

# Gender In The WoW Place

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## ***Abstract***

*In this study, we examine the relationship of player gender and preferred character role in the World of Warcraft. The initial assumption was that men were likely to play tanks (i.e. warriors, paladins, druid, etc.), and women were more like to fill the role of healers (i.e. priests, shamans, druids, etc.). For this study, we used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Ultimately, men are just as likely to play a melee class as they are a healing class. Women on the other hand are more likely to play a healer capable class.*

## **Introduction**

World of Warcraft, a Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG), is an interactive world in which players live vicariously through their avatars. Through various quests and battles, a player improves their character to become the strongest possible version of itself. These avatars are customizable from gender to race to class. The creation of these characters is a central aspect of the game and determines much of what a player's capabilities are. Of these potential capabilities, race and class are the two largest determinants. Races provide hereditary skills and attributes. Classes define jobs and combat specialization. For

## Gender In The WoW Place

example, Taurens are physically stronger than Blood Elves, and Blood Elves are more agile.

These specializations become very important in Dungeon Raids and Battlegrounds where players are pitted against monsters or players in long term combat engagements. There are three combat roles in WoW:

- Tanks: damage absorbers
- DPS (Damage Per Second): damage dealers
- Healers: teammate healers

Strategies for each encounter rely on each player fulfilling their role. Players continually strive to use their avatar to best fill these positions. In 2007, Nicholas DiGiuseppe and Bonnie Nardi conducted research on gender and class choice in World of Warcraft. One of their findings was that “females chose warriors, rogues, hunters, and warlocks less often” (DiGiuseppe). When discussing the Priest class, DiGiuseppe claims, “with their supportive healing function, priests may be seen as feminine” (DiGiuseppe). They found in their research that gender affected class choice. This made us think about how combat roles could affect decision making when it came to real life gender and character class. We wanted to take it a step further and narrow down the research strictly to combat roles. The question is: is there a correlation between gender and combat roles in World of Warcraft. While there are no gender stereotypes or expectations within the game, the ability to customize a character begs the question of whether or not men and women prefer different combat roles. The world of online gaming is undeniably a male dominated society. Social stigmas and customs formed, creating an alternate reality driven by a culture of its own. With a wide range of races, classes, and combat roles there is a question in gender bias in character building.

### **Method**

We collected two datasets for our study, one consisting of survey data from World of Warcraft players (N=582) and the other dataset consisting of qualitative forum interactions (N=48). Whether writing for quantitative or qualitative methods, the MMO community of World of Warcraft requires a certain strategy to extract data from the players. Instead of presenting oneself as a researcher asking questions, the best way to get information is to pose as a player and get a discussion going about one's topic. One will generally get more responses and less trolls in the thread. For our research, a "troll" will be seen as any answer that was posted with the motivations of humor or to lead us astray. Posting on various websites or forums as a different person also helps get a larger variety of answers and help thwart those trying to figure out your actual intentions.

However, sometimes asking a question as a researcher will still get genuine responses. If a website or forum is not flooded with researchers, players may be open to answering interesting questions about one's research. It is important to word one's post with open-ended questions because this will help spark more discussion, generate longer answers, and give more incentive to the players to share their thoughts.

The survey questions were compiled by 45 students in a first-year writing and research course at the University of Denver, a private university in the Western United States, to address a descriptive research question about the attitudes and practices of World of Warcraft players. The anonymous survey was administered through the Qualtrics application, and a link was posted on select internet forums and Twitter. The survey was kept active for 1 week and had 582 usable responses (excluded responses included those who reported under 18 years of age and respondents who did not complete the majority of the questionnaire). By comparing certain

## Gender In The WoW Place

characteristics like gender, player roles, classes, etc., we could use this data to see trends and general tendencies of players in World of Warcraft. Besides looking at role, we wanted to see if there was any relationship between class or race and gender. We tallied the classes for each race based on the data from the 2013 community survey data for each gender. We computed percentages for each class for both male and female, we looked at the responses to the roles of each player. The responses were simply counted and then made into a percentage for tanks, healers, and DPSs for both male and female.

After we gathered the bulk of our quantitative data, we moved onto collecting qualitative data. Our main focus was to use forums to generate responses and conversations about gender and roles within the game. To do this we decided the best places to post were in WoWReach forums and Reddit's World of Warcraft subreddit. Our group split the questions up between each forum so it would seem less obvious we were Researchers if the players happen to visit both sites. In the WoWReach forums we posted the following: "So I decided to make my new character a healer, and so far I hate it. Why do you CHOOSE to play healers in a combat centric game?" This question generated lots of responses and sparked some good debate within the community. We received 20 responses. The question provided an easy opportunity for healers to give reason and insight as to why they enjoy the role and their views of pro and cons of the role itself.

After posting in the WoWReach forums, we went to [reddit.com/r/wow](https://www.reddit.com/r/wow) and posted, "So I take my combat role very seriously, but I feel like most of my guild mates don't. How important is it that you stick to your combat role to be successful in raids?" as well as, "My girlfriend has only ever played casters and healers, and I usually play tanks. Anybody else experience this?" We wanted to get an average of five usable responses per question so we needed to word them

## Gender In The WoW Place

appropriately. On the first question, we received 6 responses while on the second question we received 10 responses. We wanted to generate as much discussion as possible, so we left the questions very open ended and poking fun at mechanics of the game to stir up players.

After we received most of our responses from the World of Warcraft community this way, we decided to experiment with being blunter about our intentions. We saw that most of our questions were getting more responses from the WoW subreddit. So, our group informed the community we were researchers looking to get viewpoints and general thoughts about roles in the game based on the player's gender. The post was worded cautiously, however, and was very laid back saying, "I'm not sure if this is 'kosher'..." and "I know people don't like to answer surveys all the time, so I was hoping I could get a general discussion going about this topic." We also said that any input was appreciated to help generate more responses and viewpoints from the community. We tried to post around late morning/mid-day to help the post be seen by the most people possible.

The responses to the post got a total of 12 comments, almost all being usable for our research. The community was very helpful and even suggested we look at past studies done on the subject. Players seemed to be okay with answering survey related questions as long as they were free to discuss their opinions and branch off from the original question.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative Data**

While we were reviewing our survey results that we noticed three main patterns within each gender. The first pattern we noticed within the female players was in the area of class choice. Seventy-one female players were surveyed. The data of class choice of female players

## Gender In The WoW Place

can be seen in Figure 1.

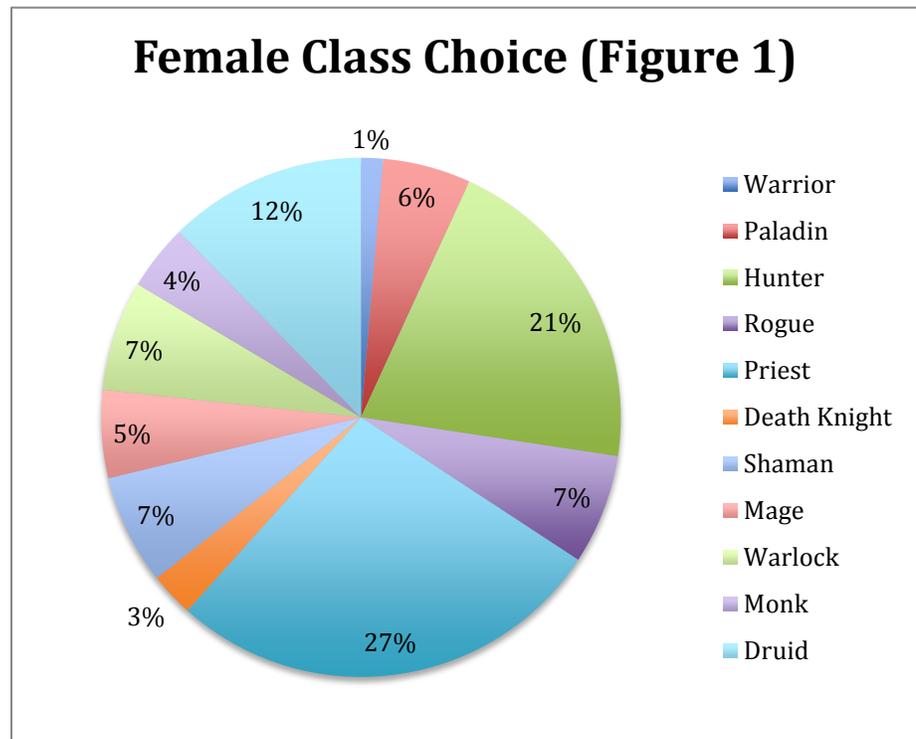
Out of the 71 females, 20 of them had Priests as their main character.

This came out to 28.2%. The next highest number was the Hunter class at 15 female players, which amounted to 21.1%.

Alternatively, the

lowest class represented among the women was Warrior, which came out to only 1 player, at 1.4%. And the next lowest class represented was Death Knight, at 2 players, which amounted to 2.9%. These findings suggest that women are in fact most likely to take on a healing role in the game. The Priest is considered a “support role” to many of the other classes. Although women were most likely to play a Priest, it is still extremely common to see a woman playing a DPS role – a class role that is primarily focused on dealing physical damage. Next, there is the finding that showed women rarely playing Warrior and Death Knight classes. Both Warriors and Death Knights are primarily Tanks and DPS roles. Although it is common to see a woman in a DPS role, our findings show that it is uncommon to see a woman in a Tank role.

Next, we analyzed the division between Caster/Healer classes and Tank/Physical Damage Dealing classes. We divided it as such: Warriors, Paladins, Hunters, Rogues, and Death Knights were considered Tanks and Physical Damage dealers, while Priests, Shamans, Mages, Warlocks,



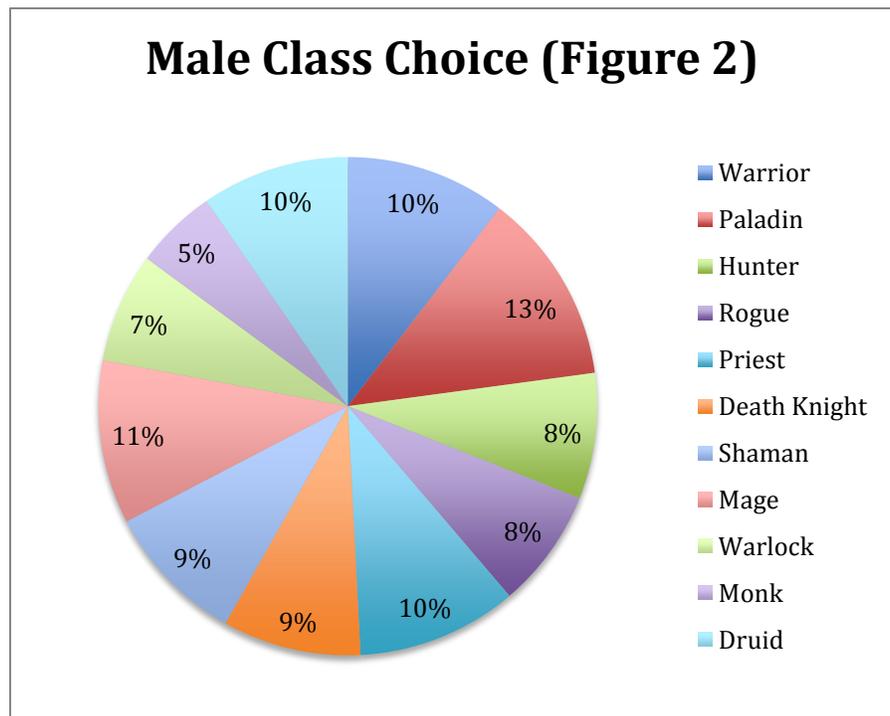
## Gender In The WoW Place

Monks, and Druids were considered Healers and Casters. Our findings showed that 46 out of the 71 female players were more inclined to player Healers or Casters -- about 65%. Only 25 of the 71 female players were Tanks or Physical Damage Dealers – about 35%. Again, we found that female players were more prone to being less physical roles and more support roles.

Finally, we looked at our findings through a purely role-based view. The three possible combat roles are Tank, Healer, or DPS. Due to the overlap in roles – many classes fulfill multiple roles – the numbers are a bit skewed. We divided up the classes into what roles that *could* possibly fill. With this in mind, we found that 19 of the female players could fill Tank roles, 41 could fill Healer roles, and 29 could fill DPS roles. These findings further solidified what we have already found. At 57%, females are mostly inclined to be Healers and finally, at only 26.7%, the least common role for women is the Tank.

Next, let us look at the data collected from the males. We will look through the same patterns of Classes and Roles that we did for the females and see if there is a complementary

pattern. Four-hundred-ninety males were surveyed. The data of class choice among the male players can be seen in Figure 2. Already, it can easily be seen that the class choice among male is much more balanced than the women. But still there are



## Gender In The WoW Place

interesting comparisons to the female data. First, the most popular class among the male players was the Paladin at 61 players, or 12.44%. The next most popular was the Mage at 52, or 10.6%. These numbers show us that male players primarily will play in a potential Tank role as a Paladin. But, men also enjoy playing Casters as Mages. But, even though there is a slight increase of male players playing as Paladins, it simply is not enough to claim that men have a strong inclination to play Tanks. Alternatively, the two least popular classes among the men were the Warlock at 7.1% and the Monk at 5.3%. The Mage, the second most popular, and the Warlock, the second least popular, are both Casters. It is interesting to see them at opposite ends of the spectrum. Although, the Monk *could* fill a healer role, so this may show that men have less of an inclination to be healers than women do. But still, the numbers are too similar to make any leaps or predictions.

The next lens we will look through is the division of Casters/Healers and Tanks/Physical Damage Dealers among the male players. We found that 256 men, 52.2%, were prone to being Casters/Healers while only 234, 47.8%, were Tanks/Physical Damage Dealers. Surprisingly men had a slight inclination towards Casters/Healers. But again, the numbers were simply too close to make a definite answer to our research question.

Finally, we looked at the data from the male players from the combat role point of view. We looked at the possibility of being in a Tank role compared to being in a Healer role. The numbers came out almost perfectly balanced. 230 of the male players, 47%, had the potential to fill the Healer role, while 229 male players, 46.7%, had the potential to fill the Tank role. Similar to the rest of our findings with the male players, the numbers were too close to make any definite statements. While the female players had clear inclinations towards Caster/Healers and

## Gender In The WoW Place

supporting roles, the male players seem to be much more balanced, not being inclined either way.

### **Qualitative Data**

Once our group allowed a few days for players to respond to our questions, we received a peculiar set of findings. The two questions we posted on [reddit.com/r/wow](https://www.reddit.com/r/wow) generated lots of unique user responses. This allowed us to get a broad overview of what kind of roles each gender played. These responses were unexpected, however, and actually showed a trend that women like to play more DPS roles, while men generally were more balanced between the DPS, tank, and healer role. Our group did have thoughts as to why this was, mainly being the minority would speak out more against the silent majority. Our group's post on the Wow Reach forums led to less unique users, but much larger discussions and insightful comments. Users frequently posted long responses with their opinions not only as to what they played, but why they played that role and their general opinions about healers. Our final question was posted on the WoW subreddit to hopefully gain as many unique responses as possible, successfully led to many comments.

The first reddit post was worded as a player who enjoys strict combat roles. The questions stated, "So I take my combat role very seriously, but I feel like most of my guild mates don't. How important is it that you stick to your combat role to be successful in raids?" The goal of this question was to get players to comment about their role, whether it be tank, DPS, or healer, and get a sense of how important player thought about their roles. Two responses were confused about what we meant with "combat role" and asked to further elaborate. One player with the reddit handle of DalekRy responded with a great and elaborate answer. He or she talked about their role in raids and strategies they generally use that go along with their role well. DalekRy also commented, "It works sometimes. It doesn't work other times, but if I need to heal

## Gender In The WoW Place

or tank to win the match, you bet I will.” Other players seemed to agree with DalekRy and usually stick to their roles, but will play another if it would help them win. This post gave us a good view on how player saw roles in game, but didn’t help much with gender preference and trends with roles in game.

Once we had this information, our group posted on reddit again. This time we posed as a curious player who came to realization that there may be some maternal instinct when choosing roles in WoW. The question stated: “My girlfriend has only every played caster and healers, and I usually play tanks. Anybody else experience this?” We had a mix of responses from various players. One player with the reddit handle IntoObsession commented: “My girlfriend only plays casters and healers. All the girls in my raid team play melee DPS. My old co tank was a girl. Soo... Nope, not noticing that.” Another player whose reddit name is JRJathome stated: “I’m a guy who prefers healing over tanking or dps. My guildmaster is a woman who plays a blood DK as her main.” Every other response seemed to be about the opposite of what our group discovered in our quantitative research. This post was also heavily down voted, with a ratio of two up votes to nine down votes. Initially we were confused about this, but one comment gave us a hint as to why this could be. The comment read:

“I think we need to be careful with this topic not to generalize. If we start attributing classes to “maternal instincts” or calling classes more “manly” or “girly”, it might influence people’s class choices. I’ve personally seen guys play everything, and girls play everything :)” (MountHyjal).

The redditor, who goes by the name of MountHyjal, brings up an interesting point with his or her comment. Players, especially on reddit, seemed to not want to generalize or stereotype roles with gender. This gave us a little hiccup because our group knew based on our quantitative

## Gender In The WoW Place

data that we had been seeing a general trend for women to play more as healers than tanks or DPSs, but we were getting responses from people who disagree with our hypothesis. Our group discussed this matter and came to the conclusion that the minority of players who think this way will tend to post on the forums when this topic comes up. The silent majority is what we were more concerned about and they tend to bypass the question bringing up gender and in game role relation.

Our final question from our original three was posted on the WoWReach forums. We posted a new thread that with the question: “So I decided to make my new character a healer, and so far I hate it. Why do you CHOOSE to play healers in a combat centric game?” We thought this question would bring out some clues as to what kind of players like to play as healers and why. The question received fifteen responses and generated some great discussion about the healing role in WoW. Many players whose WoWReach forum names included Thareon, Verkuzz, Aces, Tyrael, Conchas, and Jihkro all agreed that the role of healing is actually one of the most challenging roles. Conchas goes into detail about how an entire team relies on healers and when a player makes a mistake, the healer gets blamed for the team’s failure quite often (WoWReach). The responders came to a consensus that it takes a thick skin to be healer, requires the ability to micro manage well, and have the willingness to take care of others. These reasons help explain why women may enjoy the healing role because of the sense to care for others and not be taking fire as often as tanks or DPSs. Most of the commenters, in general, just found the healing role to be more satisfying whether they were male or female.

After receiving all the qualitative data from the three questions we decided to post one final question to reddit. Our group decided to be extremely blunt, but welcoming, in a post. We reviled ourselves as researchers taking a writing class about WoW and trying to generate

## Gender In The WoW Place

discussion based on player gender and in game roles. The redditors were helpful and gave us more great information. One player, who went by the reddit handle Toastcleaner, referred us to previous studies and their findings that reinforced our quantitative data. We did again get one response about how dividing roles between genders is “archaic.” The player whose reddit name was fearnostigma suggested a “cooler” paper would “be about how gender isn’t the dividing factor, but rather personality.” The post did get four responses from women, however, all stating they do not play as healers and one redditor by the name of yougococo said, “I stay as far away from healing as possible.” The final post, again, showed how women who do not usually play as healers, tend to speak out over those who do, disrupting more correlated responses between our quantitative and qualitative data.

## Discussion

After our research question was examined and we gathered data and results, we noticed a few things. Additionally, we found many unexpected patterns. One of the unexpected results that came about was the fact that our Quantitative data and Qualitative data did not necessarily match up. Our projections from the quantitative data projected that at minimum 30% of women leaned toward healers. The numbers said one thing, and the forums said another. The discrepancy found in the forums, while not kept void from the discussion, could be explained by vocal outliers. The forums did not represent disinformation, they represented outliers. Another cause for this could be aggressive wording in questions, which prompted anti-prejudiced responses. Women were in fact more likely to play healer capable classes. Whatever the reason, the numbers point toward a bias in women choosing healers. Looking at this trend in a broader spectrum of things, including the growing female population in the World of Warcraft, sets an interesting tone for the future of

## Gender In The WoW Place

the game. Another intriguing find is that men were just as likely to play healer capable classes as melee classes. This went against our original assumption that men would be more likely to play tanks and DPS. Overall, men were much more diverse in their choice of classes.

One factor that may have greatly affected our research was our choice of forums. Being new to World of Warcraft forums, we chose to use the WoW Reach forums. This may be problematic as the WoW Reach forums are not necessarily for the “average” player. The WoW Reach forums are a private server. While most players would use the Blizzard WoW Forums, WoW Reach forums are used by more intense players who don’t want to use the Blizzard forums. This means that some of our forum answers may not be from a good representative sample of World of Warcraft players.

In future research, we would like to use more viable forums in order to find a more representative sample of WoW players. Finding better forums and refining our forums posts may allow for more congruency among the quantitative and qualitative data. We wish to bridge the gap between the qualitative and quantitative data. To do this, we may alter our methods. We may alter our survey in order to ask different questions and be more specific or open-ended.

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