A Player's Guide to Capture the Flag

A study on the World of Warcraft Battleground Warsong Gulch

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Introduction

In the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft (WoW), the battleground Warsong Gulch presents some very unique challenges for players. Unlike almost every other player versus player experience in the game, the goal of this battleground is almost completely isolated from direct defeat of opposing players in combat. Rather, the goal is to capture the opposing team's flag before they can take one's own.

This task seems simple, but it must be carried out while surmounting some very substantial obstacles. To carry it out, a player must traverse the entire field of battle while avoiding or killing any enemy, then traverse the field again to bring the flag back while the 5 to 10 players on the opposing team have the player marked on their maps. All the while, someone from the player's team must be preventing the other team from doing the same thing the player is attempting to do. So, how does one overcome these obstacles to attain victory in Warsong Gulch?

A few minutes spent on WoW forums reveal a whole slew of different approaches to field position, player placement, team dynamics, and a whole host of other factors involved in the battle. One player on the IncGamers forums suggests,

" *zerg (send large group) in*

get flag

zerg out

kill enemy flag carrier

cap (capture the flag)

repeat

Or,

group 1 gets flag, 2 controls midfield, 3 (generally a hunter or rogue) guards flag - warns which way it gets taken." (Aerath)

Players on countless forums have discussed these two basic strategies extensively. Another player on the IncGamers forums posted an entire guide on the latter strategy. This player, known as XDarkDrifterX on the forum, suggests that there are several things essential to making the strategy work. First, he states that, "Communication is Key" (XDarkDrifterX). The strategy can only work, the player suggests, if a team is communicating constantly as to strategy and the whereabouts of the flag. He or she also suggests the ideas of "pushing" and "trapping". He or she says, "Your mid-field group may wish to 'push' an enemy group to one side of the battlefield to clear a lane for the flag runner." This more detailed strategy within a strategy is an example of a design to create opportunity in the battlefield. The other strategy, "trapping", is a different kind of strategy entirely. Rather than creating an opportunity, "trapping" is used as a reaction to the other team. The player says, "If both flags are being run, your team must 'trap' the flag, i.e. hide and defend it, until your flag is recovered." This strategy essentially consists of analyzing the opposing team's movements and attempting to block them from taking their flag back.

XDarkDrifterX suggests using players of the hunter class for the task of trapping because hunters have the ability to place traps on the ground, giving them a means to slow or damage opponents who step on the traps. Many strategies suggested on forums will use a combination of tactics to create opportunity, such as pushing, and tactics to react to opportunities created by others, such as trapping.

These guides and suggestions serve a valuable purpose for game players, but I found that there was a need for well-organized research on the subject. John L. Miller and Jon Crowcroft presented research on player movement in battlegrounds in their paper "Avatar Movement in World of Warcraft", and Greg Bunk presented research on faction advantage in his paper *Horde vs. Alliance in PvP* (Bunk). However, to my knowledge, there is no existing research on battleground strategy in Warsong Gulch. So, I devised a study to analyze strategies and their effects.

Methods

My research consisted of observing 16 games over the course of two weeks as a participant observer. I took exhaustive notes on player positions, functions different players were serving, and general observations on team strategy. Also, using the "/chatlog" function in game, I was able to record all communication between my teammates as well as the system messages generated during each battle. System messages included notifications of when either flag was picked up, dropped, or returned to its base as well as notifications of player deaths and points scored. I observed the first 8 battles using my Troll Shaman avatar, which was

between levels 50 and 53 during the course of the research. I observed the second 8 battles using my Undead Warlock, which was between levels 10 and 13 during the course of the research. I used both characters in an attempt to make my research applicable to all levels instead of just high or low level characters.

Additionally, I thought that since the battlefields I was competing on had characters representing nine different levels (10-19 for the low level battles and 50-59 for the high level battles), I could potentially hinder my team's ability to win if I remained at the lowest level for each battleground (10 for the low level battles and 50 for the high level battles). So, I split the battles between three levels for each character to attempt to reduce this effect on the outcome of the battles.

I also used my players for different player roles to attempt to eliminate any possibility of skewing results because of how I played. I used my low level Undead Warlock primarily as an offensive character. I ran straight to the enemy keep and attempted to capture their flag or alternatively joined a group of our players and attempted to capture the flag as a group. With my high level Troll Shaman, I played a primarily defensive role instead. I stayed in my team's keep and defended our flag alone or with teammates.

As a participant observer, I began by following the instructions of other players on the team, but after several battles following, I began to politely suggest

certain tactics that I wanted more data on. This approach seemed to allow me to explore the most strategies with the most depth possible.

Research

The Level 50-59 Battleground

My research began with eight battles completed with my level 50-53 Troll Shaman avatar. I immediately began to observe certain trends in battle. The first trend that became apparent was the difference in effectiveness of solo versus team tactics. When we organized ourselves as teammates prior to the beginning of the battle, then conversed constantly and developed strategies together during the course of the game, we captured flags quickly and won in short order. When we acted alone, we tended to get caught in extended engagements with the other team in the middle of the field, and were therefore unable to capture the flag. The opposing team would then obtain our flag, we would make desperate solo attempts to get the other team's flag but would inevitably be unable to capture it because of the opposing team's defense. This effect quickly compounded in games as players began to get more and

Players usually began the battle together, but would often split up after the initial surge out of our keep

more frustrated with each other, leading them to act in a more and more individualistic manner. Every game lost during the course of my research was marked by conflicting suggestions in chat between teammates, lack of suggestions, or some comments from players expressing frustration that players were not acting together. In addition to being reflected in the chat logs, this lack of organization became evident to me as I was participating in losing battles. I recorded the lack of organization numerous times in my notes for each battle.

Good teamwork created an opportunity for teams to use certain strategies in game play, all of which carried one common element. In all three battles won during my research, the vast majority of my teammates protected the flag carrier or prepared the field for the carrier to traverse it. This is not to suggest that defense was not important; it was fairly evident that defense played an important role in each battle, but the most effective strategy was using the majority of players for defense of the flag carrier or preparation of the field so that the flag carrier could travel freely. One particularly effective strategy, which I have dubbed the "three team strategy", was to place a small defensive element (1 to 2

Three team strategy from the perspective of a Horde player

players) in the home flag room, then send a small offensive team up the right side of the map (right as the map is viewed from the home keep looking out towards the opposing keep) with a large team working to control the forward midfield (the middle of the field closest to the opposing keep). Once the flag was captured, the large midfield team would then join the small flag carrying group and escort them back to the home keep. This strategy seemed to create the most opportunities for the flag carrier to not only get to the flag, but also to return safely to his or her own keep. It also proved extremely difficult for the opposing team to defend against. This was partly due to a simple mechanic of the battlefield system.

The upper midfield is an important part of the field, but it is also an extremely easy area to control for one simple reason; when opposing players are killed, they return to their graveyard, which is on the left, upper side of the map. So, players would resurrect at the graveyard in small groups of 2 or 3 players, then run straight for the large team placed in the upper midfield instead of waiting for other players to assist them. This allowed the large upper midfield team to almost perpetually kill opposing players with very little effort. The flag carrying team would then break through the right side of the battlefield and up the ramp fairly easily since the opposing players were all tied up in the midfield. Once the flag was captured, the flag-carrying group had an easy run back down the field to the home keep because teammates in the upper midfield had already prepared the field. This strategy was used to score three points in high-level battle number 4 (see Table 1

below) to win 3 to 2. Four other attempts to use this strategy yielded similar results. Three of the four attempts resulted in a point scored.

The final strategy I observed in the high level battlegrounds was a tactic that draws upon the wisdom of the turtle. It is simply this: in circumstances where a player's team would win when the time ran out, the player would take the enemy flag to a safe area and gather every teammate around the flag for defense. Two of the three wins I observed during my research were obtained using this strategy. One variant on the turtle strategy included a fourth role for team members. In cases where both teams had obtained the other team's flag (rendering both unable to score), a team often chose to send out a sort of assassin element. The goal of the assassin(s) was to find the enemy flag carrier and kill him or her, ending the stalemate.

I also observed notable trends in how the path taken by the flag carrier affected the outcome of the battle. On the field, there are two entrances into each keep; a ramp on the right side of the field (as it is viewed from the home keep to the opposing keep) and a tunnel in the center of the front of the keep. The tactic of sending the flag carrier up the ramp into the opposing team's keep resulted in all 12 of the points scored

Entrance to the Alliance keep ramp

during my research. The tunnel did prove useful at times for the return journey, however. In high-level battle number 7 (see Table 1), the ramp was essentially useless as an exit from the opposing keep because players with stealth were protecting it very well. In this case, my team sent several players ahead down the tunnel to distract and weaken enemies before the flag carrier ran down the tunnel.

Another important element of our strategies was choosing an effective defense. The most successful defending classes had abilities that could slow opponents (Druids, Mages, Shamans, etc). These players had the ability to hold invading opponents back until friendly teammates could get to the area to help. If there were two defenders, effective teams involved one character with slowing abilities as described above, and one character with heavy damage dealing abilities (Warlocks, Warriors, etc.). This allowed the slowing character to either stop a target in his tracks so that the damage dealer could attack him or to keep other members of the opposing group at bay while the damage dealer dealt with one target at a time.

One advantage of defending in teams is that a pair of defenders are better able to deal with situations like this, when a rogue from the opposing team attacked me (the only defender) and killed me, leaving the flag room undefended.

The Level 10-19 Battleground

The next question involved in my research was whether or not the amount of player experience with battlegrounds would affect the effectiveness of strategies. The answer to this question was a resounding yes. First, it quickly became apparent that less experienced players were unable to carry out the complex strategies used in higher-level battlegrounds. Thus, some strategies used in the higher-level battlegrounds were extremely ineffective. The most successful strategies in the low level battleground were those that took advantage of the opposing team's inexperience.

Strategy on defense was significantly different than it was in the higher-level battlegrounds. A standing defense was almost completely unnecessary in the lower level battlegrounds. Opposing players rarely made it past the midfield, and even when they did, it was not often in large groups, so players in the midfield were able to kill the flag carrier before he or she could reach his or her home keep fairly easily. So, successful strategies involved the placing of the vast majority of players in offensive roles.

However, general strategy for flag carrier routes through was very similar. The only noticeable difference was that in lower level battlegrounds, more opposing players stayed in midfield so there was an increased incentive to run the flag up and down the right side of the field (as the field is viewed from home keep to the opposing keep).

As for specific strategies, one extremely effective tactic which I have named the "let them fight and run" tactic was to have the entire team except for one to two players battle the opposing team in the midfield while the remaining one to two players made a dash up the right side to the ramp into the opposing keep. The player(s) could then run back down the right side with little trouble since the slow and generally inexperienced players on the opposing team were unable to react quickly enough to stop the one to two players from returning the flag to the home keep. I thought this strategy would work well to some degree, but I was surprised at just how effective it was. The strategy was used in every one of the four battles won during my research and was used to score 10 of the 12 points in those four battles (see Table 2 below).

My character, Reallok, making a mad dash back down the right side of the field while the rest of the players were tying up the opposing faction in the midfield

Application of Lower Level Strategy to Higher Level Battle

This "let them fight and run" strategy was so effective that I began to wonder whether it could work in the higher-level battleground as well. So, I extended my research and completed a final battle (high-level battle number 9 in Table 1 below) with my level 53 Troll Shaman in which I focused entirely on using this method. Ultimately, the method was not effective. I tried it four times, and each time the

opposing team realized what was going on and killed me before I could return to my own keep with the flag. This showed that some tactics are not transferable between battlegrounds. That is to say, some strategies will work in one battleground, but not the other.

Ineffective Strategies

I also observed several strategies that generally proved ineffective. Two of these in particular were used extensively. The first strategy, which I will call "zerging", is simply the process of sending every player on the team across the field to capture the opposition's flag. This strategy was ineffective because it allowed the other team to capture our flag without any opposition. Generally, our players would then react by running out into the midfield in groups of 1 or 2 in an attempt to take our flag back and would inevitably be killed. The opposing team would then strike our flag carrying team when we were weakened and take their flag back.

The greatest flaw of the "zerging" strategy was that it left the flag completely unprotected

The second strategy that I observed to a great extent was a strategy I will call the "two team strategy". This was a strategy in which players were split up into two groups, a flag carrying team and a defensive team. Generally, the defensive team had two to three players while the flag carrying team was composed of the rest of the players. This strategy was somewhat effective, but would generally meet with problems similar to those in the "zerging" strategy. The opposition would generally defeat our small defense fairly easily, and then players on our flag carrying team would react in a disorganized fashion and be killed, leaving the flag carrier essentially unprotected. There was one particular case (low-level battle number 8 in Table 2 below) in the lower level battleground when this strategy did score two of the three points necessary to win the battle, however.

Table 1: High-Level Battles

Battle Number	**Tactics Used**	**Win or Loss (Score)**	**Time Elapsed (mins.)**
1.	Three Team Strategy, Turtle Strategy	Win (1-0)	25
2.	None	Loss (0-3)	10
3.	Two Team Strategy	Loss (0-3)	25
4.	Three Team Strategy, Leave Them to Fight and Run Strategy	Win (3-2)	26
5.	Two Team Strategy	Loss (0-3)	17
6.	None	Loss (0-3)	21
7.	Three Team Strategy, Turtle	Win (1-1)	25
8.	None	Loss (0-3)	15
9.	Leave Them to Fight and Run Strategy	Loss (0-3)	14

Table 2: Low-Level Battles

Battle Number	Tactics Used	Win or Loss (Score)	Time Elapsed
1.	Leave Them to Fight and Run Strategy	Win (3-0)	16
2.	Two Team Strategy	Loss (0-1)	25
3.	Zerging Strategy	Loss (0-3)	15
4.	None	Loss (0-3)	10
5.	Leave Them to Fight and Run Strategy	Win (3-0)	16
6.	Leave Them to Fight and Run Strategy	Win (3-0)	10
7.	None	Loss (0-3)	11
8.	Two Team Strategy, Leave Them to Fight and Run Strategy	Win (3-0)	15

Discussion

If my research proved anything, it is that there is no one strategy that can win every battle; every effective strategy must start with "know thine enemy". A strategy that works in a low level battleground may not work in a high level game and vice versa. Also, strategies may have to change based on the actions of the other team.

That being said, I did find that there were common elements in the strategies that were effective. All of the strategies that I found to be particularly successful involved running up the right side of the field in order to obtain the flag, though the most successful route for the return journey depended on the field position of other players. All of the strategies that I found to be effective also involved some sort of

presence in the midfield, though the nature of this presence changed based on other elements of the strategy.

Furthermore, I found that the most effective strategies involved some sort of role assignment to members of the team. The most effective number of roles changed based on the situation in the battle as well as the level of the players, with higher-level teams being more effective with three to four roles and lower-level teams being more effective with two to three roles. However, it is fairly clear that most successful strategies at least involved the roles of preparer and carrier. The carrier would capture and return the flag to the home keep or assist in that process. The preparer would work somewhere in the midfield to open up gaps for the carrier(s) to travel through.

A third role, that of defense, seemed necessary only when the opposition was experienced in the game. Even in the lower level battleground, if the opposition was more experienced with battlefields (This was discerned by looking at armor and weapons. Higher-level items suggest that the avatar is an alternate and that the player using that avatar also has a higher-level character), a defensive role became necessary. A fourth role came into play when both teams held the other's flag since this creates a temporary stalemate in the battle. This fourth role, that of the assassin, would then attempt to kill the opposing flag carrier and thus end the stalemate.

One thing that was shown very strongly in every case was the need for teamwork. It was very evident that players were simply unable to win the battle unless they acted together as a team. This teamwork was usually marked by extensive use of chat among teammates. Every successful strategy I observed relied on teamwork and extensive communication.

My research did have limitations, however. First, my sample size was too small for my topic. I posted some of my results on forums, and quickly found out that there were certain strategies I did not investigate. Had I observed more battles, I probably would have been able to research these other strategies as well. I also had insufficient diversity in my avatars. I only used two avatars, which could bias results because my playing abilities were limited to two ability sets. Another limitation was that I only researched two battlegrounds when there are 8 battlegrounds in the game. My results could potentially have changed had I included research in the other 6 battlegrounds.

However, my research is still valid enough to serve a very important purpose. In addition to filling a long-standing gap in the field of virtual gaming research, these findings open the door for further research in a variety of areas; research as to the specific mechanics of successful groups in Warsong Gulch seems to be called for. Also, it would be fascinating to research whether or not these findings are at all applicable to real life military tactics. Ultimately, I believe my

study could form a strong basis for a new branch of research into virtual worlds and their complex yet immensely fascinating attributes.

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