

The Inevitable Imbalance between Melee and Ranged Builds in Path of Exile

Written by Richard Stack

Defining Melee

Path of Exile, like many other loot-based action RPGs, contains a variety of skills with which the player can slay hordes of enemies. The skills that are primarily used to damage enemies can be broadly split up into two categories; melee skills and ranged skills.

Thematically, when one pictures a melee character in an RPG, they will often picture a strong individual wielding some kind of close-combat martial weapon (a sword, knife, club, axe, etc.). That character will be slicing, stabbing, or crushing enemies that are right next to them. Often, they are also parrying, blocking, and counter attacking their opponent's attacks.

Within the mechanics of Path of Exile, melee combat often varies wildly from this imagery, but the basic concept is the same. While melee characters can often attack a very large portion of the screen, ranged characters can shoot to the edge of the screen and beyond, giving them the opportunity to put more space between them and the enemy, making it easier for them to avoid attacks. While the distance Path of Exile characters can attack in "melee" can sometimes be immersion breaking, the fact still stands that melee characters need to be closer to enemies, and therefore put themselves in more danger.

Melee Defenses

In Diablo 3, certain classes, like the Monk and Barbarian, were defined as melee classes. They were limited to using skills within their class to attack, which often forced them into close combat. Since the designers of this game knew that those classes can only use their own class skills, they knew that these classes would always be within melee range. To compensate for this, the designers gave melee-defined classes a built-in percentage of damage mitigation that was always active. Ranged classes did not get this bonus.

In Path of Exile, classes are very loosely defined. Any class in the game is able to utilize both melee and ranged skills. This is purposeful, to give players more freedom to build their character how they see fit. The downside to this, of course, is that the designers do not know beforehand which classes will be melee and which will be ranged, preventing them from adding

any type of built-in damage mitigation. How can melee compensate for the increased damage they take by being closer to enemies?

Fortify

Path of Exile included a mechanic called Fortify as a solution to this problem. Originally, Fortify was a temporary buff that could activate when hitting an enemy with a melee attack. The buff provided a large amount of damage mitigation for its duration. Since it was limited to only being activated by melee hits, I can only assume the intention was for this buff to be exclusively available to melee characters.

Path of Exile, however, is a game that supports as much build freedom as possible. As a result, ranged characters began to use melee-based movement skills to quickly move through enemies and hit them lightly with melee damage, activating the Fortify buff. After that, they could back up quickly and use their ranged skills to kill the enemies.

I assume that this result was not acceptable to the designers, since a while after Fortify was introduced, it was changed dramatically. Instead of providing a set amount of damage mitigation when hitting with any melee attack, Fortify now provided an amount of stackable damage mitigation based on the damage of the hit. This prevented Fortify from being used effectively by ranged characters who were only using light melee hits to trigger the buff. Melee characters could still effectively use the buff, since their melee hits did much more damage. The balance of this new form of Fortify is ongoing.

Fortify is meant to offset the additional implicit risk that melee characters take, but since it can't be built-in to the class, the character must accept opportunity costs to invest in it. Because of this, I assert that melee characters are intrinsically weaker than ranged characters.

Melee Clear Speed

Path of Exile is a game about loot. The more loot a player gets and the more currency they make, the more powerful their character becomes. Loot comes from killing enemies and taking part in various league activities (which also involve killing enemies), both of which take time to complete. The faster a character can kill these enemies and complete these activities, the more loot and currency they receive within a given time period. Since loot and currency lead to success in this game, I believe it's correct to say that killing more enemies faster equals success.

As described in the "Defining Melee" section, ranged characters can hit enemies which are much further away than melee could hit. As a result, ranged characters can not only hit the enemies displayed on screen - they can also hit enemies at the edges of the screen or even a good distance off of the screen. This gives ranged characters more possible enemies to hit with

each attack, and therefore gives them an opportunity to kill many more enemies in one attack than a melee character possibly could.

Ranged characters have the opportunity (due to their nature of being able to hit enemies further away) to kill more enemies within a given time period than melee characters could. Therefore, I assert that ranged characters are intrinsically more capable of being successful than melee characters.

My Conclusion

Those players who play solely for the purposes of efficiency and min-maxing will be hard-pressed to find a sufficient reason to choose a melee character over a ranged one. The only reason to choose a melee character is to fulfill a roleplaying fantasy, and in a game that mechanically encourages efficient character builds over thematic roleplaying, this can easily lead to frustration.

Path of Exile cannot have both freeform classes and a balance between melee and ranged characters. This is one of the costs that Path of Exile accepts when giving players the ability to essentially create their own classes.