

The Holy Trinity: Creating Definitions, Defining Creations

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Abstract

The notion of the holy trinity of Massively Multi-Player Online (MMO) games is a nebulous and often misunderstood concept due to a vast array of disparate definitions, if individuals are even familiar with the term. Many game scholars and players might be familiar with the concept of the holy trinity of games, but unfamiliar with the use of the term, even though it is gaining in popularity on websites and game forums. The player roles of damage per second (or DPS), the Healer, and the Tank comprise the holy trinity. While these three roles are the core requirement of almost every group endeavor within MMOs and multi-player games, no distilled definition of these roles yet exists.

Utilizing qualitative research methods, a content analysis of four of the most popular MMO game titles is created through analysis of the themes and syntax on the MMO websites describing player classes and roles. Viewed through the lens of the game developer, the content analysis identifies those attributes the MMO game developers use as characteristics of the DPS, Healer, and Tank player roles for their games. These themes include such topics as: defensive strategies, types of attacks, names of healing spells or abilities, and so forth. From the content analysis a new, comprehensive definition emerges to enrich scholarly understanding.

The expectations of game designers and players may be appreciated as a dialog of communication and miscommunication on both parts, since the design of DPS, Healer, and Tank roles may be inconsistent with the desired characteristics of individual players fulfilling these roles. This sort of disconnection between expectations, design, communication, and performance is investigated with an emphasis on not only the need for defining the holy trinity

roles, but also how the varied expectation of the players fulfilling those roles effects the success of the group, especially in a distributed team.

Keywords: DPS, definition, game, healer, MMO, qualitative, role, tank.

The Holy Trinity: Creating Definitions, Defining Creation

I was still a boy in 1977 when I brought the first one home. Hands shaking with anticipation, I yanked it out of the brown paper bag and can still remember that new book smell that wafted up as I peeled back the box cover of my brand new Dungeons and Dragons role playing game. I remember the wax crayons that came in the box, used to fill in your own numbers on the odd shaped plastic dice. I remember the excitement at gathering with my friends and building characters together. Still nowhere near approaching men yet, John, Peter, Greg and I waded through hoards of goblins and orcs, we slayed the dragon, we saved the world and then, next weekend, we did it all over again. The impact of this fantasy role playing game, created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, persists and continues to influence multiple genres of games still today.

Why am I speaking about this classic table top game in a paper about MMOs? The answer to that question is simply because the core components that comprise the roles of the holy trinity are rooted in its pages. However, before we begin to discuss its parts, maybe a better question to ask this early would be what exactly is the holy trinity of gaming? The answer to that question is not a simple one.

There currently exists no scholarly definition of the exact nature of the holy trinity of gaming. One possibility as to why, is that perhaps the genre of MMOs is still so relatively young. Maybe in defining the holy trinity there is confusion on the part of game designer and the player. A definitive answer to this question though might enable game designers to create a more meaningful play experience for their players. It is possible that while the holy trinity by design is included in an MMO, that information is never clearly communicated to the player. A player confused about what game designers place into the game as game mechanics and how players are to utilize those mechanics to perform various roles within a team of other players could lead to frustration and dissatisfaction. That causal relationship between the miscommunication and the dissatisfaction may also occur when player perception of a role diminishes over time due to players not meeting other players' perceived expectations of how that role should be performed. Loss of players and profits result when players become so dissatisfied that they would rather play less or quit entirely.

Lack of a common definition for scholars creates a problem for understanding and allows for ambiguity to occur. Since words may have different connotations and denotations, and the MMO game is still a new genre of online gaming, many people are unfamiliar with the holy trinity in part or in whole. Since these words may be used

in various contexts with different meanings, a clear definition of the words in relation to player roles would reduce ambiguity and facilitate studies on role performance and evaluation.

MMO games are also sites of potential social learning, allowing players to perform their roles and socialize with others in a safe, non-lethal environment. Due to the nature of MMO games, interaction between players is a certainty, giving individuals the opportunity to engage in expression. Player roles not only allow a player to overcome obstacles in the game, but allow players a way to interact with other individuals from potentially all over the world, thus creating a space for social learning.

There is an important distinction that needs to be made between a multi-player game and an MMO. The exact definition for both is outside the scope of this paper as each could easily expand into its own research topic. However, for the purposes of this paper, a multi-player game is a game where two or more people, called players, play with a set of rules with an established beginning, middle and end to the game. The game may be played online or offline, using a computer, set of computers, or game console such as an Xbox, Wii or Playstation3. The players may work cooperatively or competitively to achieve goals or objectives.

A Massively Multi-Player Online game, or MMO, again for the purposes of this paper, is a game using a set of rules where thousands of individuals, called players, may simultaneously sign into the same online, persistent virtual space to interact and collaborate with other players to experience lore, game economics, elements of culture such as customs and etiquette, and participate in pre-scripted tasks called quests, raids, flashpoints or instances. In an MMO, players take on roles to accomplish these various tasks.

There were four MMOs that were reviewed for this paper. As to why only four were reviewed, it was a simple matter of logistics. There simply was not enough time to incorporate additional MMOs in the time allotted for this research project. But of all the MMOs that are currently available, I believe the four selected are excellent examples of the genre and provide a solid foundation from which we can begin to derive our definition.

The first of the MMOs chosen is Everquest. It was selected because, from an anthropological approach, it became the first widely popular fantasy based MMO. The game has been continuously played since 2001, clearly standing the test of time for any video game. Everquest currently has both subscription and free to play formats available for players and established The holy trinity as a design concept in MMOs.

The next MMO chronologically chosen is World of Warcraft. There are many reasons this MMO was chosen but first among them is that it is far and away the most popular western MMO to date. It has been

continuously played since it launched in 2004 to the thrill of millions upon millions of players worldwide. World of Warcraft is a subscription format MMO and continues to be instrumental in solidifying the three roles that comprise the holy trinity.

A recent addition to the genre of MMOs is Star Wars: The Old Republic. Originally launched in 2011 with a subscription format, it has since moved to the free to play model with micro-transaction upgrades remaining available to its players. Star Wars: The Old Republic was created with the holy trinity firmly established as a design concept for group based content.

Finally, Guild Wars 2 is the last MMO considered for this project. Scheduled to launch a few weeks from the submission of this paper, this fantasy based sequel MMO will be free to play from the start. Game designers for Guild Wars 2 are taking the first baby steps to break out of the holy trinity model of group based content with its “class-less” skill based characters having more of a race centric feel.

So, to begin to answer the question of what is the holy trinity, it is a set of three player roles designed to work in conjunction with one another in order to successfully navigate the group based content of most MMOs. As its name implies there are three parts to the holy trinity; the Tank role, the Healer role and the Damage Per Second or DPS role and as one might guess, each role has a distinct and important job to perform in order for the group as a whole to succeed.

The player acting in the capacity of the Tank role is responsible for gaining the attention of the non-player character (NPC) or group mob of NPCs by threatening or “pulling” opponents towards the group. It is usually the Tank role within a group that is responsible for initiating combat with the permission of the group to which the Tank belongs. For the duration of the conflict, it falls to the Tank to then maintain the attention of the NPC, keeping the NPC focused on damaging only the Tank and not the less sturdy members of its group.

Exactly how the Tank performs his role varies from MMO to MMO and is based largely on the mechanics for how an NPC targets a player within an MMO. To further complicate the matter, those targeting mechanics are also based on sub-mechanics like threat and aggro. Most MMOs have a mechanic by which the NPC perceives the player, or players, as a threat. Most also have a mechanic in place to prioritize multiple threats by how aggressive (hence the term aggro) those threats are being. Using the skills available to the Tank, it is that roles responsibility to remain the most aggressive target to the NPC, and as a result remain the most important target to that NPC for a

conflict. When it is done properly, the NPC ignores lesser threats (like the rest of the Tank's party) and does its level best to eliminate the Tank.

Establishing yourself as the sole focus of an NPC brings with it a whole set of problems, not the least of which is the fact that the role of the Tank is taking all of the damage from the NPC. The Tank role is generally filled by a class or race capable of withstanding the physical pounding that is the staple of this role. However, even Tanks have limits. When those limits are tested, it falls to the second role in the holy trinity, the Healer, to keep the Tank alive and able to continue to focus on the job of being the Tank.

The player within the group acting in the capacity of the Healer is responsible for restoring the health or damage that is inflicted by the NPC. The mechanics for how the Healer accomplishes that goal vary widely but include skills or spells that heal a small amount quickly or a larger amount but might take longer to activate or cast. Management of those activation or casting times play a large part in the success or failure of the Healer role as many have a cooldown, or an amount of time it takes the skill or spell to recharge, before it can be used again. Many MMOs will also give its Healer roles the mechanics for preventing or mitigating the amount of damage that can be done to those members of its party. It usually falls to the Healer to utilize those skills and spells that enhance their party member's ability to deal damage to an NPC. These systems of mechanical "buffing" and "debuffing" seriously augment the significance of the role of the Healer in a group.

Unfortunately, in most MMOs, the amount of healing performed to other players involved in a conflict is a factor that the NPC uses to calculate the threat of multiple targets. It is very possible for a careless Healer to find itself the new main target of a very angry NPC, to be followed shortly by a very angry Tank in that Healer's group. Okay, so the Tank gets the attention of the NPC, and the Healer heals the Tank so the Tank can keep the attention of the NPC. However, the Healer has limits to both the amount of healing it is allowed to do and how quickly the Healer can utilize those skills and spells to do the healing. And generally, once combat is initiated, the NPC will not stop. That all adds up to mean that even if the Tank is able to constantly maintain the attention of the NPC, the Healer is eventually not going to be able to keep up with the amount of damage the Tank receives by the NPC. Enter the role of our third member of the holy trinity, the Damage Per Second, or DPS role.

The player acting in the capacity of the DPS role is responsible for dishing out enough damage to kill the NPC that is the focus of the group conflict. A seemingly simple task until one realizes that the DPS role walks a razor's edge when performing its role well. As the sole source of damage to an NPC, you would think the DPS would

want to hit first, hit hard and just not let up until the NPC was defeated. However, the damage received by the DPS is another factor in the NPC calculating the threat of the entire party attacking it. While it is true that the DPS will want to do as much damage as possible in the quickest time possible, if the DPS replaces the Tank as the dominant threat in the group, then the group's Tank loses threat as the NPC switches its focus to the generally much less durable DPS. Conversely, if the DPS does not perform enough damage quickly enough, then the Healer will run out of its ability to support the Tank. Without the support of the Healer, the Tank is killed by the NPC. Then, with this delicate balance lost, the NPC is usually able to quickly and brutally kill the rest of the much less Tank-like party. Trust me, it's just not pretty.

Many times a group just does not function as expected (Ducheneaut and Moore, 2012). Failure may occur if the Tank pulls too many opponents at once, if the group is not ready for the encounter, if the DPS does not do enough damage before the Tank or Healer dies, if the Healer runs out of power, mana, or energy which results in the death of the Tank or if additional opponents join the combat. Failure of players to enact their roles up to the expectations of the group then places stress on group members, leading to aggressive commentary, players quitting the group, or other social sanctions against group members who are seen as performing their roles badly. Trust me, this isn't pretty either.

When this intricate dance of a functioning Holy Trinity is performed well in a group, there is nothing as satisfying to a gamer. The three roles have to work together simultaneously and in harmony with multiple moving parts that have to all be tracked by the players of the roles. It is a skill that veteran players learn to develop over a series of multiple conflicts and might take as long as a few weeks, or even a few months to get right.

Just to keep things interesting for their players, many developers have taken to adding mechanics that require subtle adjustments to these roles. Just one of the many examples would be an NPC that was only "damaged" by being healed. What role does the DPS perform in a group when the only way to defeat the NPC is to "heal" it to death?

A player's role within the context of a group is a decision that must be considered from the beginning steps a player takes with most MMOs. This choice is generally made prior to any gameplay whatsoever. It sets the player along a path towards not only their role within a group, but as an identity moniker for other players of that MMO, in that it becomes part of the player character's identity. Much like when a person in life says, "Hello, my name is Will and I am a teacher," in an MMO you could see, "Hello, my name is Hippocrates and I am a Healer."

One of the distinguishing features of the role a player performs in an MMO that is different than real life is that no matter how impulsive, self-sacrificing, mean, or greedy the act, the player never dies or faces a setback (Kelly 2, 2004). Unlike roles in life which carry significant penalties for behaving in a deviant way, a Tank in an MMO who rushes head-long into a group of a hundred skeletons faces nothing more than the anger of the group members when their characters all “die.” The designers, however, do not have a fail-safe mechanism to stop player characters from such foolhardy decisions.

Male and female players show significant differences in their play. Female players average ten hours more per week than their male counterparts and are less likely to make plans to quit an MMO (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, and Yee, 2009). Also, females are less likely to be either physically or verbally aggressive in their MMO play. Males typically had more experience with various MMOs than women. This suggests that it is the male player who must be wooed into continuing to play the game, and it is possible that maintaining a higher satisfaction with the game may result from better role definition.

In MMOs the NPCs act as the narrators of the backstory. It falls to them to teach players the designer sanctioned game lore (Stern, 2002). Oddly these important NPCs are often ridiculed or even ignored by player characters. However, it is one of the many jobs of NPCs to deliver quests, and by doing so, keep the hundreds of plotlines constantly moving forward. As a result of their tireless work, the lore elements of the game allow players to understand the story of the game and, possibly more important, allow the players to envision the importance of their role within the story. In way of example, a healer might envision the gods it prays to and envision its role as a benevolent member of the game community based on the quest line he was sent on by an NPC in the starting area he was assigned to by virtue of its race, faction or class chosen prior to participating in any gameplay. This important design element is one way in which game designers are able to ensure that the holy trinity and each of its roles by players in their MMO, are properly communicated and understood. As previously stated, with better communication comes higher satisfaction. Higher satisfaction then equates to better retention of players, especially those sensitive, temperamental and apparently elusive male players.

The roles presented by The holy trinity and their importance to MMOs are contested by some players, a contributing factor as to why we have yet to see a concrete scholarly definition of its roles. Some players have expressed that while the roles of Tank and DPS are integral to dealing with an MMOs group based content, the role

of healing, and other roles that dispense beneficial or hindering mechanics are merely support, and as a result of lesser importance.

The integral roles for a game's design are important, in that the game mechanics must be designed with these roles in mind. For example, the types of roles and the number of players expected to fulfil those roles may be tested by quality testers, and yet limitations on how many integral roles should exist in a group may never be explained to the players. This has the potential to lead to confusion and uncertainty on the part of the players for creating groups that wish to tackle game content together.

As a result, "support" roles tend to have a negative connotation to some players. Even though team roles exist, especially in much larger MMO teams like a forty player raid or a 25 player instances, require support roles that do not neatly fit within the holy trinity but rather exist as a hybrid somewhere in between two or even all three of the roles attributed to The holy trinity. For example, some players in these large groups may be tasked with performing the role of a DPS, until such time as a specific event in the combat happens (like if the Tank ever drops below 50% health) and then that player is asked to switch to the role of Healer and assist with keeping the Tank alive and well.

Successful MMO game designers are conscious of the need for this type of support role and in addition to creating pure Trinity classes or races, that only have the ability to fulfil one of The holy trinity's roles, they include classes or races that are a hybrid of roles and able to at a moment's notice adjust to a groups changing needs. These support roles are often referred to as an Off-Tank, an Off-Healer or to a lesser degree, Off-DPS. These secondary roles are often considered by designers when constructing large group conflicts and add a level of complexity to combat that can be daunting to the newly initiated MMO player but when utilized properly by a group can greatly enhance the game experience of each of the players within the group and the chance of success for the group as a whole.

However, the similarity of the player's personalities and their character does not have a significant impact on how enjoyable the game experience for the player is, nor does the complexity of the character's backstory (Tyshen, McIlwain, Brolund and Hitchens, 2007). Additionally, simpler visual models did not significantly change player enjoyment either. All of this has significant implications for player roles in that if players are just as satisfied with a rich, descriptive backstory that explains what it means to play the role of the Tank, Healer or DPS, there is no reason for that information to remain such a mystery for players.

Lore in an MMO such as who is the king, who controls which territory and why, and so forth, is often explained not only through text or NPC conversation, but also through visual cues. Guild Wars 2 has a race called Norn. In their lands, the game designers have created a harsh ice-covered world with huge wooden houses, fur rugs in front of roaring fireplaces, and brown wooden kegs surrounding the huge humanoid models of Norns wearing medieval Viking-style clothing. This tells the player visually that the lore of the Norn people in game will be similar to Viking lore, allowing players who take on various roles to know how they should appear to others within the context of their culture. A Norn Tank, then, would probably be expected to use a shield and a one-handed weapon or maybe a giant two-handed axe. The Norn Tank would wear the heavy armor most commonly worn by other Tanks, but it would be adorned with runes and furs, much like the NPC's who are wearing the same fashion in the Norn starting area.

In World of Warcraft the starting areas reflect the factions within the game and provide lore which the player interacts with both intentionally and unintentionally (Chan, Whitman, and Baumer, 2009). Each of the starting areas of the four MMOs of Everquest, World of Warcraft, Star Wars: The Old Republic and Guild Wars 2 showcase the faction, roles, and identities in which the game designers expect players to perform. And while it may be a cathartic experience for role-players to enact these performances as Chen, Whitman, and Baumer state, it may also lead to role confusion since the exact nature of the roles of the Tank, the Healer, and the DPS are never explicitly described and most of the cues about what classes wear which type of armor and perform what role are so visually displayed rather than textually spelled out for players.

“A good group is one that is balanced in terms of the classes that can play these roles” (Ducheneaut and Moore, 2012). This sort of design strategy occurs when a quest, combat, etc. is unbalanced for a group of similar roles to overcome. This creates a desire in players to find a more efficient strategy to overcome the obstacle, such as finding members who do not fulfill the same role in the group, or who will not desire the same items, loot, etc. based on their role. In the case of Everquest for example, a DPS of the mage class wears light cloth armor, so if a group chooses to work together they might refuse to include another DPS who also wore cloth armor to avoid the inevitable conflict of who should receive better cloth armor when it is found in game. This is a case where the role and the class of the player can change not only how the group functions, but how the players interact with one another, and their level of satisfaction with the group.

Players use computer games, construct tools such as player modifications, or “mods” and computer mediated communication such as forums to reflect on the game (Ang, Zaphiris, and Wilson, 2010). When players talk about the games online, construct mods or additional fan material such as player novels, artwork, or cartoons, and add them to the game webpages or other Internet webpages, they are continuing to perform their roles or interact socially in such a way as to produce creative artifacts not only about themselves and the game, but also about their collective experience.

The experiences of players added to game webpages then influences game designers and future content. Players expressing the desire for a more graphically attractive game on the original Guild Wars forums led to Guild Wars 2 being designed as one of the most attractive MMOs. All of this feedback thus becomes cyclical, allowing players to perform their roles, talk about their experiences, imagine new design elements for the game, and participate in game development. At the same time, game designers see comments from their players, gain new insights about what might be needed in their game, and uncover elements which satisfy or frustrate players.

Players must abide not only by the rules set into the game by designers, such as who may loot goods from whom and who it is possible to kill such as NPCs or PCs, but also the rules of what each class or character may have as skills. Typical game design choices found in MMOs for managing many players include such things as guilds where only certain members may add or take out items from a guild bank, add or remove members from the guild, or decide who may go on important quests, raids, or missions. (World of Warcraft Website, 2004)

Rolecoding, which means the “security, privacy, access control, group membership and role playing” (Bainbridge, 2010) may take place on game forums, whereby players or guilds seek others to go on missions, quests, or raids, or join a guild. The expressions of rolecoding may for example say, “Tank seeks guild for late night raiding, Eastern Standard Time.” Individuals who perceive themselves as a Tank might suggest a raiding group or guild for the player to join, or might see the posting player as a potential threat. The messages posted to the forum might contain any number of potential meanings, but the shared meaning remains that the person who posted to the forum expects to play the role of the Tank and therefore identifies as a “Tank.”

A study on what created anger in World of Warcraft players found that one of the four anger-producing situations was when a player did not perform their group role to the expectation of other players (Barnet, Coulson,

and Foreman, 2010). The anger of non-performance of a role within a group is seen in many World of Warcraft player forums, but also on the other MMO forums studied in this paper as well.

Salen and Zimmerman state that there are three types of rules found within games; operational rules, constitutive rules and implicit rules (Crawford, 2012). Operational rules are simply the rules that exist so that play may occur. Constitutive rules are the logical and mathematical structures which underlie the game. An example of this would be the computational processes which allow damage to be done, armor to mitigate the damage, and how fast the player's avatar may move. Implicit rules are the unwritten, but nonetheless important rules such as whom may invite whom into a group, how many of each role may be in a group and who will lead them.

Issues with roles and rules and how they are negotiated become problematic for players, since only implicit rules may be changed. Game designers have set the operational and constitutive rules, and to some extent, even many implicit rules. For example, Star Wars: The Old Republic includes flashpoints, which are dynamic missions for a group of four players with a specific goal to be reached within a certain amount of time. The implicit rule of any group choosing to play through a flashpoint is to have one player take the role of the Tank, one player take the role of the Healer and the other two roles be filled by DPS. The player is never given any information that explains that this group configuration is necessary, and yet players expect this to be the case because groups who use this role configuration typically perform better and faster than other group. Thus, even though the game designers did not create this role configuration, players have chosen to create a new, unwritten rule that any flashpoint group will contain one Tank, one Healer and two DPS.

Aspects of trust and teamwork in MMOs have been studied and found to provide spaces for trust and social support unlike any other (Ratan, Chung, Shen, and Williams, 2010). Game developers could incorporate more of this by using voice chat and encouraging players to talk more about themselves, thus promoting trust, teamwork, and friendliness in the game.

These design elements in turn could foster role development whereby more players who understand the expectations of their MMO game could teach new players their role, the expectations involved by the MMO game community, and allow for mistakes with fewer peer sanctions. This sort of attention to not only the mechanics behind the roles of the game, but the desired gameplay of players fulfilling those roles would be advantageous to both overcoming obstacles in the game and possibly inducing higher satisfaction of players with the game as well.

According to Voulgari and Komis, two categories of skills and knowledge emerged from their studies of MMOs (Voulgari and Komis, 2010). The first is the interaction of the game-related knowledge and skills. The second is interpersonal skills including communication and negotiation. Game-related knowledge stems from the design of the tasks within the MMO, is shared between players, the environment, and is different from game resources. Interpersonal skills, though, may be supported by the design of the tasks and through cooperative or competitive communication between players.

In reviewing the data collected from all four MMOs related to the role of the Tank, there were a few things that immediately stood out. Chiefly among them was that the Tank engaged the enemy directly from the front. While it was in the group's best interest, often even strategically sound advice, for the others in the group to engage the enemy from the side or rear, all agreed that it was the Tank's responsibility to gain and keep the attention of the enemy by engaging it directly. There are even entire strategies adopted by some players that involve the Tank turning larger targets away from the group, thus turning any potential area of effect or splash damage from the enemy away from the group as well.

The role of Tank requires the heartiest and durable of classes and races available in the MMO. Additionally, these sturdy roles often have the capability to reinforce their already advanced health or armor with skill and spells specifically designed to assist the Tank in performing its role better.

All of the MMOs agree that the Tank role exists for the purpose of receiving damage simply so that the other members of their party do not. To assist the Tank in this capacity, designers usually have bestowed the Tank roles with the heaviest and most durable armors available in game. However, this delicate game balance is usually maintained by granting the Tank the ability to take the additional punishment from an enemy, but still requiring the role of Healer in order to function properly within the context of a group.

With regard to the data related to the role of Healer in all MMOs, I found that the one common thread was that of augmentation. Each individual MMO varies as to the specifics of what the role of Healer is responsible for augmenting, but only after they all agree on health. It seems a simple statement to make, but everyone agrees that a healer's primary role is to heal damage received from enemy and environment. Now, once they have all come together on that one point, they diverge once again to stress the importance of augmenting other areas including armor, skills and spells. I feel that the primary reason for the existence of so many arguments related to the

importance of the Healer within The holy trinity versus their demotion to a mere support role outside the trinity are fuelled by the multiple divergent secondary skill and spell sets of the Healer roles in so many MMOs.

While the data varies marginally from game to game, all of the MMOs reviewed seem to agree on the role of the DPS. Simply stated, it is the job of the DPS to inflict damage on the group's enemies with the intent of killing them as fast as possible. Strategically there are roles better suited to inflicting that damage in melee range and others designed to do the same job from a distance outside the melee range of the enemy. Different MMOs also focus more on damage from various sources such as via weapon, skill or spell, but most everyone is in agreement that the role of DPS has one job. That job is to deal out a high amount of Damage Per Second.

These are the initial findings of what the holy trinity of gaming means, and in particular, DPS, Tank and Healer. Some interesting aspects of each of these roles which defy the consensus on these definitions include examples such as the light armor wearing Tank found in Star Wars: The Old Republic, the DPS who also heals in the Shadow Priest subclass of World of Warcraft, and the Mesmer class in Guild Wars 2 who is a DPS role but also may heal itself. These breaks from the standard consensus of the three primary roles found in MMO games present divergent cases from the typical classes, but even in each case, the players understand which roles they are meant to fill in a group.

Players of MMOs should understand what role a group expects of them. Further, in the case of role confusion, or importance placed on integral versus support roles, an impetus for communication between players is called for, since miscommunication about roles and importance may affect not only the ability of the player to fulfil the role, but the player's satisfaction in the group. Group dissatisfaction is a consequence found within every MMO studied for this work when players either did not fulfil the role others expected or did not understand the importance of their role. For example, one Healer in a raid in World of Warcraft was the fourth Healer in a 25 person raid and was asked to act as DPS until the Tank fell below 25% health, and then to heal the Tank. When the Healer failed to heal at the specified 25% mark, he was abjured by his guild, forcibly removed from the raid, and unkind remarks were made about him before he quit voice chat. Examples of such failures to live up to the expectations of other players are frequent in chat rooms, game forums, and player blogs. The effort of learning the role and expectations of players may prevent the dissatisfaction and humiliation impressed by other MMO players.

Four of the most popular MMO game titles were analyzed to find the themes and syntax on the MMO websites describing player classes and roles, along my understanding of the roles from the perspective of an

ethnographic participant-observer. This case study provides insight into what the players of MMO games believe to be the themes which define the roles found in the holy trinity. The rich description from players and developers, through the lens of my research and time spent studying these MMOs led to a consensus opinion of what these three roles of Tank, DPS, and Healer mean. Tanks are formidable, frontal assault warriors who usually wear the heaviest armor and have skills, abilities, and spells at their disposal to prevent damage to the group. The DPS has the job of doing more damage than the other two roles, with the best DPS roles being neither ranged or melee, but viewed solely based on the damage done to a target. The job of the Healer is more complicated because the Healer must heal damage to the group, but none of the MMOs shared the same understanding of how a Healer should augment the group, whereas all agreed that Healers should do some sort of augmentation. The designer and player consensus as to what these roles mean the possibility for players to understand what these roles mean and what to expect from other players.

This work is an initial case study in four MMOs. Further research into more MMOs, a content analysis of player's and developer's forums, and a triangulation of the work with interviews of players are needed to more clearly define these roles. Role subdivision is another area for study, with ranged and melee DPS roles, hybrid role expectations and switching between roles in a game as additional topics for study. This is the first in a series of case studies to explore the meanings behind roles which exist, yet are often taken for granted in games. These roles and the players who fill them are the lifeblood of any MMO. Only when players understand their roles and communicate effectively to others about their expectations, though, will the game be a rewarding, satisfying experience for all group members.

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