

# **Role Tendencies and Player Identities Within World of Warcraft**

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## **Abstract**

The following research was conducted to gain an understanding of the identities and tendencies of World of Warcraft players that take on certain in-game roles and class types and why they make those choices. Forum posts from the official World of Warcraft forum were collected, analyzed, and coded. Common trends were categorized within the damage, tank, and healing roles, as well as into distinctions between players of melee and ranged classes. Significant relationships between player identities and different tendencies of roles and class types were found and discussed.

## **Introduction**

In many MMORPG's (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), players must choose a role to assume and fulfill within the game. World of Warcraft (WoW) is not unlike other MMORPG's in this way. Players begin WoW with the character creation process which includes selecting a class. The class a player chooses determines what style of play and abilities their character will have access to as they progress through the game. Upon reaching level ten, each class has the choice of three different specializations, each of which fits a certain role in the game. There are three possible group roles in the game including damage (sometimes referred to as DPS), tank, and healer. Players in WoW can join in a group or raid to conquer their enemies, each role having a responsibility within the group. The damage role is responsible for dealing the majority of damage to enemies, the tank role is responsible for absorbing damage and protecting the group, and the healer role is responsible for managing the health and well-being of all group members. Each role offers an important contribution to groups and players ultimately have the choice of the role they choose to fill.

DiGiuseppe and Nardi (2007) have previously conducted research looking at how genders make character choices. They conducted a total of 47 interviews attempting to discover what kinds of characters each gender chooses and why they make those choices. The study found that the most common influence on character choice was to fulfill a role within a team. Ian Mosley (2010) also conducted a study looking at the relationship between players' personalities and their online behaviors. He administered an online survey to 136 participants that inquired about in-game behaviors and player personalities. Mosley found that MMORPG populations, such as WoW players, can be used as representations of their populations. I aim to further DiGiuseppe and Nardi's exploration of player role within a group, while also using Mosley's

findings regarding MMORPG's as representations their populations to discover what types of players fill certain in-game roles and what influences them to make the role and class choices that they do.

### **Method**

My research method involved collecting posts from the official World of Warcraft forum and performing a qualitative analysis on the posts. During the process of collecting a total of 108 forum posts, I used 13 different search terms relating to the research question, having 5 produce threads containing posts used in my results. The 5 search terms which produced results that I used were as follows:

- Search 1: "Class personalities"
- Search 2: "Why play healer"
- Search 3: "Why play DPS"
  - Search 3's criteria produced 2 threads from which posts were collected.
- Search 4: "Why do you like melee"
- Search 5: "Why do you like ranged"

There were 8 posts collected from the thread found using Search 1, 30 posts collected from the thread found using Search 2, 52 posts collected from the two threads found using Search 3 (18 coming from one and 34 coming from the other), 5 posts collected from the thread found using Search 4, and 13 posts collected from the thread found using Search 5.

There were 8 search terms that did not produce any threads which I used in my results. The 8 search terms that were not included in the results were as follows: "class role personalities", "role player personalities", "dps, healer, tank personalities", "class player

personalities”, “caster v melee”, “why play caster”, “why play melee”, and “why do you like ranged classes”.

Overall, my research included 13 search terms, 5 of which produced results used. The 5 searches produced 6 different threads, and from the 6 threads, 108 forum posts were collected.

After collecting the forum posts, I took extensive notes on the content, types, and trends of the posts to notice any patterns or possible comparisons. Next, I coded the posts according to specific in-game roles and playing styles. I coded the results of my research into the following categories for comparison and analysis: Tendencies of the Damage Role, Tendencies of the Tank Role, Tendencies of the Healer Role, Tendencies of Melee Classes, and Tendencies of Ranged Classes. Some forum posts included information that was used in multiple categories.

## **Results**

Based on the collection of forum posts, players have a variety of thoughts and opinions on class and role which provide helpful insight to why players assume specific roles in the game. There were patterns found within the forum posts relating to specific player identities and behaviors of damage, tank, and healing roles, as well as differences between players that choose melee and ranged classes.

### **Tendencies of the Damage Role**

There was an overall trend in player posts regarding the characteristics and motivations of players that assume the damage role. Many of the posts explained that dealing damage is more of a relaxed role that holds less responsibility than a support role. For example, Sephiram (2017) stated in his post, “I feel more relaxed as DPS. Even though I could heal, too.” Sephiram continued to elaborate that it is much easier for a group to survive if a DPS dies than if a healer

or a tank were to die. Players that do not wish to have a large amount of responsibility within a group tend to be more attracted to the damage role because it is more relaxing in terms of group-play. Support roles are generally believed to be held more liable in groups than DPS are and receive much more criticism for misdoings. Many players, including Beverde (2017), a blood elf rogue, explained that the high pressure of support roles often causes players to choose a damage dealing role if they are not particularly skilled at playing a healer or tank. Beverde explained the frustration caused by the pressure of support roles' high expectations, "I'm super horrible at tanking and healing, so dps is the only play style for me. I really wanna try healing but ugh I just lose focus sometimes."

In addition to the pressure of the high expectations that healers and tanks are held to, essentially every class begins the game with damage dealing base abilities, making it much easier for players to continue playing the specialization they started the game with rather than trying to become skilled at a different role. Some players made comments in their posts about how protecting a group is not appealing to them, and that killing monsters is simply their main enjoyment of the game, such as Ilockalot (2017), "I am good at killing stuff [and] not so good at keeping everyone alive." These players' main attraction to World of Warcraft is to strike massive blows on the battlefield and defeat their enemies, making dealing damage their priority.

Rather than focusing on keeping a group alive, damage dealing players tend to enjoy perfecting their battle tactics while tracking their statistics. Many players indicated in their forum posts that they love the competitiveness of playing the DPS role, and that being at the top of the damage recount meter is their favorite part of the game. The following quote from a post by Lorsaire (2017) describes why he continues to play the damage role, "I never really stray from DPS, on any character. I guess I like the focus on actually killing things fast, seeing the big

numbers, executing on mechanics... And topping the dps meters.” Many players posts indicated that they enjoy the process of perfecting one damage tactic, or ability rotation, and being an asset to groups because of their high damage output. A small amount of posts indicated that there are a “dime a dozen”, or excess, of damage specialized players and that they do not play the role for that reason. However, some posters viewed the majority of players being damage dealers as a positive. In his post, Mezo (2017) describes how an effective DPS can be just as valuable as a strong healer or tank:

“I felt like a well-oiled machine, and I love delivering results to my raid group. I like the challenge of building a starter kit into a hotrod, and then taking it to the track. It [is] just fun to do. As an aside on the whole "dime a dozen dps" - it's true that by raw numbers, there is a glut of dps compared to other roles. But a dps, especially a ranged dps, who can show up consistently, run mechanics, and outperform the crowd is worth their weight in gold. Guilds are always looking for skilled ranged players who can both pull numbers and run mechanics.”

Other players like Mezo wrote posts describing the competition within damage dealers being like a game within the game as they are always aiming for the top of the damage chart. It is evident that improving characters to reach the top of the competition and focusing on dealing damage to enemies while having limited group responsibility are important aspects of the damage role and its takers.

### Tendencies of the Tank Role

The forum posts also included a category of players that wrote about getting more enjoyment out of playing a support role that promotes the overall success of the group. Many of

these players indicated the most natural feeling role for them as a tank. Several posts described the rush of being the first person to rush into battle and take on an enemy as the appeal of the tank role. For example, Violenthug (2011), who plays a protection warrior, described the intensity of charging into battle as a tank, “GodMode, COME EAT MY SHIELD!”. Other posts also included details regarding the indestructable feeling tank players get from plowing through a battle.

Given that the tank’s role is to lead and protect the whole group in battle, players that discussed taking on the role of the tank naturally tended to enjoy being in control as a leader. There was a common trend among the posts showing that the greater group responsibility of the tank role gives players a sense of control within a group, making it an appealing role to leaders. For example, Gaahr described why he enjoys playing a tank, “I like the fact that I’m at the front, because I feel it gives me some measure of control, and I like how my role slots into the rest of the group.” (2015). Other posts also described the tank’s appeal of being the durable front line and having an influence on the survival of the group.

Because tanks are tougher and more enduring, they generally do not need to depend on other players to survive trying situations, another trend among posts regarding the tank role. Players noted the appeal of being able to take on tough enemies alone, as well as not having to depend on or wait for group members. According to Google’s (2015) post, the advantages of playing a tank include defeating enemies that other roles could not, being able to stay alive independently, and not having to rely on slacking group members. The freedom of independence and ability to lead and protect a group were some of the main trends among posts regarding tanking.

### Tendencies of the Healing Role

Among the posts regarding support roles, there was also a trend of healers playing the role for a general love of protecting their friends and group members. One example of these players was Sevaryn (2015), who posted about why healing appeals to him, “I want to protect my loved one’s from harm.” Several posts also indicated that because they provide protection and management for the whole group, healers tend to be more concerned with the success of the group rather than individual results. A trend showed that a main appeal of the healing role is the feeling of saving a group from sure death and defeating an enemy. The following post by Knit (2015) summarizes the group motivations for players to be a healer:

“As a healer, it makes my day if I can save the day in an impossible situation. I don't care about numbers; healing numbers don't mean the same thing as DPS numbers anyway. For me it really is all about keeping everyone alive.”

Another trend that emerged within the posts showed that players who take on the role of healer tend to like the high pressure and feeling of being needed in a group. Several players stated that having the responsibility of keeping their allies alive is the ultimate thrill of healing. According to a post by Snowfox (2015), healing is the most natural role for her because being able to “fix the group” and solve problems is the most satisfying feeling. Other posts aligned with the ideas of Snowfox, describing how recovering from a disaster is the greatest sense of achievement. Players also noted that playing as a healer is appealing because it is a necessary role and it provides a feeling of being needed. Groups generally have gracious attitudes towards healers because of their importance, a reason many players said they feel welcome in the role. Some players mentioned how the appreciation they receive as a healer can help them with problems outside of the game.

The healing role comes with a variety of responsibilities that, based on the forum posts, appeal to adaptable and patient players. Unlike playing as the damage role, healers must be able to adapt to the damage the group is taking in a specific fight. Several posts commented on the excitement of every healing encounter being unique, including Kellissandra (2015), “I chose healing because I like the challenge of dealing with a new problem each day. I don't like falling into a rhythm and trying to get something perfect.” Because of the necessary adaptability to be an effective healer, not all players are able to take on the role. Several posts explained that every player starts the game dealing damage and can easily continue, but not every player has the patience to be a healer. The variability of trying to protect group members while in high pressure situations is a clear appeal to the players that choose the role of healer.

### Tendencies of Melee Classes

The forum posts also showed a distinction between the motivations of players who choose melee and ranged classes. Posts generally indicated being in the center of action during a fight and seeing a character physically attack with a weapon as appeals of melee classes. Many of the posts regarding playing a melee specialization revolved around themes of the rush from the intensity of close-quarters combat. A post by Goodberry (2016) describes the rush, “[The insanity of combat] is the fun of being melee. Put on the right music for you, and just go with the flow.” Because melee combat is close-quarters, it requires more awareness and movement, which was commonly seen in the posts as an appeal for melee players. Several players stated that they only play melee classes because they get bored with standing back as a ranged class. Hands-on play was a common theme within melee-related posts, however other posts described possible motivations and appeals for players that choose ranged classes.

### Tendencies of Ranged Classes

While certain players wrote about the dullness of playing from a distance as a ranged class, several other posts recognized the calm strategic play style as what makes ranged classes appealing. Posts regarding the appeal to ranged classes generally revolved around the theme of being able to stay distanced from a fight because it gives a calmer, more collected feel. In his forum post, Trigonometry (2016) explained why he prefers to use ranged classes, "I end up focusing on my immediate surroundings...Dealing damage at range and healing is definitely less "busy." In addition to being able to see the fight, several players commented that they simply enjoy the visuals and animations of ranged abilities, such as Felynis (2017), a blood elf mage. Other posts explained a certain satisfaction in seeing a character's abilities projectile towards a target and hit it. The general theme among posts seemed to characterize ranged classes as being a calmer and more distanced playstyle which provides better spacial awareness during fights.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to discover an understanding of the identities and tendencies of players that take on certain in-game roles and class types and why they make those choices. I found significant relationships between player identities and five different categories of roles and class types. The results are discussed below.

#### **Group Roles (Damage, Tank, and Healer)**

I found that the different responsibilities of each role in combination with varying desired play styles of players is what determines what kinds of players adopt certain roles in World of Warcraft. The damage role has minimal group responsibilities, giving it wide appeal to players looking for a more relaxed playstyle. Damage specialized players tend to play what they are comfortable with and will become an expert in executing familiar battle tactics. Players that

gravitate towards support roles do so because of the increased responsibilities within a group. These players focus on a much more group-orientated playstyle and their success comes from the success of others. The tank role appeals to players that are natural leaders. The role offers durability and independence, along with the ability to protect others. The players that enjoy playing as a tank the most are representations of those leadership characteristics. The healer role has the responsibility of keeping a group alive and managing the varying aspects of each combat encounter. This role appeals to players who enjoy group protection/management and problem solving. Overall, the players that assume the healer role represent the protective and controlling characteristics of the role.

#### Class Types (Melee v. Ranged)

I found a relationship between players' mentalities towards combat and the class type they choose to play as. Players that choose melee classes are more satisfied by being directly in the combat of a fight and seeing the swing of a physical weapon making contact. Melee players are more movement-based and prefer maneuvering a fight up-close. Players that choose ranged classes are more strategic and spacially based. They prefer to be distanced from the action in order to see the entire fight. It is possible that the choice between a melee and ranged class can be explained by whether the player is more hands-on or visual/spacial.

### **Conclusion**

#### Limitations

There were some limitations to the research, one being that in World of Warcraft, some classes do not have the choice of a tank or a healer role. There was also only one research

method used and the results of that method only included 108 forum posts from one forum website. Future research into this field could include more methods and a larger sample of posts.

### Significance

The findings show that people will generally take a role that they are comfortable with. Given the responsibilities of the different roles in World of Warcraft, certain players gravitate towards the roles in which they will perform best and feel natural. Exploring the tendencies of the players of each role has helped demonstrate the fact that people tend to assume roles which best align with their identity and skills. In future research, these findings could be applied outside of World of Warcraft. For example, conducting research on work place roles could show a relationship between workers' identities and job appeals and their position of employment.

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