

# STRUCTURAL ROLES IN MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMES: A CASE STUDY OF GUILD AND RAID LEADERS IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

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## ABSTRACT

*Role is an under-studied topic in research on virtual game worlds, despite its centrality in the ubiquitous term “massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG).” In this article, we report on a study of the role concept and its relevance to virtual worlds, with emphasis on the MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW). In particular, we focus on the concept of structural role, a term introduced to delineate a certain kind of social actor that carries greater-than-average responsibility for facilitating the diffusion of culture across interlocking groups. Beginning with a brief discussion of structural roles, this paper draws on ethnographic research in a raiding guild and interviews with hardcore WoW players to investigate the roles of guild and raid leaders in building and maintaining*

*collaborative group play. Our study explored not only the expectations and obligations for players in key structural positions, but also specific processes through which they were embodied in everyday life online. Data show that an interest or willingness to learn the intricacies of game-play, to take responsibility for players' emotional well-being, and to manage a shared definition of the situation were all basic components of the guild and raid leaders' roles, and guild or raid success was often reducible to the extent to which leaders mastered these components.*

**Keywords:** Frame; guild; massively multiplayer online game; MMORPG; raid; role; virtual world; World of Warcraft

## ROLES AND THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Traditional sociological definitions characterize roles in terms of their functional attributes. Individuals inhabit status positions (e.g., guild leader, girlfriend, healer) that exist within a social system and which have expectations and obligations attached to them (Parsons, 1952). A role in this sense has to do with stereotypical representations of what an individual in a certain status position does. An interactionist conception of role recognizes that these expectations and obligations are not static external structures that impinge upon an individual inhabiting the role (Dolch, 2003). Rather, individuals purposefully act in ways that project to others a desired impression. Individuals understand the expectations for their behavior in a particular situation based on the status identity they are performing, but beyond those expectations there is a potential for performing the role in creative, idiosyncratic ways.

Role is an under-studied topic in research on virtual game worlds, despite its centrality in the ubiquitous term “massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG).” In this article, we report on a study of the role concept with the specific intent of exploring its relevance to virtual worlds and especially the MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW). In particular, we focus on the concept of structural role, a term introduced to delineate a certain kind of social actor that carried greater-than-average responsibility for facilitating the diffusion of culture across interlocking groups (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). MMORPGs are based on specific kinds of role performances. This is not always clear to new players, some of whom understand only that they play a character who must “kill” virtual creatures in order to progress through the game world. Yet with

progression comes increased pressure from the game's design to band together with others, at least temporarily, to accomplish increasingly difficult tasks. During this process, players come to recognize different character roles such as "healer" (tasked with keeping other players alive) or "DPS" (the acronym of "damage per second;" primarily responsible for eliminating enemies). As the likelihood for engaging in collaborative play increases, so does the likelihood that players will band together in organized communities.

In WoW, two forms of organization are most common. The first is transient in nature and consists of players who band together for short periods of time (from a few minutes to a few hours) to accomplish some goal that is of mutual benefit. As characters progress through the game world, they encounter, with increasing frequency, circumstances that require them to work together with others. For example, a player may be offered a very powerful weapon as a reward for destroying some local evil power, but the player will find the enemy too strong to defeat alone. Players may invite others to join forces, thereby sharing the workload and benefitting from the increased strength of the group. Such groups are called "parties" and are limited to five players. Once characters reach level 60 (out of a current maximum of 85), they may join larger (up to 25 players) groups called "raids" to enter extremely challenging areas of the game world, with tougher resident evils and even more powerful rewards. The second form of organization is more durable in nature and consists of players who band together to pool and share resources. The groups are called "guilds," which any player can join and leave at any time.

You may discover that a guild greatly enhances your gameplay experience. You can meet friends, share adventures, and find people to protect you if you fight in faction versus faction combat. Typically, players in good guilds can go places and do things that players in poor guilds or no guild can't. This is especially the case at character levels 60–85, where the dungeons become very challenging. (WowWiki, "Background," para. 1)

Guilds are not only about helping players succeed at difficult challenges. Other advantages include developing networks of friends to socialize with, even when playing the game alone, and having a pool of fellow "guild members who are often a more reliable and more kind [*sic*] source of information than general chat" (WowWiki, "Advantages of a guild," para. 4). With these new organizations come new opportunities for leadership.

Anyone who can afford a "guild charter" from the vendor and then obtain signatures from nine other players can create a guild and be Guild

Master. Leaders often start guilds because of their interest in working with and/or managing others, building relationships, and organizing friends. The guild leader is primarily responsible for organizing collective action within the game, from recruiting players, to arranging group activities, to handling disputes and disruptions. Guilds may have up to 999 members, though most are much smaller. As they increase in size, it is likely that the Guild Master will identify responsible players and appoint them as guild officers. Regarding group activities, many guilds engage in “raiding,” where groups of 10, 25, or 40 players will work together to overcome powerful enemies (see Williams & Kirschner, 2012).

Raid and guild leader roles are not mutually exclusive and often overlap. As we will show, leaders share many attributes and work to meet similar sets of obligations, yet we witnessed many unique forms of leadership during our data collection as well. Some guild and raid leaders were online “all the time” and were available to discuss strategy, technique, and other game-related issues. Some leaders were just as ready to talk about their off-line lives as in-game play and thus fostered more intimate bonds among players. Others showed little tolerance for poor player performance and were relatively authoritarian in how they managed cooperative play. Yet despite these differences, leaders’ roles were bounded by technical and social rules that govern gameplay. To the extent that leaders’ role performances aligned with the expectations of other players, they became well-known and trusted individuals. When their role performances were poorly handled (or poorly received by others), individuals found their guilds or groups abandoned in favor of others managed by players who were better able or willing to organize cooperative activities.

In MMORPGs like *WoW*, leaders of guilds and raids are expected to be knowledgeable about the game and to be able to coordinate groups of players in various activities. Some studies have taken the roles of guild and raid leaders into account, but they overlook the multiple frames and detailed interactional processes that make roles robust (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2007). Instead, studies have typically emphasized role performance in terms of stereotypical extremes, what one of Yee’s (2006) respondents termed “Den Mothers” and “Bitch Goddesses.”<sup>1</sup> These terms refer to ideal typifications of MMORPG leadership styles that are affected by structural and situational factors. Structurally, things like size matter, with smaller guilds often being more focused on social bonding and larger guilds being more focused on hierarchies that facilitate the achievement of in-game goals (Williams et al., 2006). Situationally, players’ intentions, emotions, and interactions affect how leaders act as they manage groups of

players (Chen, 2009; Prax, 2010). Such studies focus primarily on classifying and categorizing guilds and players based on a perceived dichotomy between raiding on the one hand, and everything else on the other. While the dichotomy takes into account situational demands placed upon leaders, it is focused on leadership style without sufficiently considering the analytic depth that the role concept contains.

In theorizing the unique status of guild and raid leaders, we draw upon the concept of structural role. In its subcultural formulation, structural role referred to individuals whose actions diffuse cultural information across groups of people that otherwise might not have direct ties. Our study found that guild and raid leaders were regularly responsible for the dissemination of information that bore on players' experiences with and within the virtual world of Azeroth. For newer players, guild leaders were especially useful in helping them solve a variety of problems, from finding quick routes to level their character(s) to developing efficient play styles for a particular character class. For more advanced players, guild and raid leaders were often helpful in advising how to set up keyboard shortcuts or use macros<sup>2</sup> to maximize character performance. We identified other sets of expectations and obligations as well, and in what follows we focus on three aspects of structural roles for players in these positions. First, leaders dedicated extensive amounts of time to mastering their knowledge of the game, its characters, and its players. Second, they engaged in policy-making decisions that affected dozens or even hundreds of players and worked within and among player groups as a type of public relations officer. Such work required leaders to deal with both their own and other players' emotions. Third, guild and raid leaders were instrumental in maintaining a collective definition of the situation that was necessary for success in advanced forms of collaborative play. An interest or willingness to learn the intricacies of gameplay, to take responsibility for players' emotional well-being, and to manage a shared definition of the situation were all basic components of the guild and raid leaders' roles, and guild or raid success was often reducible to the extent to which leaders mastered these components.

## **METHODS**

This report on the structural roles of guild and raid leaders is part of a larger multi-year study of *WoW*, a Tolkienesque, fantasy-based virtual game world that has boasted more than 12 million concurrent subscribers

worldwide (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004, 2010). Using ethnographic methods including participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and writing personal diaries and field notes, we participated in the social world of guilds and raiding. Patrick and David had been playing WoW recreationally since 2005 and were familiar with many aspects of the game world, each having created multiple characters and played them to the maximum available level. However, we had no more than fleeting experiences raiding. Therefore, in 2009 Patrick and David joined a respected raiding guild to begin studying experiences and interactional processes among cooperative teams of players. Zahirah joined the research team in 2010 and began playing WoW on a different server in order to collect data outside the primary raiding guild.

During 2010 Patrick and David participated regularly in scheduled weekly raids as well as other events both in and out of the guild. In 2011, they conducted a series of informal discussions with guild members about collaborative action, and all three authors completed semi-structured interviews with four individuals who had objectively defined leadership positions within the guild (i.e., Guild Master and Guild Officers). In discussions and interviews we sought an understanding of the responsibilities and strategies they took on as leaders in the guild and of weekly raids. In all cases, interviewees had played WoW for a minimum of five years. Additionally, each had served as Officer or Guild Master of at least one guild prior to joining The Cleaning Crew<sup>3</sup> and thus had largely internalized the roles of guild and raid leadership. Patrick was promoted to Guild Officer in late 2010. In this role, he experienced leadership firsthand and was privy to discussions and debates among a small group of core guild leaders that most guild members were unaware of. These discussions were also treated as data that provided additional insight into the everyday constitution of guild and raider leader roles.

We conducted interviews through Ventrilo, an online voice communication platform, as it was the preferred method of communication among players, partly because of the sense of familiarity and comfort it affords to people who play together in computer-mediated contexts (Chen, 2009). We subsequently transcribed these interviews for analysis. On average, Patrick and David spent 10–15 hours per week during much of 2010 and half of 2011 raiding and otherwise playing with fellow guild members, establishing a large degree of rapport with interviewees in advance. Despite this amount of time, we never asked for, nor did other guild members typically disclose their “real-life” identities. We did, however, offer information about ourselves and our research project to members of the guild by providing links

to Patrick's university website as well as both of our email addresses should players want to contact us privately.

We collected additional data through two methods. First, we used software to automatically record all text chat that occurred while our characters were logged in. Chat logs provided us the opportunity to look for patterns of interaction among guild and raid members which we could compare with players' reports from interviews. Second, we tapped into WoW development blogs and internet forums that related to guild and raid leadership. For example, one developers' blog entry aimed at new players was called "New player tips: building foundations" and directed readers to a thread within the Raid and Guild Leadership community forum where players from around the world posted comments. Many posts were from experienced players who gave advice on how a guild should be managed and/or shared anecdotes from their own experiences. Another thread that we analyzed was created specifically to seek opinions on how to create a successful raiding group, and consisted of players who shared their opinions on populating a raid guild and about decision-making processes for leaders.

## FINDINGS

Although we were interested in exploring the potential utility of the structural role concept, we treated it as a sensitizing concept that helped us begin the process of analysis without allowing it to impose itself on themes that emerged from the data. Our subsequent analysis was further driven by recognition that roles are embodied in at least three analytic forms: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. In what follows, we divide our analysis according to these analytic forms as we consider how each form improves an understanding of the leadership roles within WoW.

### *Knowledge*

We found guild and raid leaders to be among the most knowledgeable members of the gaming community. Leaders were expected to either know the answer to any question or to be able to point players to an answer. Leaders were therefore obligated to maintain their knowledge of a game world that was constantly expanding through developers' and players'

actions. Three facets of knowledge are relevant to our discussion: knowledge of the game environment, knowledge of characters that act within that environment, and (especially for guilds that raided together weekly), knowledge of the players that controlled those characters.

Azeroth is a vast virtual landscape that has expanded regularly since WoW's launch in 2004. Originally comprised of two continents, the Eastern Kingdoms and Kalimdor, Azeroth subsequently grew to include a third continent called Northrend and part of a separate, sundered planet called Outland. In 2010, Azeroth was redesigned so that many old areas of the game world were replaced with new content. The world was divided into interconnected zones where players of different experience levels could find challenging content. All players progressed through some of these zones, but guild leaders typically maintained knowledge about all of them. In addition to single-player content, some of these zones contained instances where groups of players, from as few as five (called "dungeons") up to groups of 10, 25, or 40 (called "raids"), quested together. These areas contained much more difficult content that required that players learn to act cooperatively (Williams & Kirschner, 2012).

Guild and raid leaders generally took it upon themselves to master the intricacies of group encounters with bosses in order to lead effectively. The amount of knowledge they dealt with was in no way trivial and was crucial to the development of a "theory of task" (Bastien & Hostager, 1992) that guided role performance via a common set of behavioral conventions. First, there was a basic set of group play-related tactics that covered all role types that leaders were expected to understand and sometimes had to teach to newer players (see Fig. 1). Leaders also had to maintain knowledge of all current top-level bosses, including their abilities and behaviors. In only the *Cataclysm* expansion of WoW, which serviced level 80–85 characters, there were approximately 100 unique bosses to be encountered, each with a host of abilities to be understood.

*Note:* This is based on the illustration by a player named "Aear" and published on many WoW raiding websites.

A single example should suffice in suggesting the amount of knowledge to deal with. In the Bastion of Twilight raid, the second boss encounter involved a pair of dragons, named Valiona and Theralion. Together, the pair had eight unique abilities through which they attacked players. One was called "Blackout," a magical attack that could seriously injure or kill all players within eight yards of the spot where Valiona cast it. Worth noting is that the damage was split evenly among affected players. Raid leaders had to know exactly when Blackout was coming and ensure that other

BASIC RAIDING TACTICS  
YOU ARE

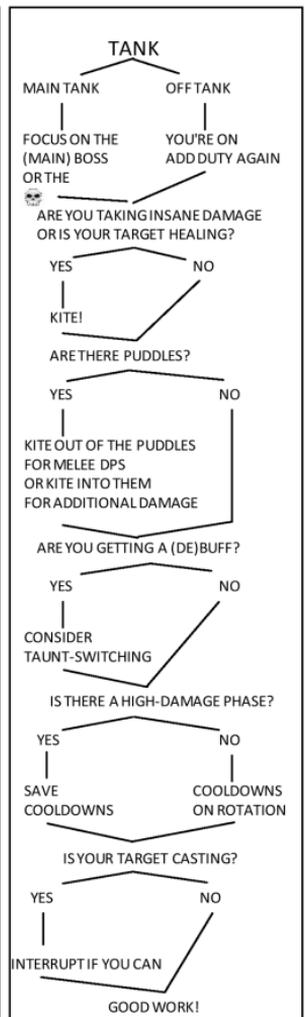
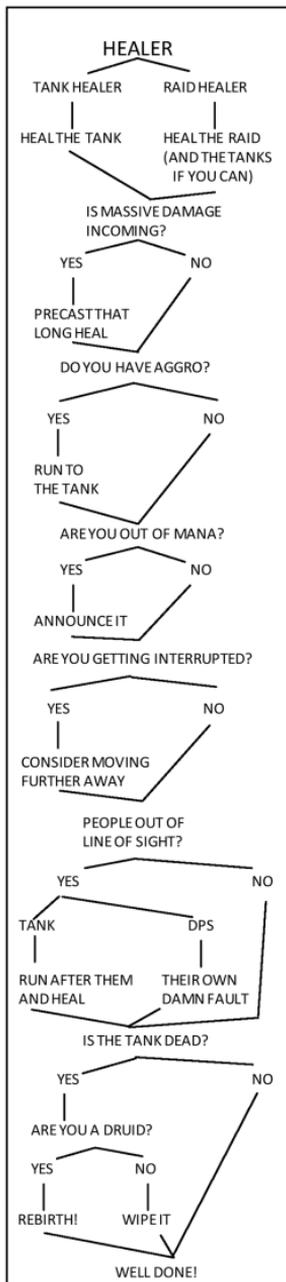
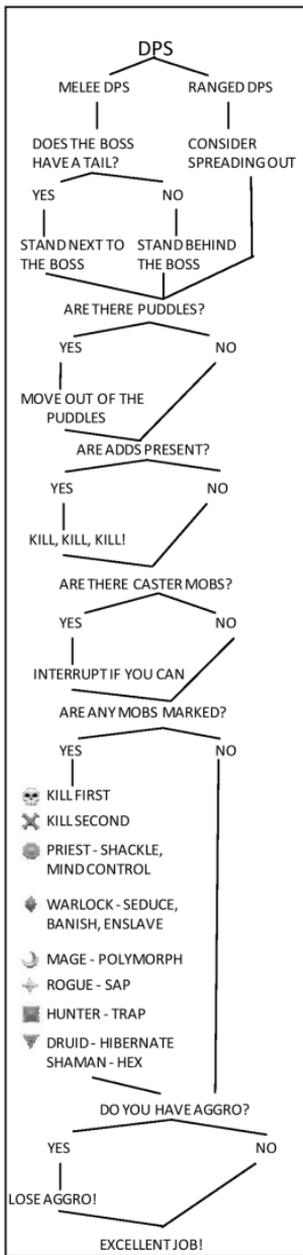


Fig. 1. Raiding Role Obligations in WoW.

members of the group knew what to do. To handle this particular ability, raid leaders would mark a location on the floor and instruct players when to collapse onto that spot so that the damage was split among as many players as possible, thus minimizing damage to any single character.<sup>4</sup> Raid leaders were responsible for knowing how each of Valiona's and Theralion's seven other abilities also worked, when and in what order they would come, and then instructing raid members as necessary. Although ideally players would come into a raid with at least some of this knowledge already mastered, it was not uncommon to witness leaders coaching individual players on specific aspects of boss encounters.

In order to coach players and otherwise manage a group, leaders had to keep up with the abilities and skills of each character class. There were 10 character classes in WoW – death knight, druid, hunter, mage, paladin, priest, rogue, shaman, warlock, and warrior – and each had three distinct sets of talents. A player could master a set of talents that provided certain potential advantages or disadvantages when playing in a group. Certain situations might call for healers who had the ability to provide moderate healing to many players simultaneously, while other situations might call for healers who could restore large amounts of health to single targets instantly, or a group might need one or more of each type. Guild and raid leaders therefore needed to understand not only which classes were capable of healing, but how each class did so. In addition, guild and raid leaders had to know about the accoutrements of play, including weapons, armor, foods, potions, and other magical items that affected individual performance. There was thus a *burden of knowledge* unique to the structural role of guild and raid leader, as one interviewee described:

Gotta be gemmed. Gotta make sure you've got the right item level, the right gear. You've gotta make sure that you have things reforged, now, to what your class requires and your [talents]. When you're a raid leader, it's that times 10 or 25 because not only do you have to know what you have to do, but now you have to know what everybody else has to do ... to be a raid leader you really have to know everybody else's class too. You've gotta know what their cooldowns are, you have to know what kind of trinkets they currently have. You have to know when to [use] certain spells from a certain ... class. You have to know when to call things out .... [Interview]

Such knowledge comes from a variety of media and may be passed on through the guild or raid leader to group members via an equally diverse set of media, including text chat within the game world, VoIP software, internet forums, and YouTube videos, to name a few. For this knowledge to impact the lives of players, it must be known, usable, and functional for guild and raid leaders (see Fine, 1979). To the extent that any particular bit

of knowledge was triggered as situationally appropriate, leaders used it to improve the collaborative experience of online play.

Guild and raid leaders also regularly sought knowledge about the players behind the characters. Getting to know other players served several leadership related functions. For example, knowing something about the players behind the characters on screen might assist a raid leader in building the best team possible. “If I’m like inviting, say for Icecrown, and I know there’s a lot of mobility fights, I have four or five people that I consider friends that I wouldn’t invite just because I know they can’t move” [Interview]. Sometimes leaders had to split up these friends in order to achieve group goals, for example, if two players were redundant for a team or if one was not well suited for a particular raid. Leaders explained that knowing which players were more or less capable could make all the difference in keeping the larger group happy. This was true for the long-term stability of the guild as well for the short-term stability of the raid. Having players online who were both able and willing to help other players or to craft armor, weapons, enchantments, or consumables was important for a guild’s sustainability.

Getting to know the player behind the character helped guild leaders make informed decisions about the guild’s current situation and its future direction. Officers talked regularly about well-known characters who could possibly be recruited, as well as about the “personalities” of players and how well or poorly they fitted with the guild’s collective identity. This information was gleaned through months of participating in the everyday life of Azeroth, typically by interacting with other players in both private (e.g., “guild”) and public (e.g., “general” and “trade”) chat channels. When The Cleaning Crew experienced a void in upper management, the Guild Master turned to Patrick because she had learned through many months of almost-daily interaction that he was a university professor, he logged in regularly, and he offered advice or feedback when asked. Thus, she decided he would be relatively dependable in a leadership position. As an officer in the guild, Patrick became a regular participant in discussions about guild membership issues and was even sent as an envoy to another guild’s raid when a possible guild merger was being considered. On that occasion, he reported that the other guild seemed to be made up of relatively immature players who seemed as much interested in one-upping each other in telling vulgar jokes as actually playing the game. Given this feedback, the guild leadership began questioning the consequences of such a merger.

Hanging out with other players in voice and text chat channels was equal part getting to know them in terms of their personal lives and getting

to know what type of players they were online. Unstable family or work environments, for example, often affected players' online participation. Some leaders avoided players whose outside lives would disrupt guild or raid progression, while others wanted their guilds and raids to be a home-away-from-home, that is, something players could look forward to. In sum, understanding the role of guild or raid leader was partially encapsulated in the knowledge they developed about the game world and its denizens. To look more deeply at the relations among leaders and other players, we need to consider emotions, which are important in interpersonal relations. Switching our discussion thusly is also important because emotions are a key component in an interactionist conception of roles.

### *Emotions*

Unlike traditional single-player video games, where a player's success is predicated on her ability to anticipate what the program will do next, MMORPGs are distinctly social worlds within which individuals are connected to one another. The connections are not only among players but also among roles. When playing games face-to-face with friends, there may be, on the one hand, a desire to *win* while, on the other hand, there is a need to maintain (the appearance of) in-group solidarity (see Williams, 2006). The desire to win, and the emotional experiences that surround it, is determined not so much by the person, but by the rules of the game and the roles that players perform within the context of the game. We therefore need to distinguish between two frames that shape individuals' orientations toward gameplay: the play frame and the game frame (see Table 1). The

**Table 1.** Orientation Frames.

<b>Play frame</b>	Achievement-oriented: the player seeks to progress; to accumulate resources and status
– orientation of the <i>player</i> toward the game world	Relation-oriented: the player enjoys establishing relations with other players; likes to help or offer advice
<b>Game frame</b>	Competition-oriented: the character seeks status; to be recognized for goals achieved; to be better than other characters
– orientation of the player's <i>character</i> toward the game world	Collaboration-oriented: the character enjoys working with a group; puts the team before herself; wants to be recognized in terms of group achievements

play frame refers to the orientations *players* exhibited toward the game world, while the game frame refers to the orientation of players' *characters* toward the game world. Rather than being mutually exclusive, individuals orient as both players and characters and their orientations are shaped by a negotiated definition of the situation. This is a feature of all role-playing games and highlights the significance of in-game role identities and performances on interpersonal relationships (see also Weninger, 2006).

Players regularly demonstrated their orientation to these frames through talk and other actions. Sometimes members of guilds or raids had divergent frames, which resulted in moments of "drama." Managing drama was almost always the leader's responsibility as leaders typically agreed that "having one person the entire guild knows as the final authority can be a huge benefit" [Forum post]. A leadership role involved responsibility toward and responsiveness to players' emotions. It required the cognitive tools to sense members' expectations and then manage the emotions arising out of conflicts in a way that maintained, or repaired disruptions to, players' frames. Such definitions were not always democratically derived as leaders regularly staved off bases for conflict in advance by setting rules regarding players' etiquette, by defining the situational limits of characters' roles, and by stating consequences for deviation. When drama arose, guild leaders had to decide how to handle the situation, whether by relying strictly on pre-existing rules or mitigating negative emotions on the fly. Either way, there was demand for emotional responsiveness on the part of the leaders that required them to engage in emotion work – "the process of evoking, suppressing, or otherwise managing [players'] feelings" (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561) – to align their behavior with the feeling rules that characterized the situation at hand. The emotional dimension of guild and raid leader roles was most salient during raiding.

Raids, being purposefully designed to require coordinated action, demanded a high level of skill and knowledge and all players therefore expected each other to know how to perform class roles. Failure to perform, however, elicited varying responses. Data demonstrated an overarching assumption that members of "elite" raiding guilds were achievement (play frame) and collaboration (game frame) oriented. One guild leader called these the "hardcore" players who "put together a team that is actually consistent" and whose members were "always prepared. People who are ... pretty anal about getting stuff done and about progression" [Interview]. Drama emerged when one or more members of such groups failed to perform. How leaders managed such drama "depends on the raid I'm in. A lot of times in high-end raid guilds they'll demean people on the

spot for any problem they have. If you failed on one little portion of a fight, they'll just rip you in half and replace you with somebody from a waitlist ... I guess if that's what you come in with the expectation of, it's fine" [Interview]. This might suggest that leaders gave little consideration to players' feelings, yet other interviewees discussed the emotional labor that occurs as leaders prepared for group play:

I ... start figuring out who's going to come ... who we're going to have to sit, whose feelings we're going to have to hurt ... which is ... it's hard sometimes because I don't .... I want everybody to be able to come, but usually I have to log in a little bit early so I can explain to some people why they have to sit ... and you know, explain to people sometimes .... [Interview]

Some leaders' role performances shifted across situations as they moved between the "den mother" role before and after raids to the "bitch goddess" extreme during raids (Yee, 2006). For other leaders, in so-called "social guilds" especially, the roles were more consistent and leaders had to work less to maintain collaborative and relation-oriented frames where players felt relatively little stress.

Our experience was with a guild that was transitioning from one of the top raiding guilds on the server to a more social guild. It was populated by a mixture of players and as the Guild Master told us, "if you are only here for gear and progression, you're probably in the wrong guild, because yes, we have a lot of skilled players, but we're also a lot of skilled players who have a lot of real life stuff going on. That's why it's a casual raiding guild" [Interview]. Players who didn't appreciate the increasingly relaxed nature of guild life vis-à-vis raiding would leave the guild, only to be replaced by others seeking a similar approach to gaming. Despite the more relaxed atmosphere in late versus early 2010, we continued to observe moments where discontinuities between play and game frames negatively impacted group play. During raids, failures in character role performance were most common, for example, when a mage did not dispel an enemy attack or when a tank did not taunt at the right moment. Out of game issues also affected the play frame – work stress, bad mood, and "wife aggro" were often cited as reasons behind emotional outbursts. Leaders had to consider such contingencies as well as the identities of players when mediating problematic behaviors. "There's a huge diversity in WoW, and you never know who you're playing with. And your best healer could be a grandmother, might be a mother of three children. You know, you can't just ... expect everybody to get along" [Interview].

Leaders had to take the players behind the screen into consideration and anticipate the diversity of play and game frames as they dealt with

management issues. The previous quote exemplifies both leaders' awareness of feeling rules and their engagement in "emotional role-taking," the imaginative experience or anticipation of moments of guilt, empathy, or shame for others (Shott, 1979). Upon reflection of our own opinions about who were "good leaders," we found they were individuals who made efforts (or undertook emotional labor) to avoid or mitigate the negative effects of such emotions. They were players who typically acted only after considering the many others involved. Emotional role-taking, and emotion work more generally, is significant in social life as it promotes self-control, creates trust, and consequently, maintains social organization (Cahill, 1995). Interpersonal conflicts often led to disrupted play and game frames, which could make raiding and guild life unpleasant:

Sometimes you have to be the mediator. You have fights between ... members. Happens quite a bit, people whispering you, telling you "wow this guy sucks" and then the other person saying "hey, this guy's bothering me." So you end up playing mediator. Sometimes it feels like you're playing the nanny. As a leader, you're cleaning up everybody else's messes, so to speak. [Interview]

Leaders had a responsibility to act in conflict situations in order to protect others from drama and maintain the sanctity of the definition of the situation. In doing so, "good" leaders appeared neutral or objective when possible, ousted troublemakers when necessary, and projected confidence and poise during moments of intense emotional fervor. "There's nothing I respect more than a guild leader that knows when a player is souring his/her guild, and knows the best way to handle it" [Forum post]. Leaders' actions earned them the respect of many guild and raid members, a point that was repeatedly found to be important for a guild's long-term success in field notes, interviews, and forum data.

### *Action*

Leaders who effectively manage their and others' emotions are able to solidify legitimacy in the eyes of their followers. Role legitimacy increases leaders' likelihood to be able to project or reinforce a definition of the situation, which is a crucial feature of managing social action. In the course of managing guilds, running raids, and frequenting forums, leaders learned to leverage their knowledge, feelings and authority to overcome numerous threats to the interactional order. The visible behaviors leaders engaged in to maintain a collective definition of the situation comprised the embodied

leadership strategies that were diffused as cultural knowledge. As leaders strived to maintain a collective definition of the situation, they constantly negotiated interactions through both the play and game frames. We previously looked at how an emotionally informed definition of the situation is dialectically related to each of these two frames. A collective definition of the situation achieved frame alignment in *guilds*, resulting in a relatively drama-free social environment for like-minded players (Williams et al., 2006) as well as frame alignment in *raids*, facilitating the coordinated action necessary for advanced group play (Williams & Kirschner, 2012).

Guild or raid leaders needed to act responsibly, maintaining a vested interest in members' emotions and in the validity of their own positions in order to maintain a collective definition of gameplay. The significance of a shared orientation toward gameplay cannot be overstressed, especially when it comes to advanced forms of collaborative play. After all, collaborative play is the primary reason guilds exist, as they provide an organizational structure that facilitates the development and maintenance of the shared definition of the situation. Sometimes, however, leaders acted in ways that were best for them rather than in ways that were best for the groups they managed. The following two vignettes exemplify individuals acting in ways counter to collective expectations for guild and raid leader roles.

The first example comes from our first weeks of fieldwork and highlights the performative nature of roles by focusing on how a guild and raid leader made expert use of his knowledge and of feeling rules to mask his play and game frame so as to con other players. Not recognizing the significance of the event at the time, we later combined anecdotal recollections with recorded chat logs to reconstruct our initiation into the social world of expert raiding guilds. Patrick had obtained invitations for himself and David to join a new guild that was expressly organized for raiding. The Guild Master, Lolether, had recently created the guild and attracted a number of well geared and knowledgeable players to begin raiding. A group of 25 players immediately started raiding the Crusader's Coliseum, at that time the most advanced raid instance in WoW. During our third week of raiding, an extremely rare and prized item was found. Many raids operate under the rule that any character who (a) is eligible for an item and (b) needs it to upgrade her equipment has an equal chance of winning it through a random, computer-generated dice roll.<sup>5</sup> In this case Lolether, who was the raid leader as well as guild leader, was responsible for transferring the item to the winner. Yet after everyone had rolled, Lolether transferred the item to his own character, telling the raid that his internet

connection was creating lag between his computer and the game server and he did not want to risk losing the item by disconnecting. When pressed by many raid members to pass the item to the winner, he was silent for a time, then typed “splled Pepsii onn keyboard,” misspelling the words to support his performance as a player with a technical issue. As one player recollected, he then “went afk [‘away from keyboard’] for 20 mins in hopes people would leave and he could take the gear” [Chat log]. Players did not leave, however, wanting to believe that he was attempting to resolve internet connectivity and keyboard issues and would return to transfer the item fairly. But his character eventually disappeared, and he was gone. Given his roles as raid and guild leader, Lolether wielded considerable power and control over the definition of the situation by retaining all managerial responsibilities, including those related to distributing items. He also engaged in careful emotion work, declining to respond to any questions or comments while he was idling and several times exhorting others not to complain or otherwise stir up “drama.” His prior actions had reassured the group that everyone’s play and game frames were compatible. We therefore shared a definition of the situation until he went idle after taking the item, introducing conflict into the situation, inducing strong negative emotions among the group, shattering the cohesive play and game frames, and reducing the shared definition of the situation to an angry and buzzing confusion. Not only did the raid group break up after he logged off, but the entire guild disbanded within 24 hours. We encountered him once more several days later in a public area of the game world where he was advertising a service. Another player responded: “Oh it’s Lolether again the ninja who even steals stuff from his own guildies! he might just take ur stuff and log!” [Chat log]. His reputation and therefore his ability to lead a guild or raid ruined, Lolether transferred his character to another WoW server not long after.

Our second example came in 2011 after nearly a year and a half of active participation in The Cleaning Crew. One of the guild’s Officers and most trusted raid leaders, Xeky, left the guild after several weeks of poor raid participation and performance. He was well-liked and well-respected by many guild members and was responsible for teaching many, including us, how to become better raiders. Yet by his own admission, he was struggling to reconcile his own play frame between being achievement- and relation-oriented. “Sometimes I really like to be that progression guy that has the best gear, but most of the time now, I just like to be the guy that everybody wants to be around and still get things done you know?” [Interview]. He enjoyed time online with his guild friends but also felt that guild members

were not doing all they could to be prepared to raid each week. Regular raid members would not show up sometimes; other times they would not know the details of boss fights and thus cause unnecessary setbacks for progression. In the end, the leader felt he needed to move to a guild that made faster progression. The emotional toll on the guild was evident in the reflective comments of another leader from the guild:

[His leaving] makes me question what he was ever really here for and all the conversations we had and all the things that we play about and all the, you know, inside jokes that we had ... It's like, one of those things, where you start building a relationship with someone and then all of a sudden, they're gone and all you got was a small whisper, and it ... vaguely ... vaguely describes why they're leaving and there's no ... you know, sympathy or remorse involved in it. You start to really question, you know, the people around you. [Interview]

These vignettes bring the raid and guild leader roles down to earth. First, they illuminate the significance of emotions and behaviors in shaping the cultural definition of these roles. Second, they show that leaders are simultaneously similar to and distinct from other group members. Leaders are players like everyone else, and like everyone else they play games with their own goals in mind; goals which may or may not align with those of others.

The disruptions emphasized in these vignettes are partly attributable to the leader being distinct from other players. Players place their trust in leaders more than in other "random" players. They trust, for example, that the leader will facilitate a collective definition of the situation, or that the leader will be there every week to take charge and literally *lead* the group to success. Part of the role responsibility of the leader is the obligation to followers. When Lolether acted in ways that disrupted his role obligations, play was interrupted and people quit having fun. When Xeky left for a more achievement-oriented guild, those that had put faith in his orientation toward relationships felt cheated. In both cases, we must recognize "the precarious position in which these performers place themselves" (Goffman, 1959, p. 59). Whereas some leaders enjoy managing player groups, seeing it as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end, others lead because of a variety of benefits the role performance may provide. Generally, leaders enjoyed achieving high social status and with it the ability to wield power over collective definitions of situations, as we have highlighted above. In addition, they seemed to enjoy personal in-game rewards that they and their fellows received in part due to their effective leadership skills. Lolether's case involved each of the aforementioned benefits, which

together facilitated his “misrepresentation,” wherein he used his role capacity to deceive others for personal gain. Such a *faux pas* represents “that moment in their performance when an event may occur to catch them out and badly contradict what they have openly avowed, bringing them immediate humiliation and sometimes permanent loss of reputation” (Goffman, 1959, p. 59). Similarly, the precariousness of Xeky’s position was rooted in the conflict between play frames that pulled him back and forth between managing player groups as a means versus as an end, between wanting to achieve and wanting to be in a guild where “friends” came first. Because roles are reciprocal, Xeky expected that followers would do what was expected of them. But several weeks of poor raid performance betrayed the expectations Xeky had placed on guild members to do their part. Analyzing his leaving illuminates the dialectic nature of roles, though the responsibility to maintain a shared definition of the situation rests more on the leader’s shoulders than any other player because the leader is in a more structurally significant position.

## CONCLUSION

Individuals performing structural roles diffuse culture across groups of people who may not otherwise have direct ties. For Fine and Kleinman (1979), a person in a structural role traveled physically among groups spreading culture (their examples included drug dealers, rock musicians, and itinerant preachers). In WoW, raid and guild leaders occupy structural positions around which other players gravitate, coming and going and in doing so bringing and taking culture with them. Guild and raid leaders also “travel” across internet websites and forums as they collect information, discuss problems, and search for best practices. Over time, many move as guilds merge and split, and they move among groups as they invite random players into their raids. The subsequent interactions between leaders and the other players/groups create or modify knowledge that is taken onward to other groups and to other roles.

In closing, we need to assess the utility of the *structural role* concept for virtual worlds, and for MMORPGs such as WoW in particular. Since the early days of WoW in 2004, games and other digital technologies have changed significantly with the integration of mass and social media into many MMORPGs. Game-related information has never been more available. The number of voices in online forums has proliferated, and WoW’s

forums are no exception. WoW players routinely tap into the collective intelligence of the community online and in doing so learn about how to think, feel and act as players. This has affected the structural nature of guild and raid leader roles, mainly by reducing the amount of knowledge that a leader must carry around in her head. As one leader described it, “I used to know everything about unusual or difficult quests, all the locations to buy or earn certain pieces of gear, gold prices, and other things that were later helped by informational websites and specific addons” [Interview]. But today, “none of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 4). In 2004, a would-be guild leader had fewer sources about which to learn the art of guild leadership. In 2012, that aspiring leader has access to eight years’ worth of distributed digital knowledge via forum posts, fan websites, wikis, and the millions of players that have tread on Azeroth’s virtual soil. Leaders are, to some extent, relieved of the burden of knowledge.

As such, the *structural* nature of guild and raid leader roles has become less significant. Yet in terms of emotion work and managing a collective definition of the situation, guild and raid leaders still inhabit an important position in virtual worlds. Guild and raid leaders have the daunting task of bringing together diverse sets of players’ frames of action and managing their own and others’ emotions in order to maintain a shared definition of the situation that facilitates successful social interaction. The collective intelligence of gaming cultures provides increasingly ubiquitous resources upon which guild and raid leaders may draw to perform their roles effectively. Yet such collective intelligence does not do the work of leading; individuals must still step up to the challenge of managing computer-mediated networks of players with diverse interests and goals.

## NOTES

1. Not all guilds engage in raiding as a primary activity and not all raids are comprised of members of guilds. Most research on guilds and/or raids has proceeded under the assumption that the two fit together.

2. A computer science term that refers to abbreviated sets of instructions or commands that reduce the number of keystrokes/mouse clicks necessary to perform a function.

3. All guild and character names are pseudonyms.

4. To get a feel for how this is experienced by players, you may search YouTube for “Valiona and Theralion guide.”

5. Each eligible player types “/roll” in a command line and the game generates a number between 1 and 100. The person with the highest value wins. The raid leader usually then inspects the winner’s role and gear to ensure the new item would in fact be appropriate and an improvement for that character.

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