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# Dragon Kill Points

## The Economics of Power Gamers

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World of Warcraft (WoW) is a massively multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG). The end-game consists of complex encounters requiring highly organized groups (raids). This complexity has caused the organizing of raiding guilds (self-governing player communities). Raiding guilds have hierarchical political structures in which leaders must legitimate their positions to demand participation. In a symbiotic relationship of political structure and individual desire, guilds must guarantee advancement in tandem with individuals' acquisition of items (loot); but game mechanics make this problematic. Each end-game encounter defeated offers less loot than players needed. To compensate for this raiding guilds use DKP (intra-guild economic systems). It is DKP, I argue, that generates the political cohesion necessary for guilds to successfully engage the end-game. DKP is guild specific, but important for its effects on value and reciprocity. It creates player obligation through a rationalized system measuring commitment.

**Keywords:** *DKP; MMORPG; guilds; value; reciprocity*

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a massively multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG). It is a progressive game in which players begin with a level-one avatar and gain levels through activities provided by the game. Once at the maximum level players can begin to engage the end-game. This content, however, requires more than having one's avatar be a certain level. The end-game consists of complex encounters requiring large, highly organized groups of people (called raids) to be successfully engaged. This complexity has led to a common practice among players of organizing themselves into raiding guilds. A guild is a self-governing community of players within the larger community of a MMORPG.<sup>1</sup> The governance within guilds is both an aspect of the game and a practice that goes beyond the code.

A hierarchical political structure alone does not account for the success of raiding guilds in MMORPGs. Leaders of these groups must be able to legitimate their

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political position to demand participation of their members. Members of a guild need a reason to be there. Guild membership solely for the sake of having a social network, though important, is not sufficient motivation for the achievement of the most difficult in-game goals by those who play to be the best (power gamers). In a symbiotic relationship of political structure and individual desire, a guild must be able to guarantee advancement through the game in tandem with the individuals' acquisition of valuable, high level items – or loot, as items are commonly called.

Loot distribution is problematic, however, because of the game mechanics involved. For each high level encounter the guild wins, the amount of desirable loot obtained is far less than the number of players needed to succeed in the endeavor, and furthermore the loot that does drop often does not match the needs of attending players perfectly. To compensate for this it has become common for raiding guilds to create or adopt intra-guild economic systems. In this way, a player can earn compensation from every encounter regardless of who actually receives loot. These systems are called DKP (an acronym for Dragon Kill Points) and it is DKP, I argue, that generates, in large part, the motivation and political cohesion necessary for a guild to be able to successfully engage the end-game content of MMORPGs.

Despite the widespread use of DKP, these systems are not uncontested. The end game is the only context within WoW where DKP is used. For guilds whose activities revolve around raiding, instituting DKP is not a problem, but for guilds that are more casual, this can become a point of contention. The reason for this is that casual guilds are generally seen as not needing a DKP system; therefore, if a portion of the membership begins to believe that DKP should be implemented, the implication is that the entire structure of the guild needs to change. Furthermore, in a casual guild, not all members will benefit from DKP. This brings forth the concern that a change in guild structure through DKP will also create a change in hierarchy and social status within the guild, as well as changing the value of loot to that community.

There have been a number of scholarly works published on value and economics within synthetic worlds (Castronova, 2002, 2005a, b; Malaby, 2006a, b; among others). This article will extend from this research and discuss DKP-based economic exchange within these environments. These systems are guild specific, but important nonetheless for their effects on value and reciprocity within these communities. DKP systems create player obligation to the guild by forcing members to earn the benefits they receive from their membership through a rationalized system that is intended to measure commitment. DKP systems are also unique in the way they straddle the boundary between the synthetic world and the physical one; for they are of neither domain.

The following account is taken from research done in WoW with two guilds, the Brigade<sup>2</sup> and the Libertarian Cyborgs. The Libertarian Cyborgs debated heatedly over whether or not to implement a DKP system, but did not do so during my time with them. The Brigade used DKP from its inception.

## Background of DKP

The use of DKP to distribute goods within guilds predates WoW. The earliest use of a DKP system was in the game *EverQuest* (one of the earliest MMORPGs).<sup>3</sup> Today, descriptions of various ways to set up a DKP system can be found all over the Internet. There are also sites from which prepackaged DKP systems can be downloaded for use with different MMORPGs. These DKP packages are third party sites external to the games themselves.

The progress-oriented nature of MMORPGs creates a sense of accomplishment for players. This begins through a system of leveling an avatar and the skills of that avatar. Once an avatar reaches the maximum level, loot is the main marker of progress, causing a high demand for items with a limited supply. This can make loot distribution problematic for guilds in the end-game of WoW. DKP is arguably the system most used to engage this issue.

The details of each individual guild's system may not be the same, but the basic idea of the system is that players get points for participating in killing very difficult "bosses," such as dragons or other opponents ("mobs") the game provides. Guild members then use these points to purchase high-level and unique items that drop from these bosses and high-level mobs.

DKP is different and separate from encoded synthetic world currencies and economies. In WoW, for example, the game currency of gold, silver, and copper is exchangeable with conventional physical world currencies (although this practice is officially banned). Gold can be bought from various online auction or company sites.<sup>4</sup> This type of exchange is not unique to WoW and exchange rates can be found for most, if not all, synthetic world currencies.

The easiest way to envision this system is to think of DKP as a currency, making it a form of market capital. DKP is different, however, in two very important ways. First, DKP is not exchangeable with other currencies, be they of the physical or the synthetic world. By adopting a DKP system, guild leaders are intentionally cultivating reciprocity among guild members, because it is only through actions beneficial to the guild that a player can earn DKP that is only accepted by that same guild as payment for items the guild acquires. Second, DKP is not only a form of market capital but is also a system of cultural capital, that is, credentials in highly rationalized form. The amount of DKP a player has (or has spent, which is also tracked) is directly related to the amount of high-level content he has done, thus illustrating experience and knowledge in the end-game.

This motivational aspect of DKP systems is only part of the reason guilds implement DKP. Another reason is that even though the game includes several more rudimentary loot distribution systems that are a part of the WoW software, most players consider these systems inadequate for determining who gets the most rare and powerful items, and unrepresentative of the value of these items. These items are not just

pieces of material capital that can be bought, they are also status symbols and resources necessary to progress further through the game.

The more a person participates with the guild the more DKP he will earn which equates to more loot he can buy, thus DKP not only measures experience and competence, it also measures group commitment. This is an item-driven system, and therefore points to the modernist preoccupation with consumption (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978). Players want valuable items because it increases their ability to conquer the game and raises their status within the in-game community beyond the guild. As mentioned earlier, however, the supply of loot is less than the demand for it. Even though a rare item of some kind is guaranteed to drop from the boss kills in the end-game, there is no guarantee on which item it will be, and most items can only be used by certain classes. DKP is assurance against the uncertainty. Regardless of who gets what item, every player gets DKP, and by saving DKP, a player is more likely to be first in line to receive desired contested items when they drop.<sup>5</sup>

I will continue now by going into more detail about items, distribution, and the specifics of DKP systems and debates surrounding them, before elaborating on the effects of DKP on value and obligation.

## Gear<sup>6</sup>

The quality of gear a person can accumulate scales up with the level of their avatar. In WoW, the maximum level possible is 60, and thus it is at this level that people can acquire the highest quality of gear.<sup>7</sup> Quality is measured by the unique statistics of items that enhance the performance of avatars equipping them. The quality of items is divided into six categories; from the least valuable to the greatest they are poor, common, uncommon, rare, epic, and legendary. These items are color-coded by the software (the code) as, respectively, gray, white, green, blue, purple, and orange. Players often refer to items by their color.

There is one more encoded loot characteristic that affects the value of items: the quality of being soulbound. A soulbound item is one which only one player can ever use. Once an item is soulbound it can never be traded or sold to other players. There are two ways items become bound to an avatar. Some items become bound to the avatar that picks it up. These items are called Bind on Pick-up, or BoP. Other items do not become bound to an avatar until they are equipped. These are called Bind on Equip, or BoE. Not all items in the game become soulbound, but the higher the quality of the item, the more likely it is to have this characteristic.

BoE and BoP distinctions add to the value of items because they cannot be shared. BoE items can be sold or traded, but not shared in that only one avatar can actually equip and use the item. BoP items carry even more value because the only way to obtain one of these is to be present when they appear; that is, be a part of the group that is there when they drop.<sup>8</sup> This means that these items never enter the more

common auction house market for BoE and nonsoulbound items. This gives these items a different kind of market value—in DKP—and high value as cultural artifacts. To illuminate this further, I will relay here the story of how I came to possess a Cold Snap, a BoP purple, and the reactions of others afterward.

Cold Snap is a wand that can be equipped by any class with the ability to use wands, but its stats are clearly designed to benefit mages above other classes. This wand only drops from one dragon, Azuregos, and is reported to drop only 10% of the time or less that Azuregos is killed ([www.thottbot.com](http://www.thottbot.com)). Azuregos is a special boss mob in that he is a world spawn. World spawns only appear (“spawn”) every so often and they do so in open areas. This is unlike dungeons which are always present and are closed spaces, meaning that each group gets their own private version of the space (called an “instance”). Azuregos can be a difficult fight on its own, but because it is a world spawn, groups of people also have to contend with other players trying to get at the dragon, which often leads to players disrupting each others’ attempts.

I must note here that the reason players on this server can disrupt each other’s attempts is because this is a player-versus-player (pvp) server.<sup>9</sup> This means that avatars of opposing factions can attack each other. This is not the case on all WoW servers. Other servers are player-versus-environment (pve) servers in which players cannot attack each other unless they are “flagged” for pvp, meaning they have chosen to allow pvp combat for themselves.

These fights require 40 people to be successful, but that many people from one guild would rarely be online all at once other than at scheduled raid times. The Brigade, therefore, used a phone tree to be contenders in the fight over world spawns (Azuregos was not the only one). Once logged in, all guild members had to gather anything they might need and get to Azshara (the area where Azuregos spawns) as quickly as possible. Being able to take down Azuregos was partly a race against time. The first organized group of people to get into position was likely to get the first attempt at killing him. Guilds would sometimes even fill their raids with nonguild members that happened to be nearby just to beat the other guilds gathering in Azshara.

I never saw an uncontested attempt at Azuregos; there was always more than one guild present. The Brigade dealt with other guilds in these situations differently, depending on the guild. With some guilds, the Brigade’s raid leader (usually the guild master) would speak with the other raid leaders and together they would agree on an order for the guilds to attempt killing Azuregos until he was dead. This was not possible with all guilds, however, and so in some cases the Brigade would just race to be the first to make contact with (“tag”) Azuregos.<sup>10</sup>

On this particular day, someone started the phone tree and the Brigade got a full raid in position and tagged Azuregos first. Many avatar deaths later, Azuregos was defeated and Cold Snap was among the loot he dropped. As a priest, I knew I would not be given this wand over a mage, so I waited before saying anything. At this time I

was still using a rather worthless green wand, and so after the only mage present passed on Cold Snap, I showed the raid what I was using and asked whether I could have the wand since it would be an upgrade for me. Some jokes went around about giving Cold Snap to a priest, but with no one actually protesting it, I received the wand.

From this point forward, everyone who inspected me commented on my wand.<sup>11</sup> Mages who saw it would cry (using an “emote,” a coded animation, in this case of one’s avatar crying, triggered by typing “/cry”), and one person even asked me whether I had ninja-looted (stolen) it.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, a priest carrying a Cold Snap was a statement about that priest’s guild. Equipped by any avatar, Cold Snap relayed to on-lookers a story about Azuregos like the one I have given here, but equipped by a priest, it demonstrated that that guild had progressed so far that they could afford to “waste” a Cold Snap on a priest.

The phone tree used by the Brigade is also significant to my analysis of DKP in that it was made possible by the reciprocity created through the DKP system they used. The system put a numeric value (in DKP) on the moral obligation of members to participate in guild activities. If a player expected to benefit from their guild membership, that is, to receive loot, they had to earn DKP through contributions of effort to the guild. The phone tree extended this obligation by demanding availability on a 24-hour/7 days-a-week basis. This benefited everyone in the guild by expanding the amount of gear and DKP available.

Like DKP, the phone tree was external to WoW, and yet it existed only because of WoW. It crossed the boundary between the game and the physical world by extending the obligations of guild membership into the everyday lives of the members. A player could receive a call at anytime and was expected to set aside whatever they were doing and log into WoW, because the members were all counting on each other to do just that. There were a few exceptions to this availability, a job being one of them, but these were very few. On more than one occasion, for example, my companion woke me up at 2 or 3 in the morning because he had received a call from someone in the guild. Sleep was not an accepted excuse to not log in.<sup>13</sup>

## **Coded Loot Distribution<sup>14</sup>**

There are several means by which to distribute loot while in a party or raid. I will refer to the programmed choices within the code of the game as the internal loot rules. There are five main choices for setting loot distribution: free for all, round robin, master looter, group loot, and need before greed. There are also three loot threshold level possibilities: uncommon, rare, and epic (green, blue, and purple).

The level of the loot threshold refers to the quality of items. Items at or above the threshold are distinguished from items below the threshold. The loot distribution option is usually set for a group based on what quality of loot that group sees as

valuable. Gray and white items are always below the threshold because they have very little value. These items are referred to as vendor trash because selling them to an NPC is often the most useful purpose they serve.

Free for all means that anyone in the party can loot any mob the party kills. Whoever clicks on a corpse first gets to loot it. Round robin allows a different player to loot each mob in succession. The code of the game will not allow a player to loot a mob unless it is their turn. The last three options all work the same as round robin except when looting items that are at or above whatever the loot threshold is set at. (If the threshold is set at rare for example, then rare, epic, and legendary items are all at or above the threshold.) Master looter requires the party leader to pick up or assign to other players items above the threshold. In group loot, an option to roll for an item will appear anytime an item above the threshold drops. A box will appear with a picture of the item, a timer, and the choice to either roll (receive a randomly generated number) or pass. If time runs out before a choice is made then the item is forfeit to that player. The person who rolled the highest number automatically<sup>15</sup> receives the item. If everyone in the party passes on the item then anyone will be able to pick it up. Need before greed works like group loot except that the option to roll on an item is only given to party members who are able to use it.<sup>16</sup> Money that is dropped is automatically distributed equally among the members of the party once it is picked up, regardless of which loot option is set.

The preferred option among small (non-raid) groups was group loot. The Libertarian Cyborgs usually set the threshold at green, because at this time much of the membership still found green items to be useful. The Brigade members usually set it at blue or purple. For a raiding guild few items outside of the end-game were useful and so green items were not seen as valuable. During raids, the option was set at free-for-all, however, the external rules of DKP prevented anyone from taking items that were not meant to be theirs.

## Zero Sum DKP

Though I am not in a position to give detailed descriptions of every configuration of DKP system possible, I will give an overview of the system used by the Brigade, to illustrate one example of such a system. In fact, this system used by the Brigade was not novel and was being used both elsewhere in WoW and in other MMORPGs predating WoW, making this a good example of the way in which DKP systems can work.

The Brigade used what is known as a zero sum DKP system. In this system, every purple and orange item that can drop from a raidable<sup>17</sup> boss mob or dungeon is given a point value. When one of these items drops, the person who receives the item pays what the item is valued at in DKP. The DKP that were paid are divided by the number



of people in the raid and distributed evenly among the raid group. In this way, the total of points earned and spent equals zero, hence the name of the system.

Items were awarded based on two criteria. The first determinant was the amount of DKP a person had. Of the people who could use an item, the one with the most DKP received it. The second criterion would, however, override this. If an item was deemed more useful to one class over the others, then that class would be given preference (this is called officer intervention). Taking the Cold Snap example from earlier, the mage with the most DKP got the first opportunity to take the wand. In this case, there was only one mage and so when he passed other classes were given the opportunity to get it.

There were two contingencies for which deviation from this basic outline was deemed necessary. The first was the cases of loot drops that were unwanted by anyone in the raid. Because no DKP was awarded solely for killing a mob, the only source of DKP was from a player buying loot that dropped from a mob.<sup>18</sup> Without someone paying for the drop, no one could be awarded DKP without breaking the zero sum system. Therefore, a dummy character was created to account for the loot drop and allow for the credit due to be awarded. Anytime an undesired item dropped, the dummy character paid for it and all of the players received the regular distribution of those points as if an actual player had bought the item.<sup>19</sup> The dummy character never earned any DKP, but remained indefinitely indebted to the system. The dummy character was necessary because DKP is an item-driven economy, and it is the certainty of earning DKP (possible by the certainty of an item dropping) after every successful encounter that motivated player participation.

The second instance of deviation was an over abundance of people for a given raid event organized by the guild. In these cases, all players who were online, prepared, and available to raid from the start of the raid up through 1 hr into the raid were recognized as contributing. In these instances, the DKP distribution was carried out as if all of these players were participating in the raid. For example, if the guild was raiding Molten Core (an end-game dungeon with a maximum of 40 players allowed in at any one time) and there were 10 extra people available for this raid, the DKP value of all drops would be divided and distributed among all 50 players equally.

There were other challenges that arose in relation to this DKP system, but these were either not dealt with or were confronted with solutions that offered variable amounts of success. As the guild progressed in dominating the end-game content, dungeons that were once challenging got put onto what was known as farm status. This meant that the strategy for advancing through the dungeon was completely worked out, and the guild was now only going through the dungeon to collect drops or materials needed to advance through other, presumably harder, dungeons. Farming raids often had the problem of too few players willing to participate. To counter balance this, a nominal amount of DKP was given to players who would go in to farm. Despite this, however, there were occasions when farming groups went into Molten Core with only 30 people.

Another situation when people needed extra encouragement to participate in raids was with the release of new content. In the basic zero sum DKP system there was no compensation made to players for their efforts in the cases of failure. In any new dungeon it takes time and failures before a strategy can be worked out. These attempts cost players gold needed to repair equipment and buy consumables. They also cost players time; not only the time spent in the dungeon, but also the time needed to procure the gold needed for these repairs and consumables.

The guild tried to offset these costs using both gold and DKP incentives. First, players could request gold for repairs from the guild bank.<sup>20</sup> In the case of new dungeons when players would likely suffer many deaths in one session, however, the amount of gold offered by the bank would not fully cover the cost of repair bills. DKP incentives were not offered for each attempt made at a particular fight, but a DKP bonus was awarded to all the players who participated in the guild's first kill of a boss mob. This encouraged players to participate during the learning phase of new dungeons, because it could not be known when the first success would occur.

None of these solutions were completely effective, however. Players complained that farming was boring, and that the amount of DKP offered was not enough to make the endeavor worth their time. They cited comparisons between the amount of gold it took to repair equipment and the amount of gold they could obtain from the bank for these repairs and found that the unbalance still made it necessary to have to farm for more gold on their own.<sup>21</sup> Because the DKP bonus during the learning phases was only accrued after the first successful attempt, people would sometimes try to end raids during which success was seen as unattainable, rather than putting effort into furthering the progress of developing a good strategy. In these cases, players would sometimes stop using consumables, or even unequip certain items that were costly to repair. Although this would save a fraction of what the cost for that session would have been otherwise, it also meant that those players were not playing to their fullest potential, thus effecting the success of the raid as a whole in a potentially cascading effect of diminished involvement.

This description of the zero sum DKP system used by the Brigade provides a general understanding of one example of an external economy. There are deeper implications here than who gets what, however, and DKP is more than a simple currency. On a deeper level, then, what is DKP? DKP is a form of material and cultural capital, being a hybrid of currency and credential. The ways in which DKP was used and discussed among players in the Brigade, however, suggests an even more complicated view of this capital.

DKP is a form of material capital similar to currency. A player accumulates DKP and uses it to buy items from guild raids. DKP is distinctive however, in that it can only be used in very specific circumstances; that is, it is not as liquid and universal as most familiar currencies. A player cannot take DKP from one guild and spend it during another guild's raid for example. Nor can DKP be sold on eBay because it does not have an exchange value with physical world currencies. DKP is confined to

intraguild trading, and is worthless outside of the guild. This enhances group cohesion in that it encourages members to remain with the guild. Once a player has accumulated DKP, it is to their benefit to stay and spend it. Conversely, one can have a negative amount of DKP, thus obliging one to stay and earn what was already spent. Because DKP is continuously redistributed (through participation and purchases) throughout the group, this becomes a cycle of earning and spending that hinders any desire to leave the guild.

For these reasons, guild members saw DKP as something other than money. "Money people can get. DKP is sacred," (Paeon, personal communication, March 2005). The DKP system of the Brigade was an intraguild economy with DKP as the currency, but some guild members such as Paeon described DKP in terms of cultural value and did not recognize it as having material value. This is also due in part to the internal rules applied to many of the items in the game, especially those obtainable via DKP.

Equipped items can be seen by anyone. As mentioned earlier, much of the high-level gear in WoW is BoP. When someone inspects a player wearing these high-level soulbound items, he knows that this player has accomplished certain challenges within the game. The items are credentials, a form of cultural capital that indexes certain competencies within WoW. Within the Brigade, the only way to obtain these coveted items was to purchase them with DKP. Because most of the items with a price in DKP are BoP, guild members were paying more for the cultural value of items than their material value. This perspective and use of capital in the Brigade is indicative of Bourdieu's (1986) view of capital in which the boundary between material and cultural capital is not distinct; one can be bought with the other, and furthermore some things constitute both forms of capital.

High-level items, like Cold Snap, are objects of cultural capital. These items are associated with the mobs and dungeons from which they come and are valued for the difficulty of obtaining them. Like all artifacts of cultural capital, the value of such objects is group specific, and the significance of certain classes of avatar carrying certain objects is even more specific to DKP systems that use officer intervention. People take advantage of purples as credentials, for example, by listing their gear when applying to guilds, and linking items into chat channels to brag.<sup>22</sup> Purples attest to competence by showing what a player has already accomplished, but they are also valuable for their potential. These items are a form of capital in that they are "resource[s] for action" (Malaby, 2006b, p. 146). Gear adds to the abilities of avatars, thus contributing to their ability to progress even further.

## Debates on DKP

Despite widespread usage of DKP systems over various MMORPGs, the legitimacy of such systems is not uncontested by their users. Although the Brigade had

a DKP system from its inception, the Libertarian Cyborgs did not. The reason for this was that the two guilds were formed under different circumstances. The Brigade began as a ready-to-raid splinter guild, with its entire population at or close to level 60.<sup>23</sup> The Libertarian Cyborgs began when the game was released as a casual guild. For this reason, it was also quite some time before anyone in the Libertarian Cyborgs was ready to take on any of the end-game content, which are the only contexts within WoW where players deemed a DKP system desirable.

As people began to reach level 60, the Libertarian Cyborgs formed an alliance with some other guilds to experience the end-game. It was during this time that debates arose surrounding whether or not a DKP system should be implemented. Some players discussed different types of DKP systems possible, but a majority of the posts generated in the forums around this topic were of a more dichotomous nature—DKP was either good or bad. The internal loot options were the default alternative to an external DKP system.

These debates continued off and on for over 5 months. There were a number of recurring themes that got brought up by both camps, the most frequent being: fairness, work, play, games, and time. The two groups of people, those for DKP and those against it, had different ideas about what was fair and what constituted play; and both valued the investment of work and time put into the game differently. Because it was always the players for DKP implementation that began these threads, I will begin by discussing their arguments and then move on to the reasoning given against DKP systems.

## **Reasons for DKP**

A number of players, upon reaching the maximum level, discovered that the end-game could be repetitive. To make successful attempts at the increasingly difficult end-game content, these dungeons and the ones preceding them needed to be farmed for specific loot. The loot drops were random, however, and this, coupled with the fact that these dungeons do not drop enough loot for everyone on any one attempt, meant that these dungeons had to be done several times to equip an entire guild.<sup>24</sup>

Contribution in the form of time became a major point of tension because of this. The first players to reach the end-game spent countless hours developing strategies to conquer these dungeons.<sup>25</sup> When the guild was first attempting Molten Core with the inter-guild alliance, the dungeon had to be attempted over several days, and all who participated had many failures, with high costs. As time passed, the alliance progressed and players began to learn the encounters. With time, however, new players became available to join the raids, players who did not have the experience and expertise of the veteran raiders.

The loot rule used at this time was an external form of need before greed used in conjunction with part of the game's internal devices. Any player who had not yet

won a contested item during the current raid and was able to use the item dropped could use the random number generator, and the highest number won the item. (This process was referred to as /random or /roll.) There was no distinction made between veteran raiders and first time raiders.

Many players felt this system was unfair. They felt that it did not take into consideration the amount of time, resources, and effort the veteran raiders had invested in these dungeons.

Your system is clearly biased toward the people who can't/won't go as often, which I disagree with. Sure, I'm sorry that you can't be there every time and all that, but if this loot we're after is so unimportant, why use a system that rewards those who work the least for it? That's "coattail riding" and I don't like it one bit. (Ironblood, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, March 24, 2005.)

Under this system, they argued, a player could get everything they wanted on their first raid while winning over people who have been attempting to get these same items for weeks. This leads directly into another problem that started occurring sometime after the initial learning phase.

With so much repetitive raiding, some players got burned out by the time they had everything they wanted. Once a dungeon has nothing more to offer, players have little incentive to go back and continue spending time with an activity that has long since lost its novelty and excitement. The problem with this is that it takes 40 people to make a raid, and if enough people decide they do not want to go anymore, then those who still do can have problems gathering enough people to participate.

DKP was seen as an answer to both of these problems.<sup>26</sup> DKP rewarded people who put in more time and it gave people incentive to continue helping the guild raid a specific dungeon even if there was nothing that player wanted from it. DKP was the compensation that one obtained when nothing else could be offered. By helping the guild raid a dungeon and earning DKP in the process players helped themselves and the guild. The new players could continue to get in on raids to gain loot and the veteran players could gain DKP to be used in other dungeons.

Raiding should reward people that work hard and attend often. You don't raid solo, you raid for the common good of 40 people. Looting odds shouldnt be like a casino where you lose your ass 99% of the time and win big 1%. You should know when to expect rewards, and know when you need to be helping other people get their own rewards so eventually you may be rewarded again. (Shippo, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, March 24, 2005.)

The argument was also made that as people got items, they would be passing on items much more frequently which made the amount of loot possible for new raiders larger than that desired by the veteran raiders; since contested and uncontested items were counted differently. If an item dropped and only one person in the raid needed the item then the item was uncontested. Players were allowed to win unlimited

amounts of uncontested loot, and these acquisitions did not count against the rule of one purple per raid. This rule applied only to contested drops in which more than one player wanted it. This meant that a new raider could acquire any number of uncontested items and then still win a contested item over another person who had as yet received nothing from that raid.

In terms of strategic contributions, some players claimed that random distribution was not indicative of the fact that the encounters themselves were not random. Each fight in the end-game was (ideally) carried out through the careful execution of a well-planned strategy. This required work and, as the argument went, the guaranteed work put in should be equal to some form of guaranteed compensation. With a DKP system, even if a player is not immediately receiving loot, they are still earning DKP to be used for loot later. This would also benefit the players that took the time to figure out these dungeons instead of sitting back and waiting to participate until it was all figured out.

You want the right to roll on every single piece of loot and you call me greedy for saying my having been there more makes me more deserving. You are the greedy one, because you already got a nice rare purple item [The Benefit of Our Work to Make This Easier for Everyone]. (Cloud, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, March 25, 2005.)

The brackets in this quote were meant to make the text appear to be a game item. In the original, the brackets and text inside them were purple. This suggested that the item [The Benefit of Our Work to Make This Easier for Everyone] was a highly valued and sought after commodity. As one of the power gamers, Cloud was claiming that he and the other veteran raiders had invested work to gain knowledge that the new raiders were getting free.

The players reaching level 60 first and devising strategies for the end-game found themselves in a constant state of teaching the dungeons, because there was a steady flow of new raiders as more and more people became eligible to participate in the end-game. They felt this slowed their progress in the end-game and made each raid take longer than necessary due to the need to explain strategies that had been known for some time, and thus expanding the amount of work they needed to put in. The raid leaders tried to alleviate this problem by writing guides for the dungeons, but this was not successful. This left the veteran raiders feeling that now not only had they figured out these encounters on their own, but they were being forced to hold the hands of the newcomers through the experience, while still remaining on equal ground for loot in the /random system. “in short, i worked hard for US but was given the sh[o]rt end of the stick” (Appleseed, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, February 12, 2005).

Work was not the only argument brought forth. Many people posted that their idea of fun in WoW was conquering the end-game, and that to do this they needed to have the necessary equipment. “Better loots = better equipped to tackle new content when they come out. To have fun in the end-game, you need good gears. It’s that simple”

(Roar, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, March 24, 2005). The definition of what constitutes fun became a major point of contention during these debates. Everyone agreed that fun was the point of playing the game, but there was considerable disagreement over what was fun.

We can both agree on one thing, we don't play for the gears. We play for fun. It's just that my definition of fun isn't making 8 alts and leveling them all the [sic] 60. I want to tackle end-game content. Maybe that is the core issue. (Roar, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, March 24, 2005.)

Roar was illuminating an important point in this debate. Fun was in fact at the core of the differences in opinion held by two groups of players, each constituting a different playing style. Though there were a few exceptions, most of the people in favor of some form of DKP system were more serious in their play style relative to those who were against it. These people consistently referenced the end-game as a challenge to be overcome, while the players against the use of DKP were more casual, and cited the end-game as content to be experienced. "We play the game to play together. We have fun TOGETHER" (Neo, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, March 25, 2005). Roar valued a competitive style of play, while Neo valued the social aspect of the game.

## Reasons Against DKP

The players against the implementation of a DKP system all consistently agreed the game was about having fun and that loot was a secondary byproduct of this experience. The insinuation made, sometimes overtly other times not, was that game items were not valuable.

You pay money, spend months and month and months of time, get into a bunch of silly arguments (some polite, some not) people split off, people get mad, people have a negative game play experience, for....pixels.... This shit won't get you laid my man, 15 people drops and \$2.50 will buy you a cup of coffee, it isn't worth shit, your reward, is a fake, your reward is nothing. My reward? Shit, my reward is worth all the gold in fort knox, my reward is hanging out with you bastards talking about stabbing gnomes and kicking night elf children. (Kefka, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, June 20, 2005.)<sup>27</sup>

Many of these people felt that the players wanting DKP were treating the game like work and missing out on the fun of WoW. "Everyone needs to CONCENTRATE on having FUN. Making a points system turns this into a JOB" (Neo, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, March 24, 2005).

They claimed the use of DKP to award people for their contributions constituted a form of payment implying that raiding was a job and not a part of a game. If raiding

was a job then, they reasoned, the purpose of the game—fun—was lost. The players for DKP did not agree with this argument and stated that a methodical, goal-oriented style of play was a legitimate manifestation of fun (cf. Taylor, 2006).

Many of the players against DKP were also either just hitting level 60 or not yet there. These players expressed fear that the implementation of such a system would ultimately bar them from the end-game. They saw these systems as elitism, which would create “a class system where the rich get richer and the not rich get nothing,” (StrongArm, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, March 24, 2005). To even get loot the raid had to be successful in killing the mobs in the dungeon being attempted. Therefore, the more high-level gear a player has, the more they are able to contribute to the raid. With this logic, the newly minted or near level 60 players felt that they would be left behind in favor of bringing in players with better gear. If this happened, they would end up with no chances at loot. Thus the fear of DKP creating a hierarchical class structure within the guild emerged.

The casual gamers were afraid this elitist gap would fall along lines of certain physical world differences. Many casual players believed the veteran raiders were being unfair to the players with external time commitments that did not allow them to play as often. The two most frequently posted hindrances to play time were school and work. The players who could not attend every scheduled raid due to school and work thought a DKP system would work against them in that they would always be behind the power gamers in DKP accrued. This meant to them that even when they did get to attend the occasional raid, they would be ineligible to receive any items. The /random system, they argued, gave the “casual guys an equal footing on raids,” and this was the way the guild was supposed to work (Homunculus, Libertarian Cyborgs forums February 9, 2005). External time constraints were not supposed to matter; in the Libertarian Cyborgs Guild all were supposed to be equal.

The players against DKP lumped together everyone for DKP into the category of hardcore or power gamer. They described these players as selfish, greedy, and self-centered. They claimed a DKP system was contrary to the spirit of the guild, which was formed as a selfless, socialist space.

*Loot & You:* Since you're in a guild, you are expected to help contribute to the guild goal. What does this mean? If you come across high end recipes and loot, donate it to the guild bank . . . Drop it in the mail. High level recipes and epic sets are a must. Anyone found selling these will be seriously considered for guild removal. (Guild rules, Libertarian Cyborgs forums February 14, 2005.)

This excerpt from the rules of the Libertarian Cyborgs guild was often cited as illustrating the founding ideas of this guild concerning loot. Everything found in the game was to be shared. DKP, they said, went contrary to this in that it turned the focus of raids onto the individual and away from the guild as a whole.



## Breaking Down the Debates

It is noteworthy to mention that many of the players against DKP in the beginning of this debate were not level 60 and had not had any experiences in the end-game. Looking back through the forum posts in chronological order, I found that several people changed their minds as they progressed through the game, though only one person openly admitted this change.

At first (read: before I ever did MC),<sup>28</sup> I was really opposed to a points system concept for raids. But, as time has moved forward, and we've all participated in more raids, it's becoming more and more apparent to me that perhaps we do need some sort of system that rewards people who go on lots of raids. (Ironblood, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, March 23, 2005.)

At the core of this argument was the question of where to draw the line between play and work; a distinction which we can see here is always a cultural accomplishment, not something that follows from the fact of participating in a game (Malaby, 2006a, b). DKP was seen as a form of compensation. The people in favor of DKP felt they deserved compensation for their valuable contributions to the guild. The people against DKP saw payment for services rendered as turning the game into a job, which they saw as devaluing the fun aspect. These players argued that members should be obliged to contribute on the basis of their membership alone; while the power gamers wanted a guaranteed return to foster obligation. Each of these groups had a different view of the way the game should be played and both saw their position as the best way for the guild to proceed.

These differences came to be drawn along lines of distinction between casual gamers and power gamers. The casual players accused the power gamers of elitism. The power gamers accused the casual gamers of coattail riding. The difference of views here revolved around unequal valuations of the cultural capital the power gamers held. The power gamers holding this knowledge did not want to donate this capital—that is, their competence in the end-game raids and their credentials in the form of levels, abilities, and gear—without measurable compensation. They argued that their knowledge and expertise was valuable enough to be worth compensation from the guild. The casual gamers argued that this cultural capital was of debatable value at best, but more importantly, that it was public property and should not be withheld by the individuals possessing it.

This view became even more apparent when some of the high-level members of the Libertarian Cyborgs, including some of the officers, announced that they were leaving the guild.

Removing the knowledge seems like such a slap in the face, and someone even boldly said 'more rewarding to figure it out on your own' ... well, when did THAT come

about? . . . Give me a break, EVERYONE wants the quickest path. (Delphi, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, May 27, 2005.)

Delphi was one of the casual gamers arguing for the public property status of the officers' knowledge. His claim was unique among the casual gamers in that he was one of the few to acknowledge the value of the expertise of the veteran raiders. Many of the others admitted only to losing bodies—level 60 avatars to fill out a raid group.

Implementing a DKP system would allow the power gamers to continue to engage the end-game through an explicit means of calculation of costs and benefits. Under this system, players were able to see the progress being made toward their personal goals. This fits in well with the methodical approach to game play of the power gamers. T. L. Taylor devotes a chapter to this in her book *Play Between Worlds* (2006). Taylor (2006, p. 71) discusses the form of instrumental play of power gamers and also points out how this often comes into conflict with the views of casual gamers. In Taylor's research, the casual gamers typically took the stance that the power gamers were cheating and felt animosity toward them because these casual gamers could not keep up. In my own work, the animosity was there, but the view of the power gamers by the casual gamers did not get verbalized as cheating against the game. Rather, they were seen as cheating their fellow guild members.

The power gamers were the ones to devise the strategies for the end-game and spend time outside of the game researching the dungeons through various websites dedicated to WoW. With each attempt at these fights, there was a strategy to be deployed. Even in the case of first-time encounters, there were always people doing research on the dungeon and bringing with them plans of action that were then modified as the experience proved necessary.

These players wanted the same level of commitment from the guild. DKP was about institutionalizing the guild's raiding. A successful raid was a well-organized, cooperative effort, and these players wanted the awards system of these raids to be the same. If they were going to put forth the effort of furthering the progress of the guild as a whole, they wanted to be assured that their effort would not be in vain. Without a DKP system, loot distribution was random and there was neither a way to assign gear according to a member's level of contribution to the guild, nor a way of demanding more contribution from players.

For the power gamers, this took the fun out of the end-game. As Cloud once so plainly put it to me, "I play to win" (personal communication, April 2005). This is an interesting sentiment in relation to MMORPGs considering there is no clearly defined win scenario. Power gamers like Cloud played to be the best, loosely defined by conquering the end-game, having all the top gear, and sometimes by dominating the pvp rankings.<sup>29</sup> This challenge was the fun of WoW for these players. This play style can be characterized through "a focus on efficiency and instrumental orientation, dynamic goal setting, commitment to understanding the underlying game systems/structure, and technical and skill proficiency" (Taylor, 2003, p. 4).

DKP meant different things to different people. As a form of capital, it crossed the line between material and symbolic, showing that the two are not distinct. It also was the topic around which the Libertarian Cyborgs debated work, fun, and value, to find that there are no easy answers. What constitutes fun depends on the people involved: there is no universal definition (Malaby, 2006a, b). The same goes for work. The power gamers of the Libertarian Cyborgs described their style of play as fun while the causal gamers pointed at this and called it work. The power gamers and casual gamers also valued each other's cultural capital differently. The power gamers put a higher value on knowledge and skill than the casual gamers did, and they also saw these assets as being private property; while the casual gamers argued that skill differences in general in WoW are negligible, and that knowledge was cheap and easy to come by.

First off I didn't know that ripping off of [thatotherguild]'s website and others was very difficult. I salute those with the strength and ingenuity to type in [www.thatotherguild.com](http://www.thatotherguild.com).<sup>30</sup> It must have taken such a long time, and tons of man hours. /sarcasm (Aura, Libertarian Cyborgs forums, March 25, 2005).

This debate also brought forth issues at the core of describing the gaming experience. What is fair? What is the distinction between work and play? For the members of the Libertarian Cyborgs, the answers to these questions were not clear. Fair to some people meant acknowledging the contributions of players, rewarding them for offering their expertise to the guild's raids, for volunteering their cultural capital. To others, fair was leveling the playing field of physical world constraints by making everyone equal regardless of their contributions of skill or time.

The examples here show there is not a universal definition of fun, or gamer for that matter. MMORPGs are multifaceted games that can be experienced in a multitude of ways, all constituting legitimate experiences of fun. Having a DKP system does not equate to transforming WoW into a job. It does show, however, that some players view the game as incomplete and bring in external devices (such as DKP as an example of an external economy) to further their enjoyment of the game. Some people believe this pollutes the pure game space, but this is a hard argument to make for a game that is consistently being fixed and updated, not to mention a space in which everyone is bringing with them their own personalities as shaped by the outside world.

## Conclusion

DKP systems are a small part of the macro economy of WoW, but are important nonetheless. They demonstrate the weakness of the boundary between the game world and the physical world; and they give insight into the inner workings of

high-level guilds. The implementation of a DKP system by a guild solidifies the reciprocal relationship between the group and the individual members by allowing for measurable compensation to individuals for their contributions to the group.

This compensation also forces participation of members. With a DKP system there is no free ride, members must earn and contribute to the guild to receive anything from it. This allows for smoother political cohesion within raiding guilds because officers are not forced to waste time motivating members or defusing loot disagreements. The economy of DKP is set up so that contribution equals compensation, and since everyone wants loot, everyone is obliged to contribute. Leaders can then spend their time and energy organizing raids and advancing the guild's progress.

Beyond motivating players, DKP also encourages members to remain with the guild. These economies are guild specific and therefore players are more likely to stay within a system in which they are already established. This eliminates the need to continuously bring in new players who would have to be taught strategies, such as the problem encountered by the veteran raiders of the Libertarian Cyborgs' alliance.

Guilds employing DKP systems create established and motivated membership bases that are well equipped, knowledgeable, and capable of conquering end-game encounters. That DKP is an economic system, rationalizes the values, both market and cultural, already present. By rationalizing these, guild leaders are able to use these values to motivate their members and gain success, thus legitimating both the political structure and the use of DKP within the guild.

DKP is not used in all guilds, however, and so it would be interesting to see what other mechanisms of cohesion might work. DKP is widely used within raiding guilds, but how prevalent are raiding guilds within the larger MMORPG community? And what kind of lifestyle or personality do these people have who seek to join guilds using DKP; who have the time and the resources to make such commitments? Are they significantly different from those who seek out casual guilds? These are all questions relevant to this paper, but beyond its scope. Perhaps, as the popularity of MMORPGs continues to grow, more in-depth research into the upper echelons of raiding guilds will be possible.

## Notes

1. Guild like structures are common across MMORPGs and not unique to WoW.
2. The names of all guilds and players have been changed to protect people's identities.
3. This is based on my inability to find any earlier references to DKP systems, and is confirmed by Mark Silverman in his work, *Beyond fun in games: The serious leisure of the power gamer* (2006, p. 91) as well by <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/dkp>, from which the first DKP system is said to have been launched in 1999.
4. For example, one such well-known site listed auctions selling gold at a rate of approximately 4 gold per 1 US dollar as of February 2007.
5. When more than one player wants an item that has dropped, it is given to the person with the most DKP.

6. By gear I mean items that an avatar can wear.
7. The maximum level has changed since the time of this research.
8. There are quest rewards that are BoP items as well. These carry value as well in that it still demonstrates that the avatar possessing the items is the one who accomplished the given challenge of obtaining it.
9. Especially in large MMORPGs, separate servers (or shards) are created to accommodate the larger number of people. Each server is a computer (or group of computers) in the physical world hosting an identical copy of the game, differing only in the players that inhabit each one.
10. Once a player interacts with a mob in some way (by talking to it, hitting it, etc.) only people grouped with that player are recognized by the game as having participated in the kill. This means that only that one group has access to the loot that drops and gets experience points for the kill. This initial interaction is called tagging.
11. To inspect someone is a command in the game that will show one all the gear being worn by another player.
12. Ninja-looting is stealing according to external loot rules.
13. I want to note here that I do not see this type of dedication to a guild as an addiction to a game. There are scholars researching addiction in relation to MMORPGs, however that is not going to be explored here.
14. The loot options encoded in WoW have been altered since the time of this research.
15. When I use the term "automatically" here and elsewhere I am referring to an action that is performed by the code of the game and not by a player.
16. Some items have restrictions on what classes or professions can use them.
17. In WoW there are limits to the number of people who can participate in certain activities. A raid group can have any number of people between 6 and 40. The end-game content of WoW has maximum limits of either 20 or 40 people. Not all encounters are raidable. Non-raidable encounters have a maximum limit of five participants.
18. The DKP spent on an item was divided among everyone present, including the purchaser.
19. The unwanted items were disenchanting (roughly equivalent to being broken down for parts) and the resulting materials were sent to a bank for use by the guild.
20. The guild bank was funded from gold dropped from boss mobs in dungeons. Instead of the gold being distributed evenly throughout everyone in the raid (which is the way gold distribution is encoded into the game) the guildmaster would leave the raid and then pick up the gold so that he would get all of it. This gold was then transferred to a bank character for use by the entire guild.
21. Farming in general, regardless of what was being farmed, was seen as a boring and undesirable activity.
22. Linking an item is a technical ability within WoW that allows other people to see not only the name of the item, but also its statistics.
23. A splinter guild is a guild formed by players breaking away from another guild.
24. To put this into perspective, one player killed the same boss 27 times before receiving a specific piece of loot he had been after. Because end-game dungeons have a timer and can only be finished once during a set number of days, this put the time frame for this example at a little over 6 months.
25. At the time of these debates, the end-game consisted of Molten Core and Onyxia's Lair.
26. Both of these problems did occur with the guild's raids, although it is impossible to confirm how frequent these issues actually arose.
27. In the quote when Kefka says, "15 people drops" he meant to say 15 purples drop.
28. MC stands for Molten Core.
29. PvP combat was tracked in WoW and rankings were calculated weekly.
30. As of the date this article was written, the website [www.thatotherguild.com](http://www.thatotherguild.com) does not exist.

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