

# From Catch the Flag to Shock and Awe: how *World of Warcraft* Negotiates Battle.

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## ABSTRACT

Within the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, attitudes towards warfare are expressed in conflicting ways. This is partly a result of the difficult relationship modern Western society has with warfare, and the various political agendas that surround this. Within *World of Warcraft*, this is expressed specifically in the minigames known as ‘Battlegrounds’, which allow players to fight against each other in teams. The way in which these popular areas have been developed in the game is symptomatic of increasingly accepting attitudes towards warfare.

## Author Keywords

Game Studies, *World of Warcraft*, online games, MMORPG, Massively Multiplayer Online Games, war games.

## Introduction

*World of Warcraft* is a game full of contradictions. By its very nature, such a large game not only contains elements that are in apparent disagreement with each other, but also contains many, often inadvertent, observations about current cultural practice and belief. Like many fantasy worlds, Azeroth is a product of recent events and of history, influenced by authorial ideologies and cultural events exterior to the game. This is particularly apparent in the response to war in the game, where the two opposite sides – Horde and Alliance, enter into conflagrations with each other despite being in a nominal state of truce.

This paper investigates a key aspect of these conflicts – the Battlegrounds. These have always been a fundamental aspect of the game: in every Realm (the name given to each server), players are able to enter arenas where they can fight against each other. Battlegrounds are voluntary, and although the benefits they grant are significant, it is possible to play the game without ever entering one. However, I will argue here that Battlegrounds are a necessary part of the game, not only preventing players from anarchistic

destruction of themselves and their environment, but also sustaining the games’ internal narrative.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the paper investigates the historical connections with the Battlegrounds in *WoW*, arguing that the game is broaching new issues in wargaming by gradually updating the heroic idealism of combat. By introducing the tropes and military strategies of real warfare, *WoW* challenges not only the ways in which conflict is played out in the game, but also draws the player into an awareness of the consequences of being at war. In a time when real world warfare is a controversial issue, the inadvertent messages about war through the Battlegrounds of *WoW* provide an essential facet in understanding how the concept of warfare is transmitted in popular cultural discourses.

Thus, this paper investigates how representations of warfare within the game often mirror the ways in which it is waged in both a historical and a modern context. It traces how the dioramas of the Battlegrounds have moved from historicised representation of war, to games which present convoluted commentaries on what it means to be at war in recent times.

## Your Country Needs You!

*World of Warcraft (WoW)* is one of the most complex MMORPG’s currently in existence. One of the reasons for this is the diversity of play it provides within the game, from roleplaying a character, to following a chosen profession, through types of play that range from individual ‘soloing’ to raiding groups of up to 40. Overall, one of the core tenets of Blizzard (the game developer’s) design has been to allow the player to choose how they navigate their way through the world of Azeroth, and how they tailor their play accordingly. However, as Blizzard state, ‘player-versus-player’ gameplay has always been a staple of the design for *World of Warcraft*, and this brings into play several different elements of what Lisbeth Klastrup has called ‘worldness’:

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The experience of 'worldness' appears to be related to the feeling of presence and engagement in the virtual world, an experience which is the result of the particular world design (how the world is presented to us as a tool to play with), the interplay between agents and interaction forms available in the world (the world as game and social space) and the accumulated experience of 'lived life' in the world (interaction in time and the continuous performance of persistent characters in the world). [3]

In *WoW*, the player versus player nexus constantly challenges this worldness. As the animated introduction explains, Azeroth is a world that is both in a state of 'fragile truce', and where 'the war between the Horde and the Alliance simply isn't over'. Within the game, this tension is played out through quests, backstory and self-determined player actions. The place where this becomes most apparent is in the Battlegrounds:

In the battle for Azeroth, certain territories have become focal points for conflict between the Horde and Alliance. Battlegrounds represent key locations where this struggle has escalated into all-out war. Each Battleground presents a different challenge and environment, and victory here must be achieved not through sheer numbers, but through strategy, skill, and grit. [9]

### **Battlegrounds, World Battlegrounds and Arenas**

Since Patch 1.5.0 (07/06/2005), every Realm in *WoW* contains designated Player Versus Player (PvP); areas in which the two playable sides of the game - Alliance and Horde, meet in teams to fight against each other. As the game has developed through patches, new areas have been introduced, providing new scope for combat. There are currently three types of areas; 'Battlegrounds', 'World Battlegrounds' and 'Arenas'.

#### **Battlegrounds**

Battlegrounds (BGs) are the standard PvP areas. A set amount of players enter the Battleground, which starts only when enough players from each side are gathered. They then fight; Alliance versus Horde, seeking to achieve various objectives. The game is won when these objectives are fulfilled. Players enter a Battleground by speaking to a Battlemaster in a capital city, or by visiting the entrance to the Battleground, located somewhere around the world. In all Battlegrounds, players are stratified into similar levels – 10-19, 20-29, and so on. This means that there is a degree of competitive fairness in the game so that players of a very high level can't win simply by being stronger. Initially,

Battlegrounds allowed only players from each individual realm to fight each other. However In Patch 1.12 (22/08/2006), in order to cut down queuing times, realms were integrated in the Battlegrounds, usually in clusters of about six.

The following are Battlegrounds (BGs):

Warsong Gulch

Alterac Valley

Arathi Basin (patch 1.71)

The Eye of the Storm (The Burning Crusade)

#### **World Battlegrounds**

In Patch 1.12.0, some world zones also became Battlegrounds. Certain objectives were added to these areas which would activate a player's PvP status (assuming they were in a realm where PvP was not the norm, where this status is always on). Anyone can take part in a world Battleground, although the zones contain extremely high level roaming monsters, thus preventing players of low levels surviving very long inside them.

The following zones contain World Battlegrounds (WBGs)

Eastern Plaguelands

Silithus

Terrokar (BC)

Hellfire Peninsula (BC)

Zangarmarsh (BC)

Nagrand (BC)

#### **Arenas**

Arenas are gladiatorial rings in which players fight. Players have to pay for the right to compete inside an arena as either a 2, 3 or 5 person team. Arenas were introduced in Patch 2.0 (6/12/06). Players need to form pre-made teams beforehand (they are not randomly located as in the BGs), which have their own distinctive tabard, for which the arena team needs to pay.

The following are Arenas:

The Ring of Trials

The Circle of Blood

An exception to this is the Gurubashi Arena, which is a bit of an anomaly in the Battleground system. It is a small and usually empty gladiatorial arena in the jungle zone of Stranglethorn Vale. Periodically, an NPC spawn in the form of a philanthropic goblin pirate appears and deposits a treasure chest in the centre of the arena. The first person to open the chest wins. The timed staging of Gurubashi Arena, as well as the fact that teams are not needed, means that it is unlike any of the other PvP Battlegrounds, which are

constantly active (although players may have to queue to enter). Additionally, the Gurubashi Arena is not an instance – players can enter it even when the scramble for the chest is not taking place.

All Battlegrounds (except Gurubashi Arena, which will henceforth be disregarded), allow players to earn Honor. Honor awards Rank, Honor Points and Marks of Victory. More Honor is awarded for winning a Battleground, but it can also be gained from the amount of kills made. Before Patch 2.0, Honor worked on a sliding scale in accordance with other players – and thus the amount of Honor a player had was in relation to people in the rest of the Realm. Rank was similarly distributed; and thus it was possible to find that at the end of one week, when Honor and Rank were calculated, that a player had been instantly cashiered! After Patch 2.0, this system was abandoned. Rank was abolished, although players who had competed in Battlegrounds before were given an honorary title based on their previous performance which they had an option to display or keep hidden. Honor was awarded not on a sliding scale, but through tokens gained from each battle. These tokens could then be used to buy specific PvP equipment, which included tabards giving an indication of rank and items named for rank – for example the Grand Marshal’s Longsword or the Legionnaire’s Silk Tunic.

Rank	Alliance	Horde
14	Grand Marshal	High Warlord
13	Field Marshal	Warlord
12	Marshal	General
11	Commander	Lieutenant General
10	Lieutenant Commander	Champion
9	Knight-Champion	Centurion
8	Knight-Captain	Legionnaire
7	Knight-Lieutenant	Blood Guard
6	Knight	Stone Guard
5	Sergeant Major	First Sergeant
4	Master Sergeant	Senior Sergeant
3	Sergeant	Sergeant
2	Corporal	Grunt
1	Private	Scout

**The Ranking system in World of Warcraft (previous to patch 2.0)**

## Going to War.

*WoW*’s representation of war as a historicised event is a complex one. In my previous paper for MIT Press, I argued that *WoW* uses a drop-off point – namely the First World War of 1914-18, to evoke not only a series of familiar tropes within the game, but to make specific statements about the conflicting issues of warfare in the game (MacCallum-Stewart, 2007) [5]. World War One is generally recognised as a point of cultural change after which ‘nothing was ever the same’, and after which Europe moved from optimism to disillusion. Europe’s war horrified and shocked its citizens as they realised the potential of modern war for mass destruction, in particular through the mental and physical maiming of the human body. Cultural mythologizing of the First World War as a result of this realisation (both imaginative and actual) affects the portrayal of other wars as well, with conflicts prior to 1914 romanticised in the light of the horrors that resulted from WW1. This mythologizing is also directly associated with the heavy use of technology in World War One; often regarded as the first mechanised war, such that 1914 is often seen as the point of ‘go no further’, both figuratively and actually. Consequently, the First World War is seen as a cultural, political and social dropping-off point, after which the business of war became a Bad Thing, and prior to which, wars were fought in a more decorous, civilised and entirely less bloody manner.

As a direct result of this, the wars portrayed in fantasy landscapes are seen as chivalrous and honourable; associated with the ideals of medieval wars – knights in shining armour and fair combat between equals. They are removed from the ideas of technology, which if it does make an appearance is usually portrayed in terms of steampunk – archaic, composed of gears, levers and valves, not particularly useful and often used by the enemy to carry out nefarious deeds. Wars and signifiers of wars post 1900 are not usually used, as the negative contexts they carry, plus the fact that they are considered recent history – and therefore not to be trifled with – means that they are rarely used in fantasy gaming.

*WoW* is extremely unusual in that it is a fantasy world stuffed with signifiers of World War One, from the zeppelins outside major Horde cities to the biplanes locked inside Gnomeregan; from the references to the two ‘Great Wars’ fought between Horde and Alliance to the ‘Shrine of the Fallen Warrior’ outside the Crossroads in the Barrens. These signifiers combine to remind the player that war has consequences, as well as counterpoising the pastoral idyll of Alliance lands (the summer of 1914 was unusually hot, and often credited as the dying moments of the English Empire) with the potential for destruction marked through the land by technological progress. Alongside this come wartime tropes – the commonality of the enemy soldier ‘we are not so different, you and I’, echoed both through Wilfred Owen’s ‘I am the enemy you killed, my friend’ [8], and the fact that since players can take the role of Horde or Alliance

players, the potential truth of this statement has obvious resonance. Furthermore, when an orc or troll player loads their character, they see not an image of glorious battle, but a war-torn landscape of fire and shattered battle standards. The ‘world’ of *Warcraft* is one where fighting may be necessary, but always comes at a cost.

Overall, the history and background of *WoW* seeks to remind the player that they are at war, but that war has consequences. PvP combat may be a regular feature of a players’ gaming, but it is still set against a context of a world sharing a truce. Although this was initially offset by the Battlegrounds, which provided a narratologically justified space for players to kill each other [5], as patches have replaced and broadened aspects of the game, this is no longer the case. Instead, *WoW* has begun to reflect the diverse and perhaps even more volatile issues at stake in not only historicised warfare, but the wars which have taken place in the real world over the last few years.

### **Warsong Gulch: All Attack...**

Warsong Gulch (WSG) is the first Battleground players can access (at level 10). A simple game with a complicated backstory, Warsong Gulch remains one of the most popular Battlegrounds in the game. Potentially this is because it is the fastest, and takes the least time to complete. Possibly it is also because, despite the narrative that surrounds it, Warsong Gulch has little to do with war itself. As with all Battlegrounds, the allure of Warsong Gulch is also that Blizzard have added the ability for players to kill other players whilst retrieving the flag and carrying it back to their own friendly base.

The game of Catch the Flag is a simple game that lives within the ‘a moment to learn, a lifetime to master’ ilk. Thus, Warsong Gulch can be highly tactical, or it can be an all out melee; players take great enjoyment in wildly different strategies which can give them an opportunity to shamelessly kill the opposition without much regard for actually completing the games’ objectives, or to work closely together, defending, coveting, hiding or returning the flags through a myriad of different strategies.

Warsong Gulch is the Battleground least associated with war through actual gameplay, and most associated with it through backstory. The narrative surrounding it is the most complex in the game, and the consequences of this can be seen over several world zones. In short, the story of the Gulch involves a territorial dispute which has its roots (sic) in the forests of Ashenvale. Ashenvale belongs to the elves (Alliance), but is being deforested by the orcs (Horde). In Ashenvale itself (a zone outside but adjacent to the area occupied by Warsong Gulch), both contingencies can be seen at work – Warsong lumber camps run by orcs dot the landscape, surrounded by elven spies trying to root them out. The orcs claim that they need the lumber for the war effort; the elves are trying to protect their land. To a modern audience, well versed in ecological concerns about

deforestation, this seems relatively straightforward; the orcs are ‘wrong’ and the elves are ‘right’. This also conforms with the (rather misguided) impression that the Horde are ‘evil’ and the Alliance are ‘good’ (a claim which is heavily disputed both by players and by myself in my former paper on this subject) [5]. Blizzard have in fact, gone to great lengths to equalise both sides, and this brings into play their first major comment about the act of war in a truce-like world. See these two examples of quest objectives for Alliance and Horde regarding the Battleground:

The battle in Warsong Gulch against the Silverwing Sentinels is of great importance. Under the guise of protecting a forest that doesn't belong to them, the Alliance seeks to deny the Horde one of our largest sources for lumber.

(Quest – Horde – Battle for the Gulch)

The Silverwing Sentinels are at war with the Warsong Outriders due to the destruction the Orcs are causing to the forest. There are, however, more reasons to defend this particular forest than plain love for nature.

The forest forms a strategic barrier that makes Ashenvale defensible against a large-scale attack. Without it, Astranaar would last a day or two before being annexed to the Barrens.

(Quest – Alliance – Fight for Warsong Gulch)

The orcs’ claim that the lumber is for the collective war effort might still seem odd – why are the orcs invading the forests? – until one looks at the lands surrounding Ashenvale. Two belong to the Horde, and one to the Alliance. Duskwood (Alliance), is another forest zone, however The Barrens and Stonetalon Mountains (Horde) are not so well populated. The Barrens is comprised of arid plains with virtually no trees whatsoever<sup>1</sup>. Stonetalon Mountains is worse. In the two areas where there were trees, both have been destroyed, one by the technologically progressive Venture Co. Thus the orcs have no trees of their own, and the elves many in excess – making the Alliance suddenly appear not only selfish but greedy.

Warsong Gulch is in many ways a perfect introduction to the tension inherent in Battlegrounds. Most players pay little attention to the world narrative; in fact several players

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, trees are so scarce that they are often used as way markers in quests – for example the quest ‘Ishamuhale’ asks players to locate a dead tree in order to find the lizard Ishamuhale himself, and in ‘Disrupt the Attacks’, players are also guided towards ‘the huge thorny vines that come up from the earth’.

have told me that they were not even aware that Azeroth was meant to be in a state of truce, so great is the in-game animosity between sides. This lack of awareness reflects how many people play *WoW* without ever really becoming engaged in the backstory. It also throws into sharp contrast the distance between the underlying world narrative and the Battlegrounds. Warsong Gulch is a game to play; roleplay within it is virtually impossible because of the speed at which the game is played, and the narrative that surrounds it is distanced from the player. After the initial quests have been taken, there is little need to pay attention to the whys and wherefores of the Battleground's history or politics. Furthermore, a player wants to enter a Battleground quickly, not get bogged down in a lengthy exposition of the conflict, especially when they may be playing multiple times in a row. As a result, the plot become invisible (even the Quest objectives only appear once), and is sidelined.

This would seem to render the lengthy attempts by Blizzard to justify the conflict redundant. Yet the fact remains that the dispute over Warsong Gulch has a significant presence in the narrative and geographical narratives of Azeroth. The first major issue in represented Battlegrounds is thus a need to justify them, perhaps excessively, in a world where players, game culture and worldness do not really care. Going to war needs a purpose, and the level of unnecessary detail provides a telling commentary of its own. Conflict must be sanctioned, and in this case, given equal weight between warring factions. Warsong Gulch, the introductory Battleground, in fact contains a higher level of this than any other in the game, paving the way for normalising later conflicts by over-emphasising the rightness of going to war.

#### **Arathi Basin and Alterac Valley: Sound the Charge.**

The second Battlegrounds that a player encounters, Arathi Basin (AB) and Alterac Valley (AV), both contain far more obvious military emphasis, both in terms of objectives and the gameplay needed to achieve these. Unlike Warsong Gulch, these two Battlegrounds also make direct links with historical types of warfare and military strategy. Whereas Warsong Gulch is clearly a tactical game, both Arathi and Alterac Valley show obvious tendencies towards being pitched battles. Both are however rooted in a retrospective vision of warfare; one which is again, clearly supplanted by later additions to the game.

Arathi Basin, the second battlefield that players can access, involves gathering sufficient resources in order to win. The Battleground becomes available at level 40 to players – coincidentally the same level that a player can buy themselves a 'mount' – a race specific creature or machine that improves their transit speed around the world. Arathi Basin is a much larger arena than Warsong Gulch, and thus the possession of a mount quickly becomes a necessity. Gathering resources simply involves visiting one of five locations, taking possession of the flag placed there, and

holding the position over a period of time, represented by an increase in resources.

Alterac Valley is huge – so large that it even has mini-quests within it that have little to do with the Battleground itself. It can also take hours to complete a game, and has the capacity of include an entire raid of 40 players per side. Because of the high casualties it is possible to inflict during the course of a game (a mage can easily rack up 300 kills in just under an hour), as well as Honor rewards granted for achieving various objectives (sometimes repeatedly) Overall, Alterac Valley grants the highest amount of Honor, and is thus the most popular with players wishing to gain high ranking in the game. It is also only available to players over level 51, and thus has a certain amount of prestige attached to it. The objective in AV is much more simple than any of the others, but involves a great deal of strategy. Simply, one side has to reach the opposite end of the zone, where the enemy's General resides inside a building, and kill him.

What is perhaps interesting about this in terms of military tactics is the retrospective nature of both Battlegrounds. In the face of modern warfare, cavalry charges are both ineffective and dangerous. Although it was anticipated at first that the cavalry would have a major role to play in World War One, this assumption was quickly revised as the use of mechanised armaments and trench warfare quickly relegated the cavalry to a service function. This dropping-off point also marks the time whereupon the machine took over from the beast, destroying any illusions that war was a noble sport. The association between mounted soldiers and knights and the perception of the cavalry as an elite force in the army was also lost; although an estimated 8 million horses were killed in World War One – and so many were requisitioned for use in the British Expeditionary Force that there was a shortage for farming in the UK, the primary role of the horse became one of transport and communications, not as a mount for offensive troops.

However, mounted cavalry charges are an essential part of both Battlegrounds. Whilst Arathi can become a very tactical battle, its most common incarnation is a rapid mounted charge from one place to another, with players quickly grabbing the territory and then riding on to the next. If anything, Arathi Basin calls into focus an even more retrospective mode of warfare; one in which 'snatch and grab' is integrated with large scale charges. To effectively conquer each territory, one strategy is to cruise the arena in large groups – not stopping at each flag but moving quickly from one to the other and retaking positions if necessary:

MOBILITY - This is pretty much the key to Arathi. You don't need footspeed, like in WSG, but you need the ability to regroup and strike out quickly after each attack. If the horde manage to take one of your bases, they should just start to get the full capture as you are polishing off

the defenders on the base you just counterattacked. Use discipline and tactics. Keep an eye on the map. Know where your entire team is. Ask around to find where the enemy is. Then move. Quickly. Decisively. The horde may take one resource point or another, but never give them time to enjoy it. Take something else. The horde should be spinning in circles, trying to figure out where you are hitting next. [2]

Alterac Valley is by far the most strategic of the Battlegrounds. A common technique by players on both Horde and Alliance sides in Alterac Valley is to race blindly for the opposing base, ignoring anyone they may meet in the middle. Whilst racing to the General is one method of conquest, in actual fact if this fails, the battle has to be partially done in stages to be truly successful. Key to winning Alterac Valley is the seizure of a series of graveyards placed on the route throughout the zone. When players die in *WoW*, they are resurrected at the nearest graveyard. In a fight where players die more frequently than not, capturing each subsequent graveyard in order to be resurrected in it is a key strategic action. Also placed throughout the zone are a series of strongholds. Capturing these is a collaborative effort and gives players access to bonuses, including Honor points and the ability to gain additional buffs or attacks by NPCs on the enemy players.

Collectively, the varied objectives in the Battleground mean that a far more complex approach to the battle needs to be taken in order for it to be won. The large amount of players involved in the game means that large-scale attacks or defensive stances can be taken, and that collective tactics and strong leadership are much more important tools in winning the game. In turn, this means that traditional military techniques are applied directly to the battle. One group might hold the fortress at one end while another races for the far end, with a third group skirmishing in the centre to distract the opposition. Small groups might be delegated to take mid-point objectives; for example the rogue class are often asked to creep through the zone as if they were snipers; 'Manotikitia' advises players that:

It is beneficial for groups of Rogues to form "Stealth Teams" and do stealth missions together, making them a[n] unpredictable force able to do things that regular members of the Alterac Valley raid can not. [7]

However, despite the plethora of available tactics to the player, lengthy battles are often the result of players reaching a stalemate on one of the roads leading to each General. Perversely, players seem to rather enjoy this – certainly they remain in the field of battle for long amounts of time simply playing tit-for-tat with the opposing side –

repeatedly dying, running back to the point of stalemate, killing a couple of the opposition and then dying again.

The emphasis in Alterac Valley revolves around knocking out the opposition's outposts and moving quickly onwards. For the buildings in question, this is accomplished by snatching the stronghold and destroying the forces inside. The buildings then visually transform into burning and destroyed ruins, worthless to either side. Whereas an alternative might simply have been the capture of the location (as in Arathi Basin), razing the resource to the ground has become the key objective. Although destroying land and rendering it worthless has been a common technique for armies in retreat, this blatant destruction of objectives, rather than the 'catch and hold' method, shows an obvious parallel to more recent conflict, whose use of sophisticated weaponry to destroy prime targets in advance (although not always with great success), is a crucial element. In this case, therefore, although securing the graveyards in the game is important, military targets are seen as objects to be destroyed rather than utilised.

Battlegrounds develop far more complicated understandings of military tactics, moving them away from the 'frozen' historicised moment described inside the world space of Azeroth. Outside of the Battlegrounds, Azeroth is locked into a medieval mindset. It looks and feels antiquated, and the First World War is used as a dropping off point in which to signify a Luddite fear of the future. However the development of the Battlegrounds through subsequent patches shows a clear movement away from this crux moment of the First World War, and towards a more recent understanding of conflict. It is possible to get entrenched in Alterac Valley; stuck fighting over the same areas of land for extremely long periods of time, however the differing responses to it show that both players and designers have taken a more modern approach to a traditional battle. The visual representation of what happens in Alterac Valley shows clearly that it is not so much about capturing your enemies resources (as it is with the flag in Warsong Gulch), but more about destroying them entirely.

Landscape, often a key aspect of connoting wartime attitudes<sup>2</sup> is clearly apparent inside the Battlegrounds. Whereas there is a strong feeling of the Medieval and fantasy 'world' outside – especially in places like Stormwind Keep and the elven 'city' of Darnassus, inside Arathi and Alterac the terrain is far more plain. Arathi is a hillside area with neutral buildings – farm, mine, lumber

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* [1], in which he argues that the representation of the pastoral in war poetry become a crucial site of expression for soldiers who were surrounded by blasted worlds. The pastoral or the destroyed world in poetry therefore becomes a key metaphor for the destruction of the human spirit, as well as a signifier of the proclivities of war.

mill, stables, blacksmiths. If anything these lend themselves in a narrative manner to the frequent cavalry charges, as they apparently have a small emphasis on horse husbandry, but little else. The buildings themselves are relatively nondescript, peopled with non-aggressive peons belonging to whoever holds the area at a given time<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, Alterac is a snowbound landscape, and the military buildings are generally stocky turrets or wooden outbuildings. In both, the Medieval is replaced with a more practical visage of war. In Alterac, the fortifications are functional, losing their historicised nature. In Arathi, they are civilian outposts.



**Fig 1. The Blacksmith Building in Arathi Basin.**

#### **Open Source warfare – Current events and World PvP.**

World PvP is perhaps the most telling of all the Battlegrounds, directly bringing the conflict into an area which is inhabited by non-Battleground players, and forcing the two aspects of the game together. This brings the war onto the doorstep of players who may never play PvP, and although they still do not have to take part, whilst in the zone they are always able to see the progress of the Battleground as a marker of success (towers held, resources gathered, guards killed) at the top of their screens.

World PvP has not been very successful. Unlike the other Battlegrounds, players do not really travel to take part in them, and the disproportionate number of Alliance to Horde players on each realm<sup>4</sup> means that there is almost always an

<sup>3</sup> These peons are presumably collecting the resources that are the ultimate objective of the game, an activity left ‘outside’ the gameplay of the Battleground as it would stop the dynamic flow of the combat. Resource collecting in Arathi Basin is also a homage to the previous Warcraft games, which revolved around this activity.

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes this disparity is as bad as 85% Alliance to 15% Horde [10]

unfair bias. Another reason that people do not take part is the widespread or even random nature of these Battlegrounds. In the Eastern Plaguelands, it takes a great deal of time to travel between each tower, and in Silithus, the item to be collected (Silithid) is a random spawn, meaning that players cannot really marshal tactics in order to gather it. Despite this, the Burning Crusade upgrade patch added world PvP combat to every new zone in the game. New objectives include holding villages – the side that holds the village is able to trade with the inhabitants, and tasks which involve periodically destroying areas. Both actions – especially the last which is redolent of the ‘shock and awe’ tactics of recent conflicts, bear obvious resemblances to more contemporary wars, with an acknowledgement with the village scenario (as with Arathi Basin) that civilians are not politicised but instead will work for whoever holds the political reins. This is perhaps a rather simplistic view of how war works, but once again, certainly connotes the idea that civilians will be not only grateful, but compliant with their current ‘liberators’.

The World PvP Battlegrounds are perhaps the most reflective of the ideas that I go on to discuss next – namely Blizzard’s rather confused attitudes to modern warfare. By bringing the war to the people, players cannot help be aware of it, even though very few wish to take part. At the same time, the tactics, if there are any, involve skirmishing briefly in one area, then disappearing into the zone (which of course is very large), and ‘taking cover’, amongst the other players. Again, this is a very updated version of military tactics, one in which anyone could be the enemy, and which is likely to take inadvertent civilian casualties (in most realms, players are able to attack each other in ‘contested zones’ on sight). In actuality however, very few people are involved in the fighting, but a far larger group can easily be held accountable. Whilst a comparison with the generic nature of the War on Terror is perhaps too extreme to be a deliberate motif here, it is notable that the ‘smash and grab’ nature of the combat is as familiar as the unseen (and frequently demonised) enemy.

Warfare in the modern age is a highly sensitive issue. The ongoing conflict in Iraq and elsewhere have made people aware not only of the complexity of warfare, but also the difficulties of waging war. As with all wars, the recent conflicts have been accompanied by massive amounts of propagandist rhetoric on all sides. The nebulous War on Terror is a classic example of this – not only was location blurred through the term, but so was the enemy, changed from a human face to a terrifying ‘Other’, an Other often additionally blasted with the stigma of religious fanaticism and cultural difference. This climate, one which affected American life in particular, is the one in which *WoW* was written and its backstory composed. It is highly likely that this is one of the reasons that war is presented in such contradictory manners.

On the one hand, the game appears to condemn war as bad and destructive. The history of the world has hitherto

worked towards truce – a truce which now stands. Yet gameplay, players and narrative all work consistently towards breaking this truce. Overtures of peace towards the enemy are virtually impossible – Horde and Alliance cannot group or communicate with each other. In PvP realms – the most popular type of realm by significant numbers – players cannot even play characters from the other side. The enemy is not only alien, it is deliberately estranged. Furthermore, conflict is rewarded on all sides, from Battleground instances, to quests which support the isolationist policies of each side. Hating the other side; calling Tauren ‘cows’, calling orcs ugly, or even using the /spit emote, is seen as a perfectly acceptable practice, and in no way racist or derogatory. It seems that having made the truce, gameplay now suggests that a cavalier attitude towards it – including invading the other person’s territory, killing their people, stealing their resources, assaulting their cities, breaking their machines, attacking their civilians and finally, capturing their soldiers and either torturing them to death or locking them up in internment camps – is not only acceptable, but part of daily life. One cannot help but be extremely wary of the morals inherent in these naturalised forms of gameplay.

### Conclusion

There are two readings of the way *WoW* conceptualises war. One is that it is an Americanised reflection upon the ways in which wars are waged by the Bush Administration. There is little regard for human rights, and Azeroth’s cavalier attitude to breaking the peace echoes recent wars which have repeatedly been decried as illegal. Blizzard’s encoding of the *World of Warcraft* is an inadvertent product of its time, produced from a standpoint in which the morality of warfare has become not only confused but perverted. The inclusion of more continuous acts of warfare – for example through the overland PvP of the Eastern Plaguelands and the Outlands, is synonymous with a real world in which multiple wars are waged globally, and the barriers between where a conflict ends and begins are often blurred.

The other alternative, one that is both less aggressive and supports Blizzard’s intention to create a large, well-developed sustained world, is that the game uses these icons in conjunction with those that historicise war in order to point to war’s failings as a solution. *WoW* is never going to be an anti-war text since it relies on conflict as an integral part of both its worldness and gameplay. However, by bringing in icons such as a festival to remember dead heroes, or placing such sites as the Shrine of the Fallen Warrior – a small brazier that burns on a hillside near the Crossroads – it is in fact asking players to think more deeply about the consequences of war. Blizzard recognises

that despite the name ‘massively multi-player online roleplaying game’, there is little actual ‘roleplay’ within the game (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler: 2007) [6], but opportunities that do exist are often taken up with commemoration or peacemaking attempts. For players who wish to imagine themselves into the world in a more creative context, the opportunity to do this through divergent attitudes to war is one which is highly apparent, and often acted upon.

A sustained world is a diverse world, and the conflicting responses to war is one of the ways to do this. Fighting is a naturalised part of the game, therefore bringing it into question, even in a small manner, is an act that facilitates difference, even questioning of the game. This paradox, one which is more akin to real life dilemmas, helps sustain the large scale, complex nature of Azeroth, and if players choose to ignore it... there are always more battles to be had.

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