

Role Theory: The Line Between Roles as Design and Socialization in EverQuest

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ABSTRACT

For a player to enter the game-world of EverQuest, they must choose a character. Each character fulfills a particular, functional role within the game that defines the game-play experience for the player. A character's role defines the basis of identity formation within the game-space. Using sociological role theory as a point of departure, this paper will explore how class roles are designed into the game of EverQuest and how players redefine these roles through social interaction, role expectations and individualization, altering the structured roles designed into the game.

Keywords

EverQuest, Role Theory, Identity

INTRODUCTION

When this research began, it was my belief that sociological role theory would define the structural foundation found within the game but that the structure would be deconstructed through socialization and appropriation of the played role. Interestingly, this was not entirely the case. In turn, the scope of this research has been broadened to consider how the reciprocal relationship between structure and socialization affects the predetermined roles within the game of EverQuest.

In the game of EverQuest, each playable class serves a functional role within the overall structure of the goal oriented play. Indeed, complimentary class combinations are necessary for successful character advancement within the game, but once individual player personality and social interaction is introduced, the definitional boundaries of these functional roles are altered.

To further explore the socialization of roles within the game, we turn to Turner [3] as he defines the function of roles within an interactive group environment, stating that:

Every position that continues to be recognized by the members of a group contributes in some way to the purposes of the group; this contribution represents its *function*. Associated with every position is a body of common beliefs concerning its function; these beliefs represent one part of the groups system of norms. The functions of a position, as understood by group members who recognize it, do not necessarily correspond to its functions as they would be seen by an outsider...[3]

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When thinking about class roles in EverQuest, we can divide Turner's definition of role function into three distinct categories; design, expectations and socialization. *Design* through the idea that one's "contribution represents its *function*", which is often structurally predetermined; *expectations*, which are created through "a body of common beliefs concerning its function" in which "represent one part of the groups system of norms"[3]. Finally, *actualization* through functional and social interaction, "the functions of a position, as understood by group members who recognize it, do not necessarily correspond to its functions as they would be seen by an outsider"[3].

To look at Turner's [3] functional role system in terms of class roles in EverQuest, we can start with a player's point of entry into the game. When a player selects a class to play, the unsocialized, unequipped character can be thought of as being in a pure state of its basic, predetermined, functioning role. At this early stage, the role carries only its own defining characteristics separate from any form of collective ideal or individualization.

Once the player enters the social space of the game world, the designed role begins to be redefined through a collective ideal – or shared 'norms' of what the functional role of a particular class should be. These are the 'norms' that are created through social interaction of a particular community and can be paralleled with Turner's [3] above-mentioned expectations that occur through functional group interaction.

Finally, through personal expectations of the game, personality type of the player and individual game experiences – among many other defining elements, a player appropriates the role of their class, making them distinct from other players of the same class.

Therefore, the role development flows through three phases; its designed elements, the collective ideals that shapes the role further and finally, the individualized role that is created through the personality of the individual player. The contrast between the fixed role of a class and the collective understanding of what the role should be can be defined as the *line of differentiation* between the designed and played – or socialized – roles.

FUNCTIONAL DESIGN: THE BUREAUCRATIC LINK

Within the structural design of the game, each class is created in functional relation to other playable classes within the game. By playing these roles in combination, players can work towards fulfilling actions and tasks that are required to complete common game goals such as quests and hunting raids. Each class role is essentially designed as individual parts to a functional whole. This designed structure is very similar to the bureaucratic structure defined by traditional role theory.

Merton [1] describes the bureaucratic system as one where "every series of actions is functionally related to the purposes of the organization"[1]. We can relate group goals to that those of an organization. Groups and guilds, grinds and raids, these are all structures that are all functionally related. According to Turner [3], the characteristics of an entity within a group must have some degree of stability. In terms of EverQuest, game design creates the stability necessary by carefully detailing the functional boundaries of each class's role that a player can choose.

In considering the role of a cleric within the game and goals of EverQuest, the stability of the

role lies within its actions. The game's official website defines the role of clerics as follows:

Clerics gain powerful healing and enhancement spells, greatly increasing the health and defenses of their group, while keeping them healed in the most dangerous battles. While other priest classes have healing spells, no one can match up with the power and efficiency of clerical healing....

With a few exceptions, clerics are dependent on being part of a group. But they are highly desirable group members.ⁱ

Although somewhat ambiguous, this statement reveals that a cleric's role within the structure of the game is essentially to heal others. There are many other detailing elements that define a cleric – from the limited type of armor a cleric can wear, to the limited races that can fulfill the role within the game, but based on generalized overview of what role a cleric is in the scope of the game, a player knows that to be a cleric is to heal other playing characters.

From a structural perspective, both Merton [1] and Turner [3] acknowledge that although individuals fulfill the roles in the group or organization, the individuals can be replaced while the roles remain in tact. In EverQuest, the design is what defines the group. Since the game is designed with group play as its focus, it could be said that the design is primarily concerned with the whole (class) instead of the individual (player). A cleric remains a cleric in its definitional sense regardless of the individual playing the role. Functionally, any cleric will suffice in a group as long as they fulfill their healing role. As Turner reminds us, "These role relationships are pretty much the same in any [group] regardless of the individual personalities of the members." [3]

Merton explains the bureaucratic system beyond the individual by stating, "Official action ordinarily occurs within the framework of preexisting rules of the organization" [1]. A successful group in EverQuest works within the idea of this predetermined framework where the primary purposive action between members is enabled through the fulfillment of one's role. Sociality aside, this is precisely the initial purpose of interaction with an Massively Multi-User Online Game (MMOG) like EverQuest.

The group structure that is designed into the game demonstrates the bureaucratic system defined by traditional role theory. Defined by the official EverQuest website, "groups are temporary groupings ... which allow an ongoing affiliation between players."ⁱⁱ In more descriptive terms, the purpose of a group in EverQuest can be defined as a combination of playing characters, usually up to 6 players, that assemble to fulfill short term goals in gathering in-game money, experience points or questing. Although each class has the capacity to play the game alone to some extent, the purpose of the role is a functional and inevitably a social one since each class role was designed to be at its most functional win combination with other classes.

In describing to players how to create a group or hunting 'party', the website states:

When starting a party, consider the skills of each member that you invite. You want a good mixture of combat, spell-casting and healing abilities. At the very

least, make sure you have a couple of strong fighters, a wizard, magician, necromancer or enchanter to cast spells, and someone else with healing powers (like a cleric).ⁱⁱⁱ

This is a basic explanation of what a good group should look like according to Sony (EQLive) it should be noted that this explanation is intended for novice players, in this sense, the explanation potentially shapes the novice player's perception of what a "good group" is. This creates the beginning of role expectations among players.

As one long term player put it, "warrior, cleric, enchanter are really the only 'needed' classes - all other classes are support". But in reality, aside from intense, high level raids, a group does not NEED a cleric; they need some sort of healing power. A group does not NEED a warrior, but some sort of muscle to diminish their enemies' hit points.

In creative game-play, it is possible to make do with two lesser healers instead of one pure healer, but then it takes the slot of an extra player, taking away the opportunity to have the "perfect group". Returning to the official definition of a group as being an 'affiliation between players', it can be understood that these 'affiliations' are based on a player's understanding of a class' role due to functional expectations of a class' norms.

THE MAKING OF EXPECTATIONS: FUNCTIONAL NORMS

Expectations in terms of sociological role theory are the collective norms that surround a functional role. These expectations bridge the social and the functional in that the norms are created through formal role definitions and personal experience of interaction with the role found in game-play.

Although based on the defined (or designed) role, expectations are also based on players' role performances and further formulated through a collective belief system of the boundaries and limits. Parsons describes role expectations as being "a value pattern" that "is always institutionalized in an *interaction* context" [2], making these expectations a social construct.

Parsons continues on to say that "there are the expectations which concern and in part set standards for the behavior of the actor who is taken as the point of reference; these are his 'role expectations' ... from his point of view there is a set of expectations relative to the contingently probable *reactions* of others ..." [2]. In other words, when a player acts towards fulfilling their functional role, there are social elements he must consider surrounding not only the functional role of the class, but also socially constructed expectations that surround the execution of the role. In order to do this successfully, a player must consider what others expect out of that role when deciding how to play. This will inevitably affect the performance of the functional role by forcing the player to create a balance between designed function, socially constructed expectations, and the actualized performance of one's role.

In this sense then, Parsons states that "a role then is a sector of the total orientation system of an individual actor which is organized about expectations in relation to a particular interaction context, that is integrated with a particular set of value-standards which govern interaction with one or more alters in the appropriate complementary roles" [2]. It is through these 'value-standards' that role hierarchies are further perpetuated, through the collective ideal of the

importance of one role over another in a group situation within the game. As other players deem the cleric a necessary class within their group, their role value will increase, creating a social hierarchy attached to the functional role.

When considering the role of cleric in EverQuest, a player can learn the role-expectations through social interaction but also through third party knowledge web sites. This is what makes the game world interesting in comparison to other structured social systems. These websites are compiled with information about what makes a 'good' cleric, with tips and tricks, hints and guides for a player to better themselves within the game-space. Although most role-expectations are based on a particular social context of the individual fulfilling the role, the third party knowledge sites are usually removed from the actual, individualized game-play experience, altering the direct reciprocal nature of the creation of role expectations through the collective norms of a particular community.

Finally, Parsons acknowledges that no matter how rigidly defined any functional role is, the personality of the individual fulfilling the role plays a large part in how the role is actualized. He states that "given the initial diversity of genetic constitution, plus the diversity of situational influence, including the combination or role-interactions, it would be strictly impossible for socialization, even in a relatively uniform milieu, in terms of major differentiations of social structure, to produce a strictly uniform product" [2]. This brings us to agency within a structured role and how an individual takes the same functional role as many others and makes it their own.

PLAYER APPROPRIATION: DEFINING THE SELF IN ROLES

As a player enters the world of EverQuest, they choose a among a selection of generic roles, among them the role of cleric. As iterated throughout this paper, a cleric's role is to heal. But beyond a role's generic design and pure function, the actualization of the role is influenced by the player's personality, expectations of the role prior to entering the game, socialized in-game expectations and finally through a player's social interaction with other playing characters within the game. This creates a player's personal style of play which defines the level of role fulfillment in terms of role expectations and collective ideals of a particular class' capabilities.

As a player puts more time into playing their character, learning the role of their class and interacting with other individuals, the roles are further personalized beyond their original definitions. Other defining elements enter the player's definition of the role they are fulfilling [through play] such as trade-skills, social status and individual player motivations for selecting a particular class and how a player sees that class being played prior to entering the game. This personalization of the role makes it difficult to view the role as simply a functional one when looking for members to complete a goal oriented group within the game. It is in this stage that the community begins to distinguish between a good cleric and a bad cleric, even if both are capable of fulfilling the same functional tasks.

As mentioned earlier, a cleric's role is to heal their group members during battle and cast spells that increase their group mates' health (or hit points or HP) and other in game characteristics such as armor class (AC) and resists (against cold, heat, poison and disease based enemy spells). Through socialization, players begin to develop an understanding between a sufficient and excellent cleric. A player who fulfills their role beyond expectations of other players, buffing their group members without being asked, or learning the hit point levels of their group mates so

they can accurately determine when to begin healing, can be qualified as an excellent cleric. This skill level is developed by the player through time [commitment], play experience, and additional textual knowledge of one's role – often found on websites and message boards

“What distinguishes one group from others is its members' behavior, and not just who its members are – that is, their names, faces, and personal idiosyncrasies” [3]. Through repeated interaction with the same people, role expectations change based on personal play style of those being interacted with. Through this type of socialization, what was once deemed a ‘generalized’ norm now becomes ‘specialized’. A tight, or highly effective group will become accustomed to such instinctual role fulfillment and begin to expect such performance from other player's they encounter.

In this reciprocal fashion, expectations become redefined, clarified and reified based on the expectations of a small group instead of a larger system. This separates players within the society found within the game-space, differentiating good guilds and bad, a great group from a functional one and a great player and a slacker. Depending on what others expect of the classes and players they associate with, each role is transformed beyond the generic class the player started out with.

There are other ways a player can stretch the role definition of their particular class. The player who plays more than one character (of different a different class) can indeed define themselves as more than just a cleric, or just a warrior – but as a unique hybrid of both, since the player will accumulate knowledge from one character that may potentially affect their definition of self when playing another character.

Fulfilling multiple roles within the same game-space allows a player to understand the functions of different roles within the same social system. This gives a player a stronger sense of what is required of their other role own role within the game. If a player who has both a high-level warrior and a high-level cleric, they can use information they have learned about a particular tactic or zone when playing one character and use this information to benefit the second character. This expands the played attributes of the fixed, designed role of any particular class beyond its confined, defining characteristics.

CONCLUSION

With these three structural definitions in place; functional design which is understood as being the boundaries of the generic class role within the game; role expectations that are created through socialization between players; and role actualization as player's individualize their role through personality and play style, we see that the game is designed as a set of roles intended to be played together, but the play experience is affected by the individuals who perform these roles. From this position we can move forward to examine the presence of social and role hierarchies that are created through the design of the game, the expectations of players and the actualized play of the individualized roles.

Furthermore, the unique environment of the game-space allows individuals to participate in and observe structural functionalist systems such as groups, guilds, and raids simultaneously. Play through an avatar has the ability to remove the player, to some degree, from the first person perspective of participation within a structural system, allowing them to potentially explore the

theoretical elements of role theory. Such an environment allows us to re-examine the position of sociological role theory in terms of traditional social structures and system in a virtual context.

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ⁱ <http://eqlive.station.sony.com/library/classes.jsp>

ⁱⁱ <http://eqlive.station.sony.com/manual/manual.jsp?id=46846>

ⁱⁱⁱ [ibid](#)