Blizzlike, Game Plus, and Funservers: An Analysis of World of Warcraft Private Servers

Geoffrey Hill
University of Melbourne
Grattan Street, Parkville,
Victoria, 3010, Australia
gwhill@student.unimelb.edu.au

Martin Gibbs, Melissa J. Rogerson
University of Melbourne
Grattan Street, Parkville,
Victoria, 3010, Australia
martin.gibbs@unimelb.edu.au, melissa.rogerson@unimelb.edu.au

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As one of the largest and longest running Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) has attracted an audience in excess of 100 million (Sarkar 2014) over its lifetime. In the 17 years since the game was released, there have been numerous changes and expansions to the design of the game. For example, the removal of talent trees in the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion ("Talent Tree" n.d.). Such changes have not always been well-received, leading some players to seek an alternative *World of Warcraft* experience. This audience pursues a variety of play experiences driven by differing motivation. Some players reject the design changes and direction of Blizzard's official expansions, instead seeking retain a design ethos of the game at a specific patch or point in time. Others look for a differing direction of game design using the *World of Warcraft* game as a starting point. To support these and other experiences a significant private server community exists, developed and operated by often anonymous third parties. Similar to authors in fanfiction (Lipton 2014) and ROM hacking (Newman 2018) communities, these developers appropriate these intellectual properties for community co-creation. This facilitates a community of spaces that provides access to an alternative *World of Warcraft* service outside the software end user license agreement. Recently in response to the increasing pressure of the private server community (Daemon 2016), Blizzard has changed its approach to players seeking a 'vanilla' *World of Warcraft* experience and released *World of Warcraft Classic* (Blizzard 2019).

PC based video games with multiplayer gameplay have traditionally had both server and client capability included on the disc, often called Local Area Network (LAN) support. However this functionality is becoming less popular to include, likely due to a combination of ubiquitous internet connectivity and development priorities. The recent remaster of another Blizzard game provides an example of changes in multiplayer gaming in the last 20 years. The original game *Diablo II* includes LAN play via TCP/IP support. In the remaster *Diablo II: Resurrected* no LAN support was

provided, instead only Internet connected multiplayer play (Blizzard Entertainment 2021), much to the concern of many players (Knoop 2021). Though the original Diablo II is still available to play online via the Battle.net servers, if the original game had lacked LAN support and Activision Blizzard had decided to shut down the servers there would be no way to play this aspect of the game. This scenario has happened for many games, for example first person shooter *Eve Dust 514*, social experience *Playstation Home*, MMO *Star Wars Galaxies*, as well as the hybrid digital boardgame *Golem:Arcana* (Rogerson, Sparrow, and Gibbs 2021). As we move towards an increasing landscape of internet connection required video games, often as part of Games as a Service (GaaS) model, this research seeks to explore the practises of *World of Warcraft* private servers so they might inform us of the future of video game emulation.

The scale of the private server space is by design difficult to determine. The legal grey (and not so grey) areas they exist in, means the servers are sometimes temporary and often hidden to a casual observer. Prior work by Crenshaw, La Morte, and Nardi (2017) has examined *World of Warcraft* private servers from the perspective of player experience and motivations. The private servers themselves vary significantly among their version of the game, intention, design, and alterations. These variations cater to and drive motivation of players and the community preferences.

In this research, we examine the scale of the *World of Warcraft* private server space, identify the components of the private server environment, and seek to examine private server practises. This includes identification of private server elements including server cores, hosting, administration, and marketing. We classify the private server space broadly into 3 main types of server through examination of current popular *World of Warcraft* private servers, and inspect some specific case study examples. Though there are many hundreds of servers, the reddit community r/wowservers maintains a list of popular servers. The servers examined in this research come from this list over the previous two years.

The first and most numerous type of *World of Warcraft* private servers are broadly classified as 'Blizzlike' servers. Blizzlike is a phrase established by the private server community that specifies a server that follows the 'Blizzard like' experience, operation, and behaviour (MakoRuu 2019). These servers aim to replicate exactly the specific version of the game as it was during its lifetime. They sometimes follow a progressive timeline, that is they may release content and even patch modification of the version of the game following a timeline similar to the Blizzard experience. For example the Kronos private servers ("KRONOS • Private Vanilla Project" n.d.) release *World of Warcraft* servers with a progressive release of content as Blizzard did with minimal changes.

The second server type that we identify are 'Game Plus' servers. This server type takes a version of the game and continues to develop content such as story, content, or classes in the style of the base game (data0x0 2019). For example the Turtle WoW private server extends the original launch version of *World of Warcraft* with a continuing story based on *Warcraft III* lore ("Turtle WoW — RP/PVE Vanilla Server" n.d.). Turtle WoW adds features such as races, gameplay features, and dungeon or raid content. This type of server sometimes uses differing versions of the game following a progressive content release, or may use some non-gameplay systems improvements from later versions such as new character models, graphical rendering, or interface scripting functionality.

The third server type, which the community often describe as 'funservers' (Yvanung 2020), represents the largest change to the *World of Warcraft* servers. These include

servers that take a specific version of the game and create completely differing sets of classes, systems, environments, and game design experiences. They use existing system components that players are familiar with, and combine them to create new gameplay experiences. For example the private server Ascension starts from a base *World of Warcraft Wrath of the Lich King* 3.3.5 client and adds features and assets using a custom launcher client ("Ascension Classless | Classless Game" n.d.). This server creates new and player customised classes, gameplay systems, and seasonal events. A small subset of these servers use the *World of Warcraft* game client and private server infrastructure in order to apply a total modification of the game. This follows the similar practises of total modifications in other standalone games (Kücklich 2005), creating an entirely new game using a mix of other IP and Warcraft IP assets. For example the private server Shinobi Story takes the *World of Warcraft Wrath of the Lich King* 3.3.5 client and creates a ninja MMO inspried by the anime *Naruto* ("Shinobi Story - a Ninja RPG" n.d.). Using base functionality from a private server core and Blizzard client, they add customisation to create a different game.

Through these classifications and examinations of case studies we reveal the significant scope, variety, and labour associated with the *World of Warcraft* private server space. We demonstrate that these practices are far larger than simply providing free to play *World of Warcraft* like experiences, and that the private server space has diversity that has yet to be explored by researchers.

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