

Skill & Class Knowledge

There are some people out there, you may even be among them, who are just naturally *good* at all kinds of video games, including *World of Warcraft*. I am not one of these people. I mean, I'm not naturally awful, but there are some things I just don't quite instinctively grasp. That doesn't mean that I wasn't a great raider when I was playing, but it meant I had to do a bit more work than some of my more talented friends. Two of my officers in my old guild, Apotheosis of Eldre'Thalas, were extremely talented guys when it came to picking up classes and just *understanding* things more quickly than most. Learning curve? What learning curve? Daey, my melee officer, and Majik, my ranged officer, made picking up a new fight, a new class, a new talent, whatever, seem easy, as though they'd done it a thousand times before. Meanwhile, I would take my time in learning the synergy between different abilities and talents.

The end result of their inherent abilities was, however, the same as my research: all of us were skilled, knowledgeable players.

- Knowledge Leads to Skill

The core of it is really learning how to play your class. Learning how to appropriately play your class and then *implementing* that knowledge makes all the difference. So how do you learn to play your class?

One of the recruitment questions on the Apotheosis application form asked just that: *How do you gain knowledge about playing your class or spec?*

As the leaders of the guild, we wanted to know what resources you used to learn how to play, basically.

Now, the actual abilities in this priority list *don't really matter at all*. It's really all about seeing the synergy between abilities and *understanding* the priority. The priority can be quite dynamic and unless you understand it well, you just won't be able to think on your feet. Truthfully, everyone in *World of Warcraft* should be thinking on their feet, but many don't. One of the major problems is that people get lazy and complacent and they don't care about the reasons why the priority system is important. When patches and hotfixes are applied, priorities may change, even drastically so, and the best chance you have of adapting to these changes quickly is through understanding why you used to do X, Y and Z, but now have to do X, Y, A, C. There are many raid groups out

there who don't have patience for those with a bigger learning curve. If you, like me, don't inherently grasp some of the synergies in your optimum priority, some of your time is best spent examining what the theorycrafters out there have *already determined* is optimum and trying to understand the reasoning behind it. Do that and you'll be ahead of the game the next time things change around on you.

Don't forget: things *always* change. That's the one thing you can always count on in *World of Warcraft*!

- **Planning Leads to Skill**

Something that a lot of people just don't take the time to do is think about how to intelligently use their particular class skills or abilities in a fight. I'm not talking about the priority list, though. I'm talking about things like a warrior's Shield Wall or other damage-mitigation abilities, or just other *utility* abilities. Let's look at some examples from the *Cataclysm* expansion.

1) Yor'sahj the Unsleeping.

There was a boss in the Dragon Soul raid instance named Yor'sahj the Unsleeping. Occasionally throughout the fight, he would summon differently coloured globules. You would only be able to kill one of them and he would absorb the others. Each coloured globule had a different effect that it would temporarily grant to the boss, Yor'sahj. In this sense, you could sort of dictate which abilities you wanted him to get. One of the abilities was a mana drain, in that *all the mana* from the raid group would be collected into a targetable object called a Mana Void. Once destroyed, the mana void would redistribute all the mana to the raid group.

On the heroic version of this fight, many raid groups, my own included, would not immediately kill the Mana Void. We'd use mana-recovery cooldowns immediately after our mana had been drained, then whittle down the Mana Void to somewhere between 10% and 20% health. Then, the next time our mana was drained, we'd destroy the first Mana Void, get our mana back and use damage-over-time spells (along with some direct damage) to whittle the second Mana Void down to 10-20%. We did this specifically so that we could just do incidental damage to the Mana Void throughout most of the encounter and then spend just a very little bit of time killing it, allowing us to regain our mana much more quickly, so we could get back to healing and DPSing even faster.

Kurn's Guide to Being a *Kick-Ass Raider* **Sneak Peek 1: Skill**

On this fight, death knights were incredibly useful, because the range of the Mana Void's mana redistribution was pretty small. As such, having a death knight use Death Grip to grip the Void into the group not only allowed the entire raid group to obliterate the Mana Void very quickly, but also permitted the entire raid group to get mana back, rather than having, oh, half the healers miss the mana. This is a great example of death knights using their Death Grip ability. It's not part of their typical rotation or ability priority list, since it also works as a taunt, but it's making good use of a utility ability to better aid the entire group.

During this fight, we also used cooldowns like Hymns of Hope from priests and Mana Tide Totems from resto shaman in order to regenerate mana, but these were generally coordinated by the raid leader (at least, I know I coordinated them for my own group). Other mana-recovery abilities, such as Divine Plea for paladins, Mana Gems for mages, Innervate for druids and the like, were not specifically coordinated, but shortly after the first Mana Void stole all the mana was a great time to use these abilities.

2) Ragnaros.

The end-boss of Tier 12's raid instance, The Firelands, was Ragnaros. On the normal difficulty, Phase 2 consisted of dealing with Molten Seeds and Engulfing Flames. These seeds would spawn on top of you, causing you damage, and would then spawn adds, while Engulfing Flames would cause random areas of the platform to be on fire. As such, grouping together during Phase 2, whenever the Molten Seeds came out, was a great way to round up the adds, kill them and make sure everyone was healed appropriately.

For a holy paladin, for example, the moment when Molten Seeds dropped was a great moment to use the Holy Radiance spell. At the time, it was very different from what we saw it become in 4.3 and into Mists of Pandaria. The ability was on a 30s cooldown and did healing to everyone around you for 10s. At the same time, assuming you were properly specced as a holy paladin, it also granted you a short burst of speed. This allowed the holy paladin to pop the ability, get into position quickly and do a lot of passive healing as others got into position. This is a great example of another utility ability being used: the holy paladin got to the required position quickly and was able to do extra healing after most of the raid had just been damaged.

3) Hagara the Stormbinder.

The fourth boss in the Dragon Soul instance was Hagara the Stormbinder. She had three phases: the normal phase, the lightning phase and the ice phase. On heroic mode, a common method of dealing with the ice phase was to have the melee run around the outside of her room, while having all of the ranged and

Kurn's Guide to Being a *Kick-Ass Raider* Sneak Peek 1: Skill

healers group up in the center of her room, underneath this shell that was basically a big bubble of water, called Watery Entrenchment. Standing inside of it lowered your movement speed by 50% and caused 9% of your maximum health to be lost every five seconds. The goal was for everyone to run to the center so that the ranged could DPS the targets on the outside of the bubble without running and so that the healers could group up and heal everyone without running. It meant a *lot* more healing, but it also meant a *lot* more DPS done and, with her hard enrage of 8 minutes, all the DPS we could muster was required.

Since I was a paladin healer, I was designated to run into the middle with all the other healers and ranged. Remember how I mentioned that there was a 50% slow in effect while under the Watery Entrenchment? Hand of Freedom to the rescue! This paladin ability, on a 25s cooldown, can be cast on someone and it grants them immunity to movement impairing effects for six seconds. Perfect. Just before we would all run to the middle, I'd slap this on myself for the run to the middle and then I'd start healing myself and then others as they entered my range. With its short cooldown, this was available for all ice phases. Had any other paladins (protection and retribution ones) wanted to be *awesome*, they could have thrown Hand of Freedom up on a healer to get them into position more quickly.

So you can see that planning ahead for the use of your other abilities, while not always *supremely* important is still, nonetheless, something that will give you that little extra something. Could I have gotten to the middle on Hagara without Hand of Freedom? Sure, but why not use it to my advantage? Did I need a speed boost to get to the stack point on Ragnaros? No, but it allowed me to position myself quickly so I could do more healing *and* healed the entire raid as they showed up in the stack spot. Did we need a death knight to Death Grip the Mana Void on Yor'sahj? Not really, but it meant we didn't have to chase the Mana Void around the whole room.

It's the little things you do with your class abilities that allow you to kick it up a notch. These are the things that will lead to you improving as a player and as a raider. Planning out cooldowns, planning out when to use certain utility abilities and having a very good idea of how the fight works *before you even see it in person* all goes towards making you a better player. There is nothing wrong with having a post-note on your monitor reminding you to hit your abilities at various points during different fights! Do what you need to do in order to remind yourself that those abilities are there and are usable.

- Practice Leads to Skill

It's one thing to *know* you should hit buttons in a particular order, but it's another when you have things like fire on the ground to deal with. Or maybe

Kurn's Guide to Being a *Kick-Ass Raider* Sneak Peek 1: Skill

it's adds in a boss fight. Perhaps you're dealing with an interrupt rotation. The key to doing well with those extra distractions is by excelling at your primary job under regular circumstances, whether that's tanking, healing or DPSing. How do you excel at your primary job? Practice.

During *Cataclysm*, I made a somewhat foolish decision to create a second holy paladin. Some friends in a guild I'd enjoyed myself in during *Wrath of the Lich King* were having a hell of a time getting a good holy paladin to stick around, so I thought I'd see how tough it was to level a paladin. As it happens, it wasn't very difficult. Soon, I was raiding part-time with that other guild while raiding full-time with my own. I raided as a holy paladin for both guilds.

While from a time standpoint, it was a little silly to raid as much as I did with both the guilds, I'll tell you what: I became a really great holy paladin. It's not that I *wasn't* a good paladin beforehand, but doing the same fights over and over *and over* again really let me refine my play. All of a sudden, the mechanics (click here, push this button, use this ability) faded away and I would feel as though I was playing the piano with my mouse and keyboard. I took less environmental damage, learned to tweak my playstyle to better use my cooldowns and abilities and, ultimately, became a better player. It really was just practicing the same fights five times a week with the same class and spec that did it for me. I don't think I would have been as improved overall if I had used my hunter in the other guild, because while the fights would have been the same, my focus (no pun intended!) while on the hunter would have been radically different than as a holy paladin. I think it's extremely valuable to experience content on more than one character, in different roles, but if you want to improve yourself, you need to practice *as* that character.

Think of it as learning a language. Immersion is one of the best ways to learn a language but, more importantly, immersion is also very helpful in retaining it. I grew up speaking both French and English, for example, but my English language skills far surpass my French skills because I went to English school. Despite daily French classes, despite half my family being francophone, I wasn't *immersed* in the French language. As such, I don't currently speak French as well as I (or my mother!) would like. Still, I know that if I get a job in a French-speaking environment, all my French language skills will return to me with, well, hey, what's that? Right! Practice.

So how do you practice without raiding the way I was in *Cataclysm*? What if you just don't have 15 hours a week or your guild isn't raiding that often?

There are lots of ways, to be honest. The first is to just do dungeons or scenarios on your main raiding character (or your character of choice, if you're trying to practice a different one). Try to be awesome! Experiment and play with

Kurn's Guide to Being a *Kick-Ass Raider* Sneak Peek 1: Skill

your abilities. Test them out. Swap glyphs and talents around to try them out and see how they work in new situations.

Then, there's the Raid Finder (or LFR). LFR has, to be honest, a painfully low bar for "acceptable play". Set it higher for yourself. Try not to eat damage (even if it won't kill you, because, let's face it, it probably won't), try to maximize your DPS or healing or overuse cooldowns if you're a tank, even if you're in no danger of dying. Practice rotations, practice movement, practice dodging crap in LFR that might be fatal on flex, normal and heroic.

Challenge Modes are another fantastic way to improve your play. While I haven't personally done any, I've heard from a lot of people that they're using abilities they hadn't touched in ages. Challenge Modes will stress different aspects of your character than you're used to. Anything that makes you think differently about your character and spec is a good thing! It helps to think outside the box, which is occasionally very helpful in raiding. (As an aside, this is why I miss the class quests from Vanilla. The quest for the epic hunter bow, Rhok'delar, was amazing and tested your ability to kite, to out-maneuver the demons, to make the most of *all* of your abilities. It was a true testament to your skill if you had Rhok'delar, not to mention your patience.)

Patch 5.4 brought with it something called "Proving Grounds". Again, I haven't done these personally, but I love the idea of them. You and you alone against waves of oncoming enemies! This is likely going to be a better way to test out new specs and such than standing at a training dummy. Training dummies, while useful, are never as useful as being in an actual combat situation. The problem with training dummies is that you're not forced out of your comfort zone. A hunter will never have to use Disengage or Deterrence on a training dummy. A paladin will never have to scan their raid frames and throw a Hand of Sacrifice on someone while they DPS a training dummy.

However, despite the fact that they will never challenge you in specific ways, training dummies are great for tanks and DPS who are trying to nail their ability priority list. Training your fingers to hit THAT key, then THAT button and so on is an important part of the game. Training dummies are great for simple, basic training like that. It's also great if you rebind some keys or abilities and you need to force yourself to remember that no, no, Devotion Aura is now your K key instead of your H key, and H is now a proper damaging ability, or what-have-you.