe flying. Moments later, the alliance player realized he was in trouble and began to defend himself. Being in a group with my friend, I joined in to defeat the alliance quickly. My friend commented (Figure 11):

<p>[Party] [Friend]: Yeah we are real good lol. [Party] [Ling]: Poor guy...</p>	<p>lol = Laughs Out Loud</p>
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Figure 11: Chat interface; Party chat

Once again, this time without provocation, I was attacking the other faction in a group. Was I part of a griefing problem? On this side of the griefing it felt more like some sort of faction war, and the game allowed it so why shouldn't I do this? This is an argument that came up many times during my substantial study about griefing (Achterbosch, 2015): “If the game allows it, it should not be considered griefing.” However, my research suggests that those on the receiving end see it as griefing more often than not. My friend and I did not stick around further to rub salt in the wound, which personally I thought was fair and in stark contrast to the many times I was camped and killed repeatedly.

As I continued through *Pandaria*, there was about a fifty-fifty chance that an opposing faction player would attack me, and these areas generally consisted of players within a few levels difference at most also going about their levelling. The rest of the levelling continued like this and I finally reached the level cap at the time, level 90. Levelling your character to maximum level may be the end of one journey, but it is the beginning of the next journey: the endgame. Many MMORPGs have varying amounts of endgame content in order to satisfy the desire to

continue playing. In WoW, endgame consists of participating in content that upgrades your gear in order to become stronger. Although I continued to play MoP at level cap for a little while, I will discuss endgame activities and observed griefing further on.

Level 90-100 (2014)

Warlords of Draenor (WoD) marks the fifth expansion, and was released in 2014, at which point I logged onto my Monk “Ling” once again for more adventures. Once completing a scripted story event, every player gains their own phase of a military base called a garrison in a regular zone. I was on a server in which the faction I joined (the Horde) was outnumbered by the opposing faction players, so it was more common to run into the enemy than a friendly aligned player. Level 100 (maximum at the time) enemy faction players of the Alliance patiently waited outside the phase of the Horde garrison. Once I stepped out of my phase of the garrison and into the zone proper I got ambushed. This became all too common, and a severe waste of my time. I had to take another obscure route in order not to be spotted to continue with my levelling.

As I moved further in to the continent of *Draenor* it became apparent that beyond the first zone, all players followed relatively the same path and quests, except for a few faction-specific storylines. This resulted in many encounters with the opposing faction, which for the most part my early sentiments remain – most attacks felt like the feud between factions was brewing and were an engaging part of the game. Occasionally, an opposing player and myself would communicate through in-games emotes, almost like how I imagine cavemen would grunt to each other, and then help each other dispatch a tougher foe. So apart from phasing technology providing golden opportunities for griefers, I can’t say that I saw anything new related to griefing during my time in WoD and reaching level 100 and its endgame.

Level 100-110 (2016)

The expansion *Legion* unlocked a new continent and ten more levels of character advancement. The entire continent and all of its zones (excluding the endgame zones) were made scalable to your level, changing the way previous expansions had operated. You could enter any zone, and the enemy NPCs level would match your own. If you were level 100, you would see the enemy as level 100; if your friend was level 105, they would see the enemy as level 105. It meant that everyone could start in any zone, and complete the content in any order. This had the effect of distributing the population across the new world and reducing prior problems I had discovered of fighting for quest objectives, resources and enemy spawns. If I became overwhelmed by the opposing faction in one zone, I could easily switch to another.

During questing, I was tasked to kill multiple beasts for NPC *Hemet Nesingwary*. In addition, as a skinner, I could skin the animals after they were defeated for extra virtual income and resources. Due to the new rule within the *Legion* expansion of being able to share a kill, a player was following me and briefly attacking each creature before I killed it. I was putting in all the effort and they were tagging along. At first it did not bother me, as I was going to hunt the animals anyway, and if they were on the same quest they may as well benefit. Unfortunately, I could no longer skin the animal until the other player had taken their loot, and in this case they refused to (Figure 12).

[Ling]: Can you loot it please? [Otherplayer]: nah [Ling]: I wanna skin it though [Otherplayer]: lol, I am not even on this quest sucker!	lol = Laughs Out Loud
--	-----------------------

Figure 12: Chat interface; Close proximity chat

They had used a new feature that encouraged cooperation to deliberately aggravate me. The developers promised that they would fix this oversight in the future (Kubit, 2016). At the time it was irritating, but it was only a small loss so I felt that I could shrug it off. Was the player effectively griefing me? In relation to the definition, yes they were. Although accordingly, there are magnitudes of griefing based on the actions performed, and some can feel so trivial that it is not worth worrying about.

Endgame (2016)

At maximum level, your level and ability progression discontinues, but various weapons and pieces of gear become the main progression factor. There are multiple avenues of PvE and PvP content to partake in, and both enhance your character through rewarding your advancement.

PvE Endgame

One of the first types of endgame I began partaking in was something I was familiar with: the instanced dungeons with five players working co-operatively to defeat NPC bosses to gain loot. Being a newly max level character is very different from being a veteran max level character. The difference in gear is quite large in terms of damage or healing output. In other words, my healing output was quite low to begin with at endgame and I would have to work harder to keep everyone alive.

Not long after reaching level 110, I joined a dungeon group in which the tank was quite geared up, meaning they would have an easier time holding enemy's threat, and also better armor and a larger health pool to soak up damage. With this in mind the tank was pacing the group a lot faster than normal, attacking multiple groups of enemies at a time. I was having trouble keeping up the required healing, and running out of resources. After defeating one group the tank would move on to a few more, meanwhile I was resting further back to replenish my mana (needed to cast healing spells). The tank had to use his emergency abilities and a health potion just to survive, and I still had not caught back up. We exchanged words (Figure 13):

[Party] [Tank]: heals [Party] [Tank]: keep up [Party] [Ling]: I'm trying. [Party] [Tank]: i nearly died [Party] [Tank]: l2p or reroll [Party] [Ling]: You ran to next group while I had	l2p = Learn to Play reroll = play a different class
--	--

no mana! You can at least wait until I'm ready! [Party] [Tank]: manage your mana better	or role. Implied: "cause you are no good at this one"
--	---

Figure 13: Chat interface; Party chat

After this argument, the tank charged in to the first boss battle without warning. The majority of the group was still at half health, and my monk only at half mana. With great struggle I managed to keep the group alive for about half of the fight at which point the tank died. A damage dealer switched to a tanking stance and took over duties of the tank for the remainder of the fight. While difficult, we ended with a successful outcome. The tank that died began insulting me (Figure 14):

[Party] [Tank]: omg fail [Party] [Tank]: worst healer [Party] [Damagetotank]: hey its ok, it worked out fine. [Party] [Ling]: Yeah pls don't rush in until I'm ready. [Party] [Tank]: you will never be ready, srsly go reroll.	omg = Oh my God pls = Please srsly = Seriously reroll = as above
--	---

Figure 14: Chat interface; Party chat insults

After that I got a popup window on my screen (Figure 15):

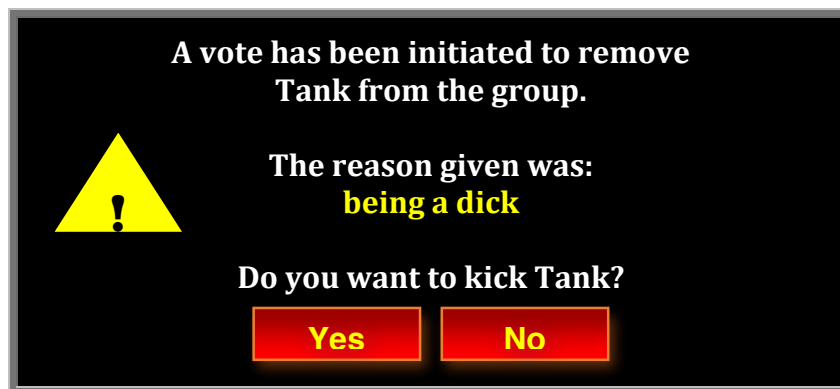


Figure 15: Vote to kick a party member dialogue box

One of the players had initiated a vote to kick the tank harassing me. I would be lying if I didn't say I enjoyed voting "Yes". The game system quickly replaced the tank with another, and we smoothly progressed through the rest of the dungeon. Systems in place like this can be good to combat team-based griefing, but could possibly also be used incorrectly. Giving the power to the players gives them the responsibility of deciding right and wrong.

After much progress through the endgame content, I was queuing for and completing raid instances. These 'raids' are similar to standard instanced dungeons except that 25 players work together instead of a standard group of five. This results in more complex strategies to defeat the opponents and gain better loot. The problem with the queuing system over forming your own group with friends is that you don't know who your team will be and any one of them could

potentially be joining to cause grief. The chances of this increase when the group is made up of 25 players. This form of griefing happened to me on multiple occasions after entering a raid using the raid finder queuing interface.

After queuing for about 10 minutes I made my way to the front of the queue and was placed inside the instance with a fresh team. The group started preparations, placing strengthening spells on one another, summoning minions to help in combat, and laying down feasts which gave a boost to the attributes of every player that ate it. Meanwhile one of our teammates had rushed forward into several groups of enemies and returned to us with a swarm of monsters in tow. Without preparations complete, and more than half of the group not ready to begin, the enemies swiftly defeated us. We had been intentionally killed.

Most of our raid group was quite angry, and returned to the instance at low health and mana (as you do after being defeated). The culprit was not pinpointed at that stage and went forth to do the same thing again. This time the group was cautious of another disruption, but still not ready after the previous death. Most of us managed to escape through the entrance portal to the raid instance, with only a handful dying this time. Like the earlier incident I received a popup on-screen about voting to kick the identified offender from the group. The vote passed easily and we went on without trouble.

This kind of team disruption seemed to pop up more and more as the content started to get older. For example, when the raids were first opened, I did not see this type of griefing occur; players were trying to enjoy the new content. After the content had been out for a while, this griefing started happening more often. Prior research suggests that the behavior of these players is due to disinterest in what the game has to offer and so they resort to griefing for fun (Achterbosch, 2015).

PvP Endgame

In WoW, as earlier discussed, most of the PvP is centered in instanced battlegrounds. There are also arenas to pit two versus two, three versus three, or five versus five players against each other. Most PvP is structured in instanced areas separated from the rest of the world, in which players consensually participate. The only griefing incidence I witnessed here revolved around arguments and insults occurring in the chat channels between team members blaming each other for mistakes or incompetence. Players usually gave back as good as they got in battlegrounds - it seemed to be an expected occurrence.

After everything I experienced, I decided to finish my journey and end the story of Ling. I logged out, leaving my monk, of whom I had grown attached, behind in the virtual world.

Conclusion

The participant observation revealed many different behaviors and actions from the *World of Warcraft* player-base. It was the personal and subjective opinion of the primary author that many of these actions were in line with the goals of the game, and the persistence of two opposing factions even encouraged some rivalry between players. However, there were times when a

player performed (sometimes repeatedly) an intentional action in order to disrupt the experience of another player and the instigator seemed to find it immensely enjoyable. Quite often it was some sort of verbal abuse typed in to the current chat channel, and just as often it was directed from a player in the associated faction. Arguments over who is to blame for losing a battle or performing not as desired in a group were all too common. This harassment can get quite personal and would affect individuals in many different ways. Players within the same faction were the cause of quite a lot of what may be considered griefing. Also observed were players stealing resources and monsters rightfully belonging to another, spamming the chat channels so they become useless, scamming players of their hard-earned virtual currency and luring large amounts of tough computer-controlled opponents on unsuspecting players. The scamming and luring could be especially impactful, leading a player to lose large amounts of progression and time.

Opposing faction players were not excluded from the griefing type actions. One of the more serious actions they took was to prey on weaker players. The higher-level avatars had the opportunity to kill without challenge and often took advantage of it. Dispersing the population across multiple zones in the later expansion helped alleviate some of this by giving players choice, as opposed to the early expansion in which all players entered the same portal, with enemy players waiting in ambush. At times the ganking, as an ambush is known, cost so much time and progression that the author felt retaliation was a good option. This cause and effect was discussed in detail by Achterbosch (2015), where players without hostile intentions eventually turn to griefing for vengeance. These players were described as Retaliators or Vigilantes.

Lastly, certain game mechanics also enabled creative ways for griefers to prey upon others. The phasing technology discussed was being exploited to avoid ramifications from slaughtering players in protected towns. The sharing of kills solved some of the early problems with waiting in turn for an enemy to spawn, but introduced a new problem relating to not being able to skin the beast until all players that shared the kill have taken their spoils. While it should not be a problem in general, a player was found to deliberately leave their loot behind so another could not skin for leathers. This was not an isolated incidence and something which the game developers acknowledged needed fixing in the future.

To summarise the definition of griefing, one player gains pleasure by intentionally disrupting another, and negatively affecting their game experience. All of the actions described above do fit within this definition, the difference is that some actions cause much more grief than others, some can be easily dismissed as having no real impact, and others cause a lot of grief. Either way, they are still forms of griefing in line with the definition provided. Of course the impact from each action is subjective, and affects each player differently. When an act such as any described in this paper occurs to oneself, it is difficult to remain objective.

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