

GAMING GENRES OF DELICATE DYNAMICS

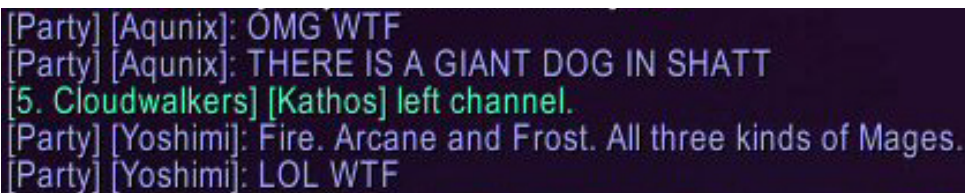
by Jillian Robb

Imagine your teacher just introduced a group project to you class. None of your good friends are in this class with you, and the teacher is randomly assigning groups. You cross your fingers, praying to whatever you hold holy that she gives you a good group, for once in your miserable school life; but alas, you end up with the weird kids who sit in the back corner, never speak, and consistently smell like split-pea soup. Now imagine that your group not only affects your grade, but also your (virtual character's) survival.

You have just entered into what we who have sold our souls to World of Warcraft call a PUG, a Pick Up Group. World of Warcraft (WoW), for those who have no experience with the game, is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). Players create a character by picking a faction, race, and class in any order. Of these choices, class most directly determines what abilities a character can learn, which range from melee battle abilities, various kinds of magical damage, and magical healing (these abilities will eventually define the character's role in a group). Players gain experience through completing various game objectives called quests. Sometimes quests involve entering what WoW has termed an Instance or a Dungeon; technological

means that the group members do not run with each other regularly. In theory, the PUG system is a great idea, because in theory, all players know the roles in a group, have some familiarity with dungeons and raiding, and observe proper group etiquette. Occasionally, players do find a group that fits into the Good PUG genre. From your own experience in life, you probably know that a lot of things should work in theory, but fail miserably in practice, and the PUG system is one of them. Usually, when someone at maximum level is searching for a group, there is a good reason that no one thus far wanted that person in their group.

My roommate told me about a PUG she once had in a raid. She was tanking, which means she was playing a melee class with high health and threat-generating abilities; it was her job to appear as the biggest threat to the mobs and therefore keep them attacking her instead of the magic users (casters) who do more damage and have much lower health. She says she watched her health drop, and drop, and drop, until her character died. Casting a glance at the group's healer, she saw the healer casting a damage spell at the mob, when a healing spell could have kept my friend alive. The healer's excuse was "I needed to get my DPS [Damage Per Second] in."



[Party] [Aqunix]: OMG WTF
[Party] [Aqunix]: THERE IS A GIANT DOG IN SHATT
[5. Cloudwalkers] [Kathos] left channel.
[Party] [Yoshimi]: Fire. Arcane and Frost. All three kinds of Mages.
[Party] [Yoshimi]: LOL WTF

Typical group discussion in any genre of PUG.

specifics and game lore aside, an instance is an area with more powerful enemies (several mobs leading up to a final boss) designed for a five-person group. When players reach the maximum level, they can also run instances called Raids with much harder mobs and bosses that require ten or twenty-five players. If players are lucky, their friends are online and around the same level range, and they can run the instance together; however, this is often not the case, and players usually find themselves forced to search for random people to run an instance. This is the essence of the Pick Up Group, which simply

Healers like this "DPS-healer" comprise a large part of the Bad PUG genre. When I asked my friends about their Bad PUG experiences, they immediately listed off in one breath: "Mages who don't [turn enemies into a] sheep, war-

locks who don't banish, hunters who don't trap, rogues who don't sap, mages who don't make food..." These are all examples of a player who is ignorant of the role his or her character must fulfill. Every group has three basic roles—the tank, the healer, and several DPS positions—and players must fulfill their specific role for the group to be successful; every group determines who will do which role before entering the instance, so ignorance is no excuse. Certain classes also have responsibilities and expectations placed on them based on their abilities. For example, several classes have "crowd control"

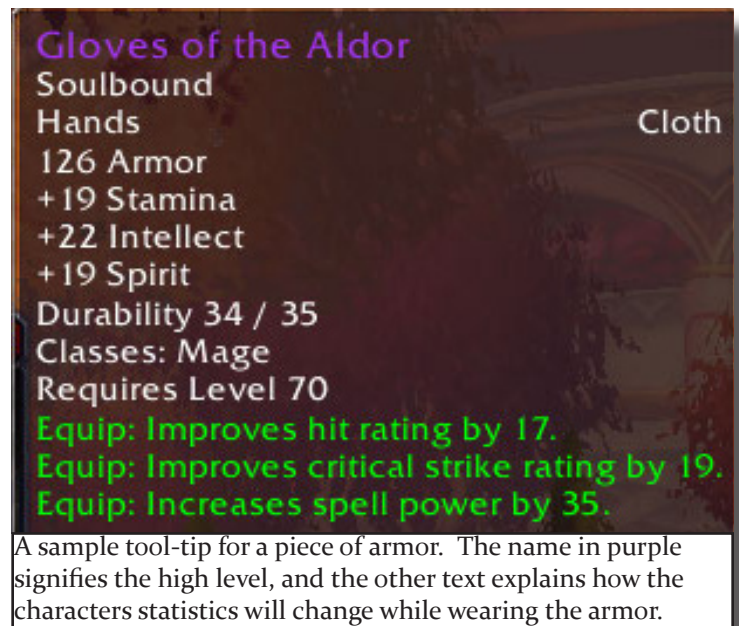
abilities, meaning they temporarily incapacitate part of a mob. Even Bad PUGs usually discuss “CC” before a battle, and players who ignore instructions and do not use their class’s CC abilities force the tank to take more damage, which can lead to the tank dying, leading to a wipe (everyone dies). As seen with the DPS-healer, groups can easily wipe when one character does not do his or her specific part.

Some players are not completely clueless; they are just terrible players or don’t know the most effective way to play their role. My friends will PUG a few spots in their raids sometimes, and once they found a new healer. The player had a habit of not doing anything during fights, constantly asking about where to get gear, and not doing what he was told. Other players had to compensate for him throughout the raid, which was the only reason the group survived. When the group examined the healing statistics afterward, they saw that another player who had been a backup healer had actually done more healing. The PUG healer knew his role in the group, but he was slow and unobservant, which made his healing suffer, which made the group suffer.

Many mistakes of ignorance come from unprepared players. Some players enter a dungeon or a raid while they are vastly under-gear, meaning that their character’s armor is not strong enough to withstand the mobs in the instance. Gear in WoW comes with “stats” that improve a character’s health, armor, magic pool, damage output, and resistance to magic, and characters at a high level need high level gear to survive in endgame instances. People who are under-gear will be more vulnerable to damage, and their lower damage output may prolong fights and cause others to die in the process. In an extreme situation, my friends met someone in a PUG who didn’t just have low-level gear, he simply didn’t have a belt. WoW prints the names of each piece of armor using a font-color ranking system—gray, white, green, blue, purple, orange—to help players determine the level, so again ignorance is no excuse. Unless the player is new and still replacing greens, an experienced raiding player should be wearing mostly purples. Under-gear players often end up in a PUG because their friends and usual groups will not risk taking someone so unprepared into a difficult raid.

Other players (and due to my real-world commitments, I fall into this group) are what we call dungeon-virgins, meaning they have never been to a certain instance

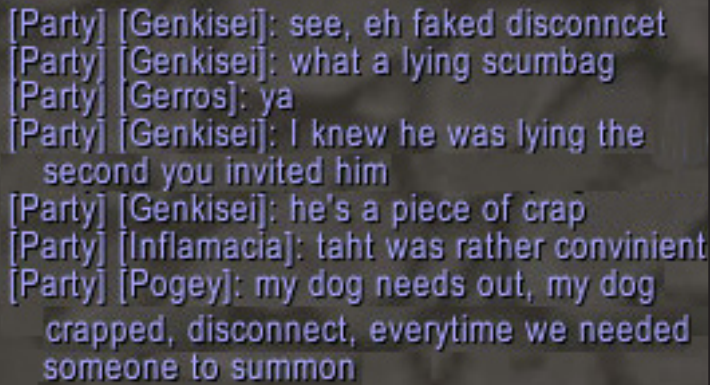
before. Many dungeon-virgins, fearing that a group will not want a newbie, do not inform the group that they have never been to the instance before, and their ignorance of a fight can cause a wipe. The boss fights in dungeons, and especially in raids, can be complicated; bosses have unique abilities, which make every fight different, and it helps to know how a fight works before diving in. For example, the final boss of the Karazan raid casts a temporary spell on random players that takes the character down to 1 health point, and the character cannot be healed; experienced players know they will get their health back momentarily because the spell only lasts a few seconds, but a dungeon-virgin might freak out, try to run away, and end up getting killed by a mob. If dungeon-virgins simply tell the group that they do not know a fight, the group can explain what happens to the newbies and avoid a wipe.



Some players simply come unprepared. Most classes need reagents for a few important spells. Among these classes and spells, mages need “Arcane Power” for a spell that increases each character’s magic pool, and priests need a “Sacred Candle” for a spell that increases each character’s maximum health. These players are expected to carry these important items with them at all times, and coming without them could cause huge problems. The druid class’s Rebirth spell is one of the best examples. About half of the classes have spell that will resurrect a dead character, but the druid is the only class that can cast a resurrection spell while mobs are still attacking the group. If a tank dies, the druid’s “battle rez” can save the group from a wipe; if a druid forgot the reagents needed for the spell, that player is in for quite the tongue

lashing, to put it mildly.

So far, these groups fall into the Bad PUG genre due to players' ignorance. Though annoying to most players, ignorance can be forgivable. The person may simply be inexperienced, and some do learn for the future from their mistakes. When a group enters the Bad PUG genre because of players' arrogance, it is a completely new ball-game.



[Party] [Genkisei]: see, eh faked disconnct
[Party] [Genkisei]: what a lying scumbag
[Party] [Gerros]: ya
[Party] [Genkisei]: I knew he was lying the
second you invited him
[Party] [Genkisei]: he's a piece of crap
[Party] [Inflamacia]: taht was rather convinient
[Party] [Pogey]: my dog needs out, my dog
crapped, disconnect, everytime we needed
someone to summon

A group discussing a ninja.

An offshoot of ignorant, terrible players, are the know-it-alls. These are the people who cannot keep their mouths shut and consistently tell the other players how to play their classes. To add insult to injury, know-it-alls are usually terrible at playing their own characters, or play classes that do not require as much skill. Suggestions from a fellow class member are helpful, but listening to a hunter tell you that you're playing your mage completely wrong, while the hunter hits all of two buttons throughout the whole fight, is about as fun as a bed of nails.

Sometimes when a class is played badly, it is actually a sign of indifferent arrogance and not ignorance. In the Good PUG genre, players know how to manage threat; they know that if they "pull agro" by doing too much damage on a mob, the mob will abandon the tank and attack whoever is doing the most damage; in an Bad PUG, some arrogant players don't care. With their high damage output, casters are the most likely to pull agro, but with much lower health than a the tank, casters don't last long in melee, earning the nickname "glass cannon." Mobs can kill a caster in about three hits (or one if it's a boss), and then move on to whoever has the next highest threat. Again, pulling agro often ends in a wipe. All players are responsible for monitoring their own threat, so most player consider consistently pulling agro to be irresponsible playing, no matter how much damage a player does before he or she dies.

Possibly the rudest of all bad PUGs occur when Mooches and Ninjas are involved. Both are extremely selfish players who seemingly have no consideration for their fellow players. Sharing various healing and magical potions is good etiquette, but asking around for copious numbers of every item in the game is simply rude. The mooch brings no healing potions or bandages, and usually has nothing to offer the raid group, but expects everything in return.

Mooches, however, are still better than Ninjas. When the raid group has taken down a boss, the raid takes the boss's gear and gives it to the person in the group who can use it best. Players usually base loot division on who needs the upgrade most, since different gear benefits different classes, and they use an automated dice roll if two or more members can use the item. The ninja ignores this system. Instead of rolling on an item, the ninja simply takes the item without any consideration for the group. Most high-level items are "bind on pickup," meaning they cannot be traded to another player after the character has "ninjaed" the item, so the group has no way of getting the item back. Some will even leave the group as soon as they get their one item, leaving the group a player short and unable to complete the instance.

To combat the ninjas, the group can change the game options and designate one person as Master Looter; then the game protocols will allow only that one character to loot the boss, and he or she places the item directly into the recipient's inventory. No one wants a ninja in the group, even if the person is an otherwise good player. Fair play comes first.

Finding a good instance group can be a daunting task, given all the types of undesirable players in the World of Warcraft. From ignorance to arrogance, with all the encompassing sub-genres of failure, one might call WoW a microcosm of a group in real-life. There will always be someone who does not know the rules and procedures, and there will always be someone who is only concerned with his own interests. Although neither is a true life-or-death matter, good group dynamics can be extremely difficult to cultivate. In real life as well as in WoW, people find groups of people with whom they like interacting, and those successful groups go on to do great things. Weeding out the characters that define a Bad PUG, or refining them in some cases, is all it takes.