

Shields Up!

**A critical look
at soloing
leveling
and
PvP**



did guild wars get snubbed?

Let's say it's the 2005 E3. You're the developer of a new MMORPG. What would you have learned from ArenaNet? I mean really, I can't make much sense out of it. 200,000+ accounts were made for the "E3 for Everyone" event. Even the most rabid of video game forums that I frequent, they had nothing but nice things to say about Guild Wars. Yet, in all of this, why didn't the video game press give Guild Wars it's props? I don't get it. It seems Guild Wars got more respect at the 2003 E3 Expo. That was back in the days of the less impressive graphics.

As far as I can see, there was nothing that Guild Wars was lacking. Well, maybe there was one thing missing. I didn't see any scantily clad booth babes at the Guild Wars display. Is that why virtually all video game publications snubbed Guild Wars? I looked everywhere for awards and favorable press coverage. I didn't find much at all. So the first lesson to you is this - take no chances. If you're trying to amaze the video game world, make sure you have half naked women. This is obviously more important than impressing thousands of gamers.

That's when I started thinking. Is Guild Wars lacking? I started to take a long and critical look at the game. Obviously Guild Wars was the Best of Show to me. You don't see me making a fansite for any other games. Despite this, I tried to see if there was something wrong with the game. Is Guild Wars somehow less impressive today, instead of 2003? That was when I looked at promo video from 2003 and I compared it to today. It's hard to imagine this is even the same game. That's when I started wondering, "How true is ArenaNet staying to their Guild Wars design objectives?" In this issue, I look closely at three crucial areas of the game.

- 1) Soloing vs. Cooperative gaming
- 2) Grinding vs. Goals
- 3) PvP and the community

Why these three areas? In recent weeks, these are the areas I feel the developers are currently examining. Soloing has changed dramatically, character advancement has been re-implemented and PvP is always under close scrutiny.

The game is nearing completion. While Guild Wars can be updated at any time, it won't be long before the developers buckle down for release. There will be a time when the developers stop thinking about major design changes and start focusing on getting Guild Wars out the door. I don't claim to know when that time will be. However, the release date is looming. If the 2004 deadline is to be met, that means things need to be finalized soon.

OK, I'll level with you. I was hoping to talk about Guild Features in this issue. I'm not sure what the hold up is, but I'm thinking it must be for a really good reason. This replacement theme was the best I could come up with. Never-the-less, your dialogue is very important. There are many Guild Wars forums out there. They welcome further discussion. That is the ultimate goal of this issue. You don't have to agree with my opinions in this issue. In fact, many alpha testers do not. I prefer Guild Wars PvE to PvP, but it's not uncommon to see alpha testers feel the reverse. Why the discrepancy? The discussion can bring forth good changes. Guild Wars cannot be all things to all people. But if major consensus says something is broken, the developers have a healthy habit of fixing it.

Oh, and for my slightly biased Guild Wars poll, over 75% said Guild Wars was the E3's Best of Show. What better acclaim could you possibly want than that?



GUILD WARS

Guild Wars® is a trademark of NCsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

ARENANET

ArenaNet®

©2003 ArenaNet, Inc. All rights reserved.

ArenaNet, Arena.Net and the ArenaNet logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of NCsoft Corporation in the U.S. and/or other countries.

"GuildMaster Photics" is a Guild Wars Fansite Electronic Magazine, by Michael Garofalo.

“you can fight alone...”



Those two dudes in red may be facing the wrong way, but they're actually on your side. While not the swiftest of warriors, many NPCs will help you out.

At the E3, it was easy to see that Guild Wars was divided into three clear sections - Solo, Cooperative and Competitive missions. There were plenty of maps where you could fight alone. That changed shortly after the E3. Typical feedback from players was that they wanted more team exploration. They wanted the game to feel less like it was instanced. The developers listened. They made it so that players could form groups in towns, then proceed to adventure across the solo areas.

Did this fix the problem? Many thought it did. A group of 4 people could go from Khylo, across the solo area and all the way through maps 1-5. This is without ever using the map to teleport you. It made the world feel more like a world, rather than imaginary boxes linked together. This free roaming ability helped with groups. It aided in creating the sensation of team exploration. Unfortunately, it had a nasty side-effect.

It is critical to understand the consequences of changing things in an MMORPG. An improvement of one feature may lead to the ruining of another feature. That's exactly what happened. By improving grouping, soloing suffered.

By allowing groups to have free reign on solo maps, the solo player game was badly damaged. For some time after the E3, almost every map in the game was balanced for a full group of level 20s. That made it a great challenge for groups of 4, but it left solo players out in the cold. Many of the maps specifically designed for solo play were now infested with hordes of Charr. We're talking 20 to 1 odds. Even if you were skilled enough to defeat that many enemies, it would take a really REALLY long time to do so. It definitely frustrated the solo players.

Why should the developers care about this? 1) It's an alpha. Maybe it's tough to find a group now, but obviously it won't be at release. 2) Why cater to solo players in a multiplayer game?

Why should the developers care about this? 1) It's an alpha. Maybe it's tough to find a group now, but obviously it won't be at release. 2) Why cater to solo players in a multiplayer game?

I found myself a bit apathetic on the issue. I knew it was a problem, and I even offered suggestions on how to fix it, but I really couldn't care. I had my own little part of the world to solo. Not every alpha tester knew about it, but there was spot to "farm" loot. Everything I needed was there - Steel, Drake Scales, Silk, Gold, Experience Points, and more. I do admit, this made for incredibly boring gameplay. I would be loading the same map over and over again. That didn't matter to me though, as I am used to MMORPG old world gaming. A little grinding is good for the mind. It gave me an objective. If getting more power means I have to hit the same land over and over again, then so be it. I don't play these games for quality of soloing. There are plenty of games in the world for that.

Now right about now you must be thinking to yourself, "Mike, stop! You're frightening me. I thought Guild Wars wasn't about level grinding. I also thought it was for all types of gamers - soloers and groups alike!"

That's where it gets interesting. Do I care about soloing for all? No, I don't. I'd feel silly about arguing for solo play in a multiplayer game. What I do care about is ArenaNet living up to their design objectives. They're the ones that said, "You can fight alone!" It was said in the 2003 E3 demo movie. They obviously know what players want to hear. They know that many players like to solo, even though it's a multiplayer game. The question remains - will ArenaNet deliver on all of their objectives? If ArenaNet doesn't live up to their words, it will throw the game into a pit of ranting. It will never cease. At which point, it will force me to take sides. I don't want to be in a spot where I have to choose between supporting the developers and supporting the community. I'd rather see everyone happy. Fortunately,



Isn't it beautiful?
Human and computer,
fighting on the same side.



Solo or cooperative, there are plenty of monsters to fight.

game's difficulty was previously balanced for a full group of ascended players. That brings us to the second change.

2) The game is now progressive. Maps now increase in difficulty. Players can now level-up. It's so cute to see level 1 players in the game. It's like a new life. They're so adorable. To me, an RPG isn't an RPG without leveling. More on this later. For now, look at the ramifications this has on soloing. A cooperative map that is balanced for a group of low-level players is also a good time for a single high level player. What is the threshold? That's truly up to the individual player. I'm personally having a great time revisiting old maps, while annihilating everything in my path. A level 20 Mesmer / Elementalist has little trouble versus a level 3 Charr. Sure, revisiting the "noobie" maps is not the most challenging of things, but sometimes it's just satisfying to one-shot kill a Charr. It makes you feel like you've accomplished something. It shows how you've grown in power. It's also pretty good to release some frustration.

I suspect the developers might be closely watching this, as awesome power has the ability to rewrite history. Maps in Guild Wars are like chapters in a book. However, when you're a level 20 in a level 3 map, things don't always go as planned. Many of you might remember Map #1 from the "E3 for Everyone" event. It's the map where you're supposed to run from the Charr horde. After spotting the Charr army, you have to run back to your garrison. You have to warn your allies about the approaching forces. Errr... but that's not how I did it. I killed the whole lot. Does that mean the war is over now? Yeay... I win!

Watching developers tweak their MMORPG is like watching a swinging pendulum. Things are balanced when both sides are pretty much happy. So naturally, now that soloers can solo again, does this mean that groups are less challenged? No, not at all. The reason for this is simple - there are NEW maps. In Kryta, there are plenty of challenging maps. Many are tough enough for a full group of ascended players. With the addition of these high level maps, this swings the pendulum back towards groupers. Does that leave soloers out in the cold again? "But Mike, what's the point of being able to enter a map you can't win?" The developers have a solution to that as well - mercenaries.

While not implemented yet, word is that mercenaries will be implemented into Guild Wars. Are you a solo player? Are you having trouble with a really hard map? That won't be an insolvable problem, not when you can hire mercenaries. I've already experienced what it is like to fight with NPCs on my side. My favorite farming spot has NPC guards throughout the area. You can team up with them and fight the Charr together. Isn't that nice? Even the computer can be on the winning team.

Soloing and Cooperative missions, this is an area where the developers are excelling. The Player vs. Enemy aspects of this game are just phenomenal! It's challenging, but not a chore. Not to mention, the maps are gorgeous. If there's a problem with Guild Wars, it's certainly not in this area. The Player vs. Enemy aspects of Guild Wars are clearly topnotch. And yes, if you so choose, you can fight alone.



there is a happy ending to this story. The game was changed into a soloer's dream.

Just stop here and let that sink in a minute. I called it a "soloer's dream". I don't just throw words around because I think they sound cool. I write what I believe. For an MMORPG, it's the best soloing I've ever seen. So what did they do? Two basic things changed.

1) Just like groups could go into any solo map, now solo players can go into a cooperative map. If you try to enter a cooperative map - as an individual - you will get a warning. "The mission your party has elected to enter, "<MAP NAME>", was designed for <X> players but your party size is 1. Are you sure you want to proceed to this mission? [Yes] [No]"

In traditional ArenaNet fashion, little fanfare happens when something changes in Guild Wars. I wasn't prepared for this change. I stumbled on this discovery by myself. I was very happy to see it. "What the... Hey! I can go into this map solo?! That's great!" This meant the entire game was opened up to soloers. While this is a great thing, that change in of itself would not be enough to please soloers. As I mentioned before, the

“we spend our time training”

Now that leveling is once again in Guild Wars, is there a grind? That depends. If you're consider the time it takes to get from level 1 to level 20, you will not find a grind. I'm thinking it would take a hardcore player just one day to get from level 1 to level 20. I've leveled many lynxes from level 3 to level 15 in half that time. There really is not much to Guild Wars leveling. With 4 character slots, you could have 4 level 20s in less than a week.

However, level 20 is not the ultimate achievement in this game. There are many things to do at level 20, which could be perceived as grinding. For one, you will not likely have enough skill points at level 20. With roughly 80 skills between two professions, you will have to keep gaining EXP. That is if you want a complete skill set.

In addition to skills, upgrading your equipment takes time. If you want a full set of high-end armor, that could take some time. Certain crafting components are extremely rare. If you want a specific color, that might add even more time to your quest. Black is the rarest color of all. Recently, a dye merchant was added to the game. It works similar to the gem merchant, where the NPC bases item prices from the player economy. The dye merchant gives concrete proof of the value of colors. At the time of this writing, the dyes had the following value: Yellow - 12 gold, Orange - 12 gold, Purple - 12 gold, Green - 12 gold, Red - 19 gold, Blue - 19 gold, Silver - 31 gold. As for the Black Dye, I've never seen it in stock.

So OK, say you're going for the absolute best gear. Say you even want to dye every piece of your armor black. Say you would never trade with other players. Say you would never even group with other players. It's just you and the game. How long would it take for you to get all the skill gems and have a great set of gear? I'm thinking a hardcore player could probably do it in a week. Even a casual player could do it in a month. It might even be less than that, as the "E3 for Everyone" event had brand new players usurping many seasoned alpha testers.



“E3 for Everyone” File Photo

Just how many skill gems do you really need?

But what if you like grinding? If you want to have an edge over other players, just because you put more time into the game, this game is simply not for you. Do you remember the E3 2003 demo video. Do you remember the part where the sexy voice said "We spend our time training!" She must have meant actual combat, because character prep time for battle is almost non-existent. Well, that is compared to other MMORPG games. Imagine if you could hit the maximum level in just a day - without cheating! What would that mean for the continuity of that game? How many MMORPG subscriptions would be canceled without the grind?

What are the ramifications of an MMORPG without a grind? How long will players stay interested? What happens when you clear all the maps? Is PvP enough to captivate players? Many players I talk to say they're sick of the grind games, yet they're quick to sign up for other level grinding MMORPGs. What will happen when they are faced with Guild Wars? Does ArenaNet need to create more PvE goals, just to keep players interested, even though there is no monthly fee?

In any case, even in the game's incomplete form, you'll clearly get your money's worth out of Guild Wars. I've spent \$50 on games that I've beat in a few hours. Meanwhile, my Guild Wars play time is measured in days. My newly created Mesmer / Elementalist has 5.6 days of play time. That says a lot, considering there is virtually no downtime in Guild Wars. I don't have a 6 minute break after combat either. After fights, I don't have time to wander off and make a sandwich or clip my toenails. What if you spent \$50 on Guild Wars, played for 135 hours and then said you had enough? That would mean you spent only 37¢ an hour to play. That's a very economical game indeed. However, I still have much to do with my Mesmer / Elementalist. How many hours will you play?

If you need goals to drive you, there are a few lengthy goals to pursue. Unfortunately, it is not on the epic level of other MMORPGs. Currently, Guild Wars has no single in-game quest that will take days of your life. Finding every last skill gem might take a long while, but it is not required to be competitive. Is that why Guild Wars didn't win any major E3 2004 awards? I doubt it. It is something to think about though. Does Guild Wars need a grind? I'm not talking about wack-a-mole gameplay. I'm talking about ultra long-term objectives. Aside from PvP, should ArenaNet make sure that even hardcore players have something to do in between expansions? If so, what should those goals be?

Even though Guild Wars is huge, the maps are in storybook form. Just as you are unlikely to read a book many times over, so are you unlikely to play the same maps over and over. How can ArenaNet easily add replay value to these maps, without creating a feeling of grind? Currently, the benefits for replaying a previous mission could be considered grind like - experience points, farming loot, attribute refund points. Many maps also contain a hidden side quest, but

they can be completed the first time around. Is there anything you would like to see done? How can ArenaNet invite you to replay maps, without it feeling tedious?

Guild Wars Experience Table

Level 1	0 xp
Level 2	1,250 xp
Level 5	7,100 xp
Level 6	9,750 xp
Level 10	23,850 xp
Level 11	28,250 xp
Level 15	49,350 xp
Level 16	55,500 xp
Level 20	83,600 xp

How do you give value to epic items, without unbalancing the game? The principle premise of Guild Wars is that anyone can be competitive. You don't need to invest six months of your life, just to be on an even footing with other players. However, humans have an inherent desire to excel. How do you create a feeling of individuality, while maintaining the integrity of fair competition?

This goes back to the pendulum analogy. How do you balance polar opposites in an MMORPG? Sometimes you can't. That is also a fair response. Should ArenaNet do anything at all? Why should they even care if you don't play every day for six months? Will this hurt their sales in the long run? Do you think ArenaNet should slow down the Guild Wars leveling?

Why not visit your favorite Guild Wars Forum and discuss it? ArenaNet is listening.



Just how many halberd
wielding skeletons can you
fight, just before it become
really REALLY boring?!

“...and some will live by our mercy”

The boundary between Solo and Cooperative content may be a bit blurred, but it's easy to see how both groups can be happy. However, I'm not so sure about PvP. In fact, I have serious doubts about Guild Wars PvP combat. It all hinges on one simple fact - people like to win.

Over the last two months, I've watched my guild - The Crusaders - become frustrated with PvP combat. The once largest guild in alpha, now many just stopped showing up for All Call. Some even stopped showing up entirely. Their Alpha accounts go wasted. Now those of you on the outside, you must be crying out in rage. "Give their spot to me!" Unfortunately, there is currently only one way into Alpha - an active guild must recommend you.

So what happened? Why did my guild, and other alpha testers like them, lose interest in PvP? When I started The Crusaders in 2001, I did so with the intention of the guild being for all types of players - casual and hardcore alike. However, it seems Guild Wars PvP isn't for everyone. Sometimes I wonder if casual players should even bother with PvP at all. There are also other reasons why Guild Wars PvP has been tough on the guild.

1) Alpha isn't for everyone.

This is one fact that should not be overlooked. All Call is tough. There are constant interruptions. Since new content is being added constantly, not everything is working properly. During an All Call, it's not uncommon to see 10 new builds in a two hour period. Also, people learn at different rates. Some testers take to this game like a fish to water. Other testers are a bit confused and don't completely understand what's going on. This gap between player skill is apparent in PvP. The skilled players win, the unskilled players are food. Unlike retail, there are no cheat websites to grab player guides from. Also, build notes are a rarity. Occasionally, a developer will explain what changes are going on. More often than not, players are on their own to figure things out.

2) Not everyone can make it to All Calls.

There are guys in my guild who hate missing a good fight. Unfortunately, All Call represents such a narrow window of opportunity. It's two hours on Wednesday and two hours of Friday. Let's be honest. Video games are great and all, but it's considered more socially acceptable to go out on Friday nights. After the retail release, you can plan your assault when it is most convenient for you. In Alpha, the current All Call times are very inconvenient - especially for testers outside the United States.

3) Players cheat!

There are certain testers who thrive on the current testing environment. There's a certain breed of tester, who will sniff out exploits like a bloodhound. A developer generally gets a tip-off about new exploits, but that still leaves a pretty good chance for the exploit to be abused at the next All Call. The exploiters will wait patiently, keeping their knowledge secret from other players. The exploiters will hope that the cheat isn't fixed in time. The next thing you know, an unsuspecting group is getting destroyed.

Granted, alpha testers SHOULD cheat. They should find every possible exploit they can find. This way, retail players will be spared the misery. Unfortunately, this means the misery is falling on the testers. A lot of new skills were added. The first time most players learn of potential imbalances is when they are mowing the grass with their teeth. "For the good of the game" only goes so far. At some point, testers get tired of ensuring the death animations work.

“E3 for Everyone” File Photo



“Ha ha!
I got the relic!
In yo face!
Nah nah!
I’m the best!
Who’s the man?
I’m the man!”

4) PvP is tough!

I don't care how good you are. The system is designed to see you fail. Even if you should somehow make it to the top of the tourney, even if you control the Halls of Heroes, you'll be facing two new challengers in the next round. The difference, they're fresh and hungry for blood. Meanwhile, your guys are getting ready to log off. You cannot hold out forever. No matter how good you are, no matter how sound your tactics are, there are no reinforcements in Guild Wars PvP. There is no one to pass the torch to. You try to burn as brightly as you can, until you ultimately burn out.

The odds are against you. Say there are to be 1,000,000 players in Guild Wars. Let's also say that the average guild has 25 people. That means your odds of winning are 1 in 40,000. Even with a ranking system, you're really just bragging about how badly you're losing. "Woot! Our guild is ranked 1,042!" Is the best a guild can hope for is their 15 minutes of fame?

5) Your enemies can talk to you!

If you think Alpha testers are above trash talking - think again. Even I have been known to throw a few snide remarks at my rivals. This will ultimately create a very immature atmosphere, which will scare away many customers. At the very least, it will keep many people out of PvP. I'm finding that this is already happening in alpha. I can almost always get a group for PvE. If I mention PvP, all of a sudden people have an appointment they forgot. I respect the people who tell me straight up that they're not interested in PvP. This way, the developers will listen. ArenaNet has shown - on numerous occasions - that they will improve their game, if player feedback so warrants it.

So now what?!

The truth is, it takes a certain type of player to truly appreciate the current version of Guild Wars PvP. There are players who enjoy the adrenaline rush of pure competition. I have not seen a more aggressive version of PvP combat, not in an MMORPG. That's the problem. It's too aggressive.

Going back to the 2003 E3 demo video, the lady with the lovely voice speaks on guilds. She says, "Other guilds will confront us. Others will vie for our honors. Some will die by our own hand and some will live by our mercy." I don't see any mercy. The combat is ruthless. It's you vs. the world - literally. Everyone, from every corner of the globe, is looking to destroy you and your team. There's no benevolence. If you run into a team that has less skill than you, it just makes it that much easier to step on them. Your only goal is to climb the ladder or to go home.

What is the solution?

Guild Wars has been in development for many years now. Back in the early days of development, I think this type of aggressive combat would be welcomed with opened arms. Today, I think many MMORPG players appreciate a more refined version of combat. I think they welcome teamwork on a larger scale. If you notice, many of the newer massively multiplayer games have faction based warfare. The whole game is divided into 2-3 teams: Red vs. Green vs. Blue, Good vs. Evil, East vs. West. This encourages organization with other guilds. This creates a more social environment, as opposed to every guild for themselves. Also, this would increase the chances of players being on the winning side. It would give players something to cheer for. "Go Green Team!"

What do you think? Many of you have experienced the Guild Wars Tournament at E3. Sure, there are key components missing - Guild Features, Ranking, Rewards, etc. But with that in mind, would this be enough to satisfy you for the long run? Why not discuss this at your favorite Guild Wars forum. How does Guild Wars PvP combat compare to other competitive games? Is Guild Wars PvP the best or could it be better?



"E3 for Everyone" File Photo