

Photics

GUILD WARS EDITION

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Exclusive Interview With Gaile Gray from ArenaNet



GUILD WARS



ArenaNet has been using a rather unconventional method of beta testing. Do you think this is working for you? How do you feel having to shut out thousands of players every month?

It's true that, like everything else, our testing doesn't fit the standard model. We're really happy that gamers appreciate and understand the value of what we're doing with our alpha and beta testing. We know that in the early days, there was hope that we'd offer a long open beta test, and that anyone could join and play during that period of time. In truth, such long open betas are often more a factor of PR or marketing than they are a factor of game development. In fact, some "beta tests" open after the gold master of the game has already been locked down, and they're not a test at all.

Our method of testing has been so incredibly beneficial, frankly we're surprised that other companies haven't thought of it before: We open up the game for a brief period, allowing tens of thousands of people to take a peek, kick the tires, experience the professions and skill sets which have often changed since the previous event on maps or in regions with which they may or may not have familiarity. During that period of time, we gather bug reports, analyses, comments, criticisms, and suggestions. We then move the game back to alpha status and continue testing on a limited scale with the alpha testing team while taking the time to read the comments, listen to the feedback, and hash out amongst ourselves where we will go with the next generation of the game, the next monthly BWE.

This testing method helps gamers, too, because instead of coming in day after day to the same thing, they step away for a while and come back to a completely different experience. While the maps might sometimes remain the same, gamers can see the

GUILD WARS

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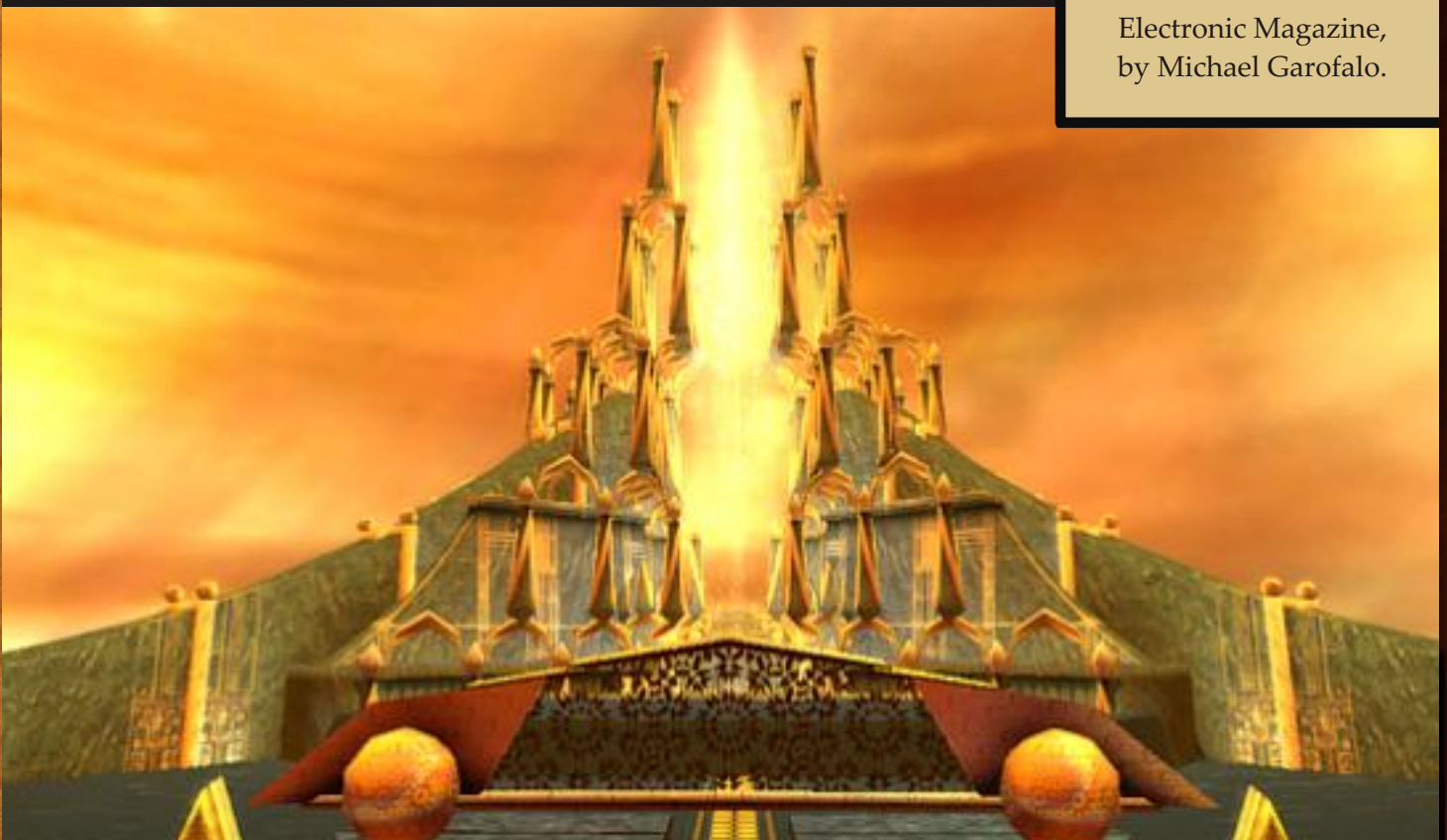
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"GuildMasterPhotics" is a Guild Wars Fansite Electronic Magazine, by Michael Garofalo.



experience is substantially different each month. So the feedback may address a lot of questions, such as: Was it too difficult? Was the mission too long, or too confusing, or just about right? How about the loot drops are they good? Are the goals for the characters attainable while being challenging? And of course, did you find bugs of any kind graphical, animation, pathing, gameplay, storyline, even spelling in the tutorial?

So yes, it's unconventional, but it's working really well!

As to closing down at the end of the world events or the Beta Weekend Events, it's always a bittersweet experience. We've all had a great time, but we're a little tired and we know there is much to be done before the next such event. We're eager to move forward yet at the same time we look back on those days of frenetic energy and rapid-fire communication, and we miss that during the quieter days of the alpha test. Or we miss it most of the time, until we have 15 teams battling it out during an All Call Session and realize the testers keep things pretty lively even during the alpha stage.

On the official ArenaNet site it says that Jeff Strain was the "creator of the StarCraft Campaign Editor." Will there ever be such a map making kit for *Guild Wars*?

We don't anticipate publicly releasing any of our map- or level-making technology in the foreseeable future. While we have tremendous appreciation and respect for the mod- and map-making



Catapults were added to Guild vs Guild battles.

community, we are putting game security and cheat/hack prevention at the very top of our list. That's one of the reasons that *Guild Wars* is a client/server game, rather than peer-to-peer, like *StarCraft*. So for security reasons, we will not be able to release a system like the StarEdit system that Jeff developed years ago.

In the FAQ, it responds to the possibility of *Guild Wars* on other systems. It says, "We will continue to evaluate these possibilities as we get closer to release." We're getting closer to release. Has there been any development on *Guild Wars* for other systems? Will we see *Guild Wars* on the Mac OS or XBOX live?

We are still in the core development phase for *Guild Wars*, and we honestly haven't looked into any operating systems or platforms outside of that on which we are developing the game: the PC. We do get letters from fans asking us about alternatives, and we certainly intend to give the question good and thorough consideration after we ship.

We developed the entire engine for rapid portability. The complete server infrastructure is what is called "platform agnostic," while the client engine is built upon a small OS abstraction layer that can be ported to other systems. After we ship, we will take another look at the market, and if other platforms have the required technical infrastructure (like, say, certain next-generation consoles shipping with a hard drive out of the box), then we will consider supporting that system. However, we do avoid the word "port," particularly when talking about consoles. Consoles have very different interface and control requirements, and it is unlikely that a straight port would be a fun experience on a platform. If we support other platforms, be assured that they will get a game that was built from the ground up to take full advantage of the platform capabilities and control paradigm.

In the early days of *Guild Wars*, the game was promoted as having 50 vs. 50 combat. Did this go away? Will there be larger battle sizes, larger than 8-player teams?

Some months ago, the designers sat down and really considered the elements of team-play and player game and



Running the relic home for
your team is a good thing
to do.



Spamming the dance emote
before scoring is a bad thing.

team management, and they settled on 8 players per team as being the appropriate number for a Player-versus-Player or Guild-versus-Guild match. Also keep in mind that we do have tournament missions with up to 48 players. At this point in time, 50-versus-50 PvP gameplay doesn't sound right for *Guild Wars*. For one thing, such gameplay would be difficult to manage from a player's or battle commander's perspective. For another, with 50-versus-50, the wide range of attack types and spell effects could cause problems for those on slower systems, and as you know, our goal is to include a wide range of gamers, not only those with high-end systems.

From the perspective of a field commander, consider the complexity of dual-profession characters, which result in 30 possible character combinations (in the first chapter, alone!). Then, add the skills, which upon release will number more than 400. The thought of a field general or guild leader trying to coordinate the movements and strategies of 50 players is simply mind-boggling!

Having played *Guild Wars* a lot, and being impressed on a regular basis with the complexity of the gameplay opportunities, I do agree with the smaller party size. Sure, there are ways to "just go in there and bash stuff,"



Here we have three members from The Crusaders guild, demonstrating the “Away From Keyboard” command.

reasonable time frame. While we think that the notion of mini-games can be fun, we do consider it somewhat outside of the core goal. So I guess the answer is "only time will tell" on the inclusion of that chess table or life-size Monopoly board. ☺

The December Beta Weekend Event illustrates how the *Guild Wars* community detests cheating. Has this caused you to rethink any of your design decisions? Would something like PunkBuster be packaged with *Guild Wars*?

The "cheating" that we saw on the ladder two months ago wasn't really a cheat so much as an exploit. The factors that allowed a few of the guilds to rack up undeserved points and get near the top of the ladder were based on known issues in an unfinished and unpolished ladder program. In retrospect, we probably should have taken the time to put the ladder protocols fully in place, so that we didn't have this very visible exploitation going on. Instead, we made it intentionally easy to create a guild, since that benefited the largest number of players, and didn't worry overly much about the exploiters. After all, it was quite easy to track who did what, and the exploiters were detected and their guild rankings were reset promptly after the December BWE.

As you can imagine, the ladder as it will be presented in the release version of the game will be substantially beefier. A finely honed system will be required, because we will be holding world championships and everything will be under great scrutiny, as it should be. You saw where we were heading with improvements in cheat and exploit prevention during the January event. In the final version of the

and that would certainly work with a large group, where every player is for himself and there's nothing close to a well-thought-out strategy being considered. But to play *Guild Wars* as it was designed, and to use the multi-faceted gameplay opportunities that it offers, a huge party is unwieldy and ultimately doomed to fragmentation and the dissolution of any strategic effort.

Now, we've been asked about team alliances, where certain groups form agreements such as non-aggression pacts or mutual enemy concords. While formal alliances of this nature will most likely not be present in the first chapter of *Guild Wars*, it is something that definitely will be considered for subsequent chapters.

Will there be mini-games at the Guild Hall, such as card games or chess?

Let's put it this way: If we have time to add such "extras" as this, we may. But if you're asking will we hold delivery of the game in order to include these bonus concepts, I'd have to say that the answer is "no." The first obligation we owe to our fans is to produce an amazing, rich, complex, and rewarding gaming experience, and to ship it within a





Guild Wars Ladder, a team won't be able to roll over for another team and give them unearned points. Guilds will take more than a few minutes to create (as you saw in the January event), and won't be "disposable" commodities where a group can make a guild, lose a game, delete the guild, and start over again with a new one. Additionally, a guild won't be able to acquire points off of guilds substantially lower than their own ranking. The whole setup will be drastically improved, where challenges are best within a reasonable distance of your own ranking, meaning you can't bottom fish to get points. You'll still have the challenge of trying to beat the best teams in the world, but if you are a member of one of those top teams, you will find that matches against non-competitive teams don't garner enough benefits to make them the sole focus of your climb to the top.

We're grateful that people understood the beta nature of the game and didn't lapse into worry about the integrity of the game or the soundness of the ladder based on that incident. In the end, we have a great incentive to make the ladder as robust and cheat-free as we're making the rest of the game, and that is a very top priority for the whole *Guild Wars* team.

While *Guild Wars* had over 200,000 accounts created for the 2004 E3, it didn't win any major awards. The only reason I could think of was booth babes. There were no scantily clad women at the *Guild Wars* booth. Was this a conscious decision? Will you be doing anything differently at the 2005 E3



I don't know, Mike. Do you really think it makes a difference? Do you think the judges weigh a game's merit on gameplay, graphics, storyline, and the gorgeousness of the booth models? ;)

If you want to know my honest opinion, I think the reason that *Guild Wars* was overlooked for awards was because we worked outside the norm, and members of the press really didn't know how to view the whole concept of *E3 for Everyone*. Plus, having been to several E3's myself as a member of the press, I know how hard it is to cover the whole show in just three days. I imagine that those in charge of giving awards were simply extremely busy scrambling around the show floor trying to meet deadlines. I believe that it was difficult to really stop and consider the ground-breaking event taking place during E3, with nearly a quarter of a million people playing, without a hitch, in the *Guild Wars Alpha*. We've seen a lot of references to the event after the show, so it was definitely noticed. Unfortunately, it wasn't noticed as much as you and I might have liked during the show itself. It's okay; I'm sure *Guild Wars* will win its share of awards when we release. :)

While I can't imagine *Guild Wars* dying before I do, let's say that I live to see the final days of *Guild Wars*. Would ArenaNet ever release a Server Pack, so that players could run their own *Guild Wars* servers?

That's an interesting question. It seems to boil down to asking that if the choice were between having no access at all and allowing hosted servers, which would we choose. In such an unlikely event, I suppose that the decision-makers would feel that it made more sense to allow privately hosted servers rather than to disallow any gameplay at all. But that's such an unlikely notion that I don't anticipate such an eventuality will ever come to be.

There is a common conception that long hours are just part of a game developer's job. How do you feel about that? Does the ArenaNet staff work long hours, to try and complete *Guild Wars*? Obviously those Beta weekends must be insane, but what's a typical day like? How's the team holding up? How's morale?

Being a game developer is never a 9-to-5 job, that's for sure. Most of us put in a lot of hours, but those of us who do are really happy to do so, and I don't think that anyone is feeling overtaxed or stressed by the workload. Our company is made up of about 75 individuals, and we came from dozens of different game company cultures, some of them the sort that asked their staff to give up their personal lives and pretty much devote every waking hour to game production.

That's not the way we do it at ArenaNet. One of the early decisions that the company founders made was to keep things reasonable as far as deadlines and expectations. And with our chapter model, we feel that it is essential that we



develop a sustainable work culture and not burn everyone out by pushing a half-baked product out the door before the end of the fiscal quarter. We don't have sleeping bags in our office; we haven't installed a shower to enable people to work a week without going home. We don't have sharp-eyed managers sitting by the door checking to make sure that you've put in your 16 hours in a row. Our team morale is really excellent, and the camaraderie among the members is extraordinary. As we get closer to launch it might get a little crazy, but I'm confident we'll hold up very well!

First Person Perspective is an excellent example of a feature that was spawned from player feedback. Are there any new features that are being added as a result of player feedback?

Yes, there are.

Oh, wait, you want to know *details*, huh? :) Well, first-person perspective and multi-player access to the Explorable Areas were both features requested in the World Preview Event in October. We made the Explorable Areas multiplayer within a week. We added first-person perspective in a few days. Then, in the November BWE, we heard from fans that

the game was too easy, that the missions did not require as much strategy and teamwork to complete as players wanted. Improving that factor, making the game more challenging, isn't simply a matter of cranking up monster difficulty and having everything else fall into place. In order to make a game more challenging, you need to look at the meta-game and determine how to add challenge without driving away the casual gamer. We want to enhance the challenge in ways that increase the difficulty so that you get a feeling of accomplishment upon successful completion but so that you don't feel that gameplay is repetitive or frustrating. After our November event, we worked on challenges and balance and rolled out a greatly different game in the December Beta Weekend Event.

Now, in December, we started hearing the opposite of what we had heard in November: "It's too hard!" "I shouldn't have to try again and again to complete a mission." Some of that feeling stems, we know, from the player having only a limited time in the event. Someone who owns the game and has all the time in the world to complete a set number of missions will certainly look upon setbacks as part of the big picture. But if you have just three days to play, you might see that same level of challenge as unacceptable, as overly difficult and frustrating. We're examining difficulty and challenge and working hard to achieve the appropriate balance for the release version of *Guild Wars*. There were significant changes in the January Beta Weekend Event, and the players haven't reported nearly the same level of concerns about difficulty, so we can see the pendulum swinging in an arc that is narrowing with each Beta Weekend Event.

And lastly, one of the comments that we received was that the early game was a bit too challenging and more than a little confusing. People told us that working through the tutorial didn't give them enough information to play well. They also said that when they completed the tutorial, finding themselves in one of the busy *Guild Wars* towns with hundreds of other players was overwhelming. To address this, we're working on some very novel ideas about the starting game that we will be ready to show in the February Beta Weekend Event.

Naturally, we have a detailed game design in mind. The "vision" of *Guild Wars* comes from within the team. The team is made up of practiced, competent game designers who are using their experience with numerous successful projects to formulate our game's major design decisions. That said, though, player input through the world events and the Beta Weekend Events has been extremely helpful to us, and we are delighted with the level of participation and the well-thought-out suggestions, reports, and comments that we receive from fans.

Thanks for all your support of Guild Wars, and for your continued production of the excellent Photics e-zine!

- Gaile

