

Grieving *World of Warcraft's* Chinese Server Shutdown

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INTRODUCTION

On January 24th 2023, the second day of the Chinese New Year, Activision-Blizzard shut down its Chinese *World of Warcraft* servers. Numerous players, rather than traditionally celebrating with their families, instead gathered in Azeroth, the virtual world of *World of Warcraft*, to bid farewell to the virtual homes, bodies and social groups they had inhabited for over eighteen years.

LITERATURE

This article explores the loss grieved by the Chinese players following the server shutdown. Between 2005 and 2023, over 3.2 million Chinese players grew up in Azeroth, developing their avatars alongside their personal self-development.

If two decades of research on *World of Warcraft* and its communities shows us anything (Krzywinska 2005; Chen, 2006; Warner & Raiter, 2005), it is that the game can become deeply entangled with players' lives. The consensus across the body of literature since, is that *WoW* serves as a site of attachment, convincingly showing that players experience (1) a belonging to the world, (2) embodiment through their avatar, (3) attachment to the labour of playing it, (4) social connection of various kinds – weak and strong – to other players, and (5) intense nostalgia for the memories they made along the way (e.g., Mortensen, 2006; Pearce, 2009; Robinson & Bowman, 2022; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Zhang & Fung, 2013).

Research Question

However much we know of such meaningful experiences – argued to be (almost) indistinguishable from offline/'real' belonging, embodiment, labour, sociality and

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nostalgia – we know little about the *loss* of them. Within the Chinese context, and at the massive, collective scale of this case, we therefore analyze:

- How did and do Chinese players experience loss after the *World of Warcraft* server shutdown?

METHODS, DATA & ANALYSIS

To address this question, our paper is based on a multi-sited ethnography of *World of Warcraft* and its players through, on the one hand, participant observation with the diaspora of Chinese players that have migrated to Taiwanese *WoW*-servers; and on the other hand by observing the grief of those ‘left behind’ in *WeChat*-groups, *NGA* forums, on video-sharing platform *Bilibili*, and supplementary interviews.

We analyze the experiences these data give access to, by showing the way these players express grief over (1) the loss of their world, (2) the loss of their virtual body, (3) the loss of their hard work, (4) the loss of their friends and other social networks, and (5) at the memories they take with them – and try to cement – as they leave behind an intimate part of their lives.

CONCLUSION

Finally, we will conclude this paper, which is to our knowledge one of the first examinations of massively multiplayer online grief over the server shutdown of this scale (cf. Crenshaw, et al., 2017; Munn, 2023), by articulating the implications of the grief of such a huge part of *World of Warcraft*'s.

We conclude that, counter to the consensus of previous MMO scholarship; virtual and physical worlds are different precisely (and paradoxically) because of virtual worlds' materiality. MMOs indeed feel just as real, embodied, and social; *until* the servers' power switch is flipped, revealing the ultimately ephemeral nature of virtual worlds and the looming possibility of complete erasure of the world, its inhabitants and all they hold dear.

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