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## **Player's motivation to select a race and class in World of Warcraft**

### **Introduction**

For nearly a decade, Blizzard's World of Warcraft has grown and expanded, and eventually became the world's largest Massive Multi-Player Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). World of Warcraft is a computer game in which a player creates a character, and then enters into a virtual world where they can grow and develop this character into a mythical hero or villain. When creating their character, users are able to choose from any one of thirteen, unique races, each of which comes with a different storyline through which the user must progress. After choosing their race, users are prompted to decide which one of the eleven different classes they will embody. A user's class also influences minor aspects of the narrative around which the game is centered, and also determines the type of skills the user's characters will possess. Some classes – take Paladins and Warriors as an example – are well versed in hand to hand combat, while other classes – like Hunters – are specialized in using ranged attacks, while another series of classes – including Priests and Shaman – focus more on healing their

comrades rather than trying to inflict damage on enemies. With the wide variety of options available to users, it is not surprising that certain races and classes within World of Warcraft are more popular than others. Warcraft Realms is a site that performs a census of all of the characters found throughout World of Warcraft, compiles the data to determine the most prevalent races and classes across the total population, and then publishes these findings online.

In their most recent census, Warcraft Realms discovered that across all of World of Warcraft, Humans made up the largest portion of all different races, coming out to 19%. Also, the most popular class across all of Word of Warcraft was found to be Hunters, taking up 13% of the total user population. Humans remained the most popular in only US servers as well, where they made up 18% of the total user population. Hunters were also the most popular class within these US servers, making up 14% of the total user population. When looking at strictly European servers, Humans were still on top as far as the most popular race, with an impressive 22%. However, Druids and Hunters tied as the most popular classes, both pulling in 11% of the total user population.

The trends also differed depending on the type of server the users participated in. In strictly PVE servers, for instance, Humans still held the top spot in terms of being the most popular race, covering 20% of the total user population for these servers. Likewise, Hunters maintained their position as the most popular class, taking 13% of the user population. Similarly, when looking at strictly PVP servers, while Humans and

Hunters remained the most popular race and class, they characterized only 19% and 12% of the total user population, respectively.

These trends also vary by the users' faction, whether or not they align themselves with the Alliance or the Horde. When looking at Alliance characters only, Humans make up 34% of the user population across all of Blizzard's World of Warcraft servers. Hunters still hold the top spot in terms of Alliance popularity, making up 13% of the population. When looking at characters belonging only to the Horde, throughout all of Blizzard's World of Warcraft servers, one can see that Blood Elves are the most popular race, making up 30% of the total user population.

Besides these somewhat obvious trends, it is interesting to look at these popularity trends from many different vantage points. For instance, across all of Blizzard's World of Warcraft servers, the top three races, in order, are Humans (19%), Blood Elves (13%), and Night Elves (12%). On the other end of the spectrum, the least popular races throughout all of World of Warcraft are, in order, Goblins (3%), and a tie between Dwarves and Gnomes (4% each).

It is not surprising that Humans are the most popular race amongst the total population of users. In their observations of the varying degrees to which users personally identified with their assigned character or role in the video games they played, Christoph Klimmt and his associates found that individuals who play video games tend to identify with characters that exhibit traits similar to those held by the individuals' ideal perception of self. This identification results in a greater level of enjoyment the user experiences while playing the game. Because users tend to play

video games in order to achieve a certain level of enjoyment or pleasure, it makes sense that because a user finds pleasure in identifying with the character they control within the game because of its likeness to what the user sees as a desirable perception of self, the user would then pick the character that best represents this perceived individual.

## **Hypothesis**

In looking at the data presented in Warcraft Realm's latest census, as of May 26, 2014, it is figured that a user's choice in both race and class comes as a result of that individual's attempt to maximize the enjoyment they receive from the game. Enjoyment is facilitated by the degree to which the user identifies with their character, and this identification deepens when the user's character becomes a closer and closer representation of the user's ideal sense of self. Therefore, it is predicted that someone playing World of Warcraft bases the decisions made regarding the race and class of their character on their ability to generate a character that most closely aligns with the individual's ideal perception of self. Meaning that a player's choice of race and class come as an attempt to project the player's idealistic version of himself into the game.

## **Method**

A summary of Warcraft Realm's census findings was posted on to Blizzard's official World of Warcraft Forums so that the opinions and insight provided by people familiar with the game could be collected and analyzed. The thread hoped to receive responses that provided a line of reasoning behind the decision making process a World of Warcraft player encounters when creating a new character. The thread was

monitored as other members of the forum contributed their own ideas and opinions, after which these responses were evaluated and categorized by their main point of reasoning. Any of the posts responding to the initial thread mentioned in this article appear just as they did on the forums. No editing, proofreading, or revising was performed on these responses to preserve their authenticity. Users' responses varied in their main arguments and points of view, but there were a few reoccurring themes. Over the course of its active life, the thread received over 160 views and 25 different responses. While some of these responses proved to be contributed by trolls, and others criticized the nature of Warcraft Realms' census, the vast majority of responses were enthusiastic members of the community who were happy to take part in the thread's discussion.

## **Results**

### **Race**

Many different members of the forums responded with their thoughts, through which valuable insight was gathered about how users rationalize the decisions they make regarding their character. Many people have certain traits and skills they look for in their characters, the character's race having a greater impact on which skills and traits are available compared to the influence a character's class has on the decision making process. In response to the reason certain races, like Humans, Blood Elves, and Night Elves, are picked much more often than others, the thread received a series of different opinions, all of which seemed to explain or justify a portion of the population's strategy.

A few responses came forward and claimed that a user's choice of race was a direct indicator of the traits, both physical and intangible, which the individual believed to be desirable or attractive, and that the individual would hope to possess if they embodied their ideal perception of self. Mcbones, a Level 90 Undead Priest, replied, "Some people want to take better extent of a fantasy game when establishing a hero. The majority however, wants to project themselves into the game by creating a character that better reflects them. Explains why most play human." Mcbones, along with other members of the forums, argued that, while some choose their race to take full advantage of the game's fantasy environment, the typical user chooses her race in an attempt to replicate herself within the game by playing as a character that resembles what this user considers to be covetable qualities, both corporeal and cerebral.

The argument that videogame players project themselves into the games they play is quite common, and is reiterated by the findings of Klimmt and his associates. One member of the forums, Jirek, a Level 90 Human Paladin, aligned his response even more closely with the theories and ideas discussed in Klimmt's work, saying,

*"Most people want to feel connected to their character.*

*That's part of that 'Immersion' buzzword we like to throw around with RPG's. Human, Night Elves, and Blood Elves are very easy to project ourselves onto. The more 'exotic' races, take a person who is more comfortable creating an 'alter ego' that is not so much a projection of themselves,*

*but maybe more a projection of what they would like to be.”*

Jirek mentions “immersion” as a word used when discussing role-playing video games to evaluate the degree to which a player is connected to the game, and is synonymous with the “identification” researched by Klimmt and his colleagues. As Klimmt’s research uncovered, the more identification the user experiences when playing a videogame, the more enjoyment they receive from the game. This basically means that the more immersed a user becomes in the game’s virtual environment, the more likely they are to enjoy the game. Because a user’s level of enjoyment is tied to the level of identification they experience with the game, it makes sense that users would be more likely to choose characters that resemble themselves more closely, and thus facilitate a greater level of immersion.

While some responded saying that one’s choice in race was an attempt to best connect with his virtual character, others felt that the decision making process was far simpler, and much less convoluted. These individuals felt that, though users did indeed pick their race based on traits they thought to be attractive or covetable, these traits were not meant to be representations of an individual’s ideal sense of self. Instead of trying to project themselves into the game, these users were choosing their character’s race simply based off what they personally found attractive or cool, and not necessarily traits they wanted to possess themselves. Padriel, a Level 32 Human Priest, put it quite simply, saying, “Because people like playing pretty races.” While blunt, Padriel’s opinion was backed up by other users who responded with greater depth. One of these users,

Demicton, a Level 90 Undead Warlock, responded to the trend in which the top three races, Humans, Blood Elves, and Night Elves, made up 44% of the total population of World of Warcraft characters. Demicton commented on the trend, saying, “Probably the way armor looks on them. Personally I love how armor looks on the human male model. Also those models don't have hunches. They stand up straight they also have good animations.” Demicton’s response was one of many that designated physical appearance as the main determinant of one’s choice in race. Following Demicton’s post, Gaige, a Level 90 Blood Elf Monk, mentioned the impact her character’s physical appearance had on her decision, responding,

*“I feel that if they unhunched Undead, Orcs and Trolls, A LOT more people would play them, myself included. Why can't undead females look like Sylvanas? That would be hot and I'd definitely roll one.”*

Figure 1 shows Sylvanas Windrunner, a female Undead character within the World of Warcraft narrative. Sylvana was originally a Blood Elf, but became a member of the Undead after being killed in the Third War. Her Blood Elf heritage is the reason for her atypical Undead appearance, which sets her apart from the other Undead characters because she is not constantly hunched over. Gaige’s response highlights the idea that people who play World of Warcraft do consider their characters’ appearance when deciding which race they will belong to. Gaige admits that she would have no hesitation before choosing a different race, like



**Figure 1 – Sylvanas Windrunner, Undead**

Orcs or the Undead, but because these races are naturally hunched over, and therefore appear much less attractive, she has stuck with being a Blood Elf.

Along with the responses discussing the reasons certain races were more popular than others, a series of users responded with their opinions as to why certain races were avoided more than others. These responses, however, also fell back on the basis of appearance as a major influence of one's choice in character. Responding to the pattern where the three shortest races, Dwarves, Gnomes, and Goblins, made up only 11% of the total World of Warcraft character population, Adelphie, a Level 90 Draenei Paladin, stated, "No one wants to be short. Goblins and gnomes are little more than jokes. Dwarves are ugly as sin." Below, Figure 2 shows the height distribution amongst all the different races of Alliance characters, making it easy to see that Dwarves and Gnomes are drastically smaller than their allies. Not only are characters belonging to the Dwarves and Gnomes shorter than Humans or Draenei, they are much less muscular, especially in the case of the Gnomes. These small races must not only attract users even though they barely reach the kneecaps of some of the other races, they must also be chosen when they look to be about 75% weaker. This set of physical disadvantages that comes with being the member of a smaller race reiterates the idea that a World of



Warcraft user relies heavily on a race's appearance when making their decision, regardless of whether or not the appearance is related to the user's ideal sense of self.

## Class

In World of Warcraft, a character's race has an impact far greater than its class.

**Figure 2 – Alliance Races Height Distribution. From left to right, by male/female pairs: Humans, Dwarves, Draenei, Gnomes, Worgen, Night Elves.**

This occurs because of inequalities between the different races in terms of their skills, powers, and starting locations. Such discrepancies do not exist amongst the different classes. The lack of discrepancies and inequalities across the different classes was brought to light in another post from Lahgtah, which read,

*“Classes change and all of them are fairly well balanced and all perform fairly well. There aren't really any ‘best classes’ anymore and it's all relevant to how you like to play. Races you are stuck with and never change. Whenever someone thinks that ‘X’ is the best race, they will likely always play that race if possible.”*

Lahgtah presents a major factor as to why race carries more weight than class in commenting that while a character's class can be changed, their race is permanent. If people were somehow able to change their race as the game progressed, the trends amongst the most popular races would likely be incredibly different.

While some users claimed that class was simply less important and less influential than race, a number of responses noted that a character's choice of class was tied directly to their style of play. These responses defended specific aspects of certain

classes, and how these aspects made the class more effective when completing quests or partaking in combat. Lahgtah discussed his own reasoning for being a Death Knight, saying,

*“As for classes, I always have and always will love the hulking, bulky plate armor classes who are covered head to toe in thick metal. You will find none of that skimpy/small crap on my account. I like my school bus sized shoulders as well and I have never been able to relate to those who like slim armor. Death knights are just plain out cool in concept...The mechanics of the class also fit my preferred playstyle very well: Spend your primary resource to get secondary resources. Spend your secondary resource to get primary resources. No other class does this quite the same way as the DK.”*

Lahgtah’s allegiance towards Death Knights is not uncommon amongst members of the World of Warcraft community, where many users tend to play as one class of character more than any other.

## **Discussion**

In evaluating the responses that users contributed through the forums, it was found that, for the vast majority of World of Warcraft players, one’s choice of race was indicative of what that individual considered to be attractive or desirable traits. These

traits, both physical and intellectual, were traits that the individual perceived to be righteous and good, and would want to embody. Thus, the resulting character is closely aligned with the main qualities the individual would have in their ideal perception of self, or their “dream-version” of themselves. By creating a character that embodies their underlying interests and preferences, an individual is able to project himself into the game, and can then easily identify with his character, as if he were actually in the game’s environment.

This sense of identification, which Christoph Klimmt and his colleagues determined to be a temporary shift in self-perception, occurs when a user begins to see themselves as similar to their virtual character. This change in perception results in the individual becoming more inclined to seeing common traits between themselves and their character, regardless of whether or not these commonalities actually exist. When this occurs, the user becomes more enthusiastic towards, and involved in, the game. This attachment, supplemented by the sense of acting as what they feel to be close to the ideal version of themselves, gives users a higher level of appreciation for the game and increases the level of enjoyment these users experience during game play. Since this level of enjoyment is influenced by the degree to which the user identifies with the character they portray, users are drawn to characters of the races that look the most similar to their perceived self – a real human being.

Referring back to Warcraft Realms’ census, the percentage of users that play as Humans, Night Elves, or Blood Elves totals an impressive 44%. It is not surprising that close to half of Blizzard’s World of Warcraft players choose to play as one of the races

that looks closest to actual human beings because characters of these races routinely serves as good mediums through which users can project their quintessential perceptions of self, leading to a great sense of identification with their character.

On the other hand, while an individual's choice of race was usually tied to their desire to project themselves within the game, the same individual's choice of class was tied to their style of play and personal interests more than anything else. Rather than continuing to project themselves into the game when picking their characters' class, it was found that users are more likely to choose a class that best matches their personal style of play. Within World of Warcraft, there are a few different styles of play users can choose from. Some classes do best in hand-to-hand combat, others do best inflicting their damage from afar, and even still, some others are best for healing their comrades instead of attempting to attack the enemy. Certain classes work better for certain styles of play, so in order to have an useful and valuable character, an individual must pick a class that best matches their own style of play.

Another difference between the factors influencing a user's decision for race and decision for class is the far greater impact of one's choice of race, than their choice of class. Because race determines the character's starting position and natural abilities, cannot be changed, and has a great deal of inequalities spread between its different options, it takes precedence over the character's class. Because of discrepancies between the different races, and the power these races possess, certain races are lower in the hierarchy of the World of Warcraft environment than others. While races of larger characters, like Humans and Blood Elves, appear dominant and powerful, characters

belonging to the smaller races, like Gnomes and Goblins, appear short, scrawny, and unimposing. Therefore, there is a more extensive decision making process that is followed when picking race than there is when picking class. Across all the different classes, while inequalities and discrepancies may exist, they are far less influential than those that have to do with race. Because all of the classes are more evenly matched with one another, one's decision as far as their character's class is concerned is far less significant than that of their race.

While it was hypothesized that a World of Warcraft player's choice of both race and class was dependent upon his or her own preferences and would serve to resemble his or her ideal perception of self, this proved to be true for only one's choice of race, as one's class was tailored to fit their individual style of play. After a summary of Warcraft Realm's census was posted to Blizzard's official World of Warcraft forums, members of the World of Warcraft community submitted responses discussing the different factors and reasoning used by players when creating their characters and choosing their characters' race and class. Nearly all of the responses noted that an individual's choice of race was based on what that individual felt was attractive or covetable, and the vast majority of these responses also went on to discuss the idea that these characters were made to represent the individual's dream-version of themselves. Yet, as one chose their character's race in order to resemble their ideal self, they were less convoluted when it came to choosing their class. Rather than choosing what may have matched their personal preferences, users tended to choose their class as a function of their style of play, picking the class that worked best for their strategies and techniques.

By gaining insight into the psychological factors that influence a user's experience within World of Warcraft, it can be gathered that as video games become more and more interactive, individuals will become more and more enthused with projecting themselves and their ideal sense of self into these virtual environments. This immersion into, and interaction with, the virtual environment leads to a seemingly endless list of psychological and emotional effects. As the video game industry continues to produce newer, innovative, and increasingly interactive virtual environments, the effects of such products on consumers will become all the more prevalent. In looking at the mental processes that consumers exhibit while interacting with these virtual environments, researchers can obtain invaluable information about the effects of these, and how these effects can be monitored and controlled.

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