Private Servers Are More Than Video Game Piracy.

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INTRODUCTION

As it celebrates its 20th anniversary, the Massively Multiplayer On-Line Role-Playing Game (MMO) World of Warcraft (WoW) has had in excess of a hundred million players and a billion days played since its release (Sarkar 2014; Newman 2024). However not all these players of the game have done so through the intellectual property owners' official servers (Nostalrius 2018). Unofficial 'private servers', which exist at the fringes of the game's legal and ethical boundaries, provide access to the same game world that the official game does, but without the control of the intellectual property owner. These servers allow the participants to remain in a particular period of a living games lifetime, to change the rules of the games design, or to play from the beginning, through the variety of fresh servers that are run by the private server community.

By analysing data from current and former websites frequented by private server developers, hosts, and players, we investigate a historical timeline of private servers for WoW through the last two decades. We document a history dating back to the pre-release alpha version of the game before the official public release. Moving beyond an understanding of private server participation as simply piracy, we identify a range of practices in the community of developers and players. We show that the initially closed community of developers has evolved into a black market of services that exists in a grey area of legality. The collaborative and competitive dynamics of development in the early years mirror that of the Warez scene. In this subculture, breaking the law is seen as a form of resistance, generating prestige for the participant (Eve 2021). Through this, developers publicly create large scale open and closed source server infrastructure despite persistent attempts by the intellectual property owner to shut them down. This highlights the significant development resources and marketplaces of services that support what is often thought of as merely piracy.

PRIVATE SERVER COMMUNITY PRACTICES

Research into other piracy distribution networks such as the previously mentioned Warez scene, and into the networks of film piracy have identified surrounding practices that are broader than simple piracy (Lobato 2012). We identify similar practices emerging from the development and distribution of private servers.

Preservation of Gaming Artifacts

WoW is an MMO that has changed significantly over time, what is now known as a live service (Dubois and Weststar 2022). Throughout the game's continuing life there have been many players who wish to play the game as it was during a specific period (Nostalrius 2018; Zed 2020). Private servers have often supported this use case, where they provide access to a snapshot in time of a game that is no longer accessible. This form of preservation eventually adopted by Blizzard with the release of WoW Classic (Toft-Nielsen 2019), as they are influenced by their audience after years of dismissal (KareemNatic 2017; Makuch 2021).

Education and Professional Development

Emerging from the earlier Blizzard game hacking community, the private server space began as a closed community of hackers seeking to provide access to a game that wasn't even released yet. As this community expanded, despite the legal successes and failures of Blizzard Entertainment to stop them, the server software development moved into the more public and collaborative open-source development space. This research finds significant evidence of participants utilising both development and hosting of WoW private servers for personal education, using the skills and experiences developed to support professional career aspirations (Thaler, n.d.).

Expressions of Counterculture Politics

The recent exposure of the Activision Blizzard workplace behavior towards women emerging after a California state lawsuit (Plunkett 2021), has left many WoW players with moral questions surrounding their participation in media produced by a company they don't agree with. During this period, evidence of WoW players looking to access the game without financial contribution to the company led them to the private server space. This is a specific example of a long history of counterculture or anticapitalism participation among the private server community.

Access in Worldwide Economies

Although WoW was a game developed with the eastern market in mind, commonly neglected by western online games of its era (Staats 2019), the game was not accessible to large portions of the world through the early period of the games life. Even recent years have seen access issues with the game in some regions due to commercial, cultural, or political influences (Randall 2024; Toh 2023). Private servers provide access for regions outside Blizzard's official reach (Torta 2023).

Game Design and Modding

Private server development extends beyond preservation through to clear examples of extensive design and modification of the game. Players are presented with a wide range of modifications available through the variety of servers available to them. These game modifications have impact not just in their own space, but also feed back into the official game, even if they are not publicly acknowledged by Blizzard .(Renata 2024; Viper 2016) Using the language of the private server community we describe a classification of private servers, and identify the properties and game design modifications they use.

Plain Old Piracy

Of course, the simplest answer continues to have some truth to it. Some in the WoW private server space do engage in clear piracy of the game as its primary intention (Classroom-Wild 2023). This includes a portion of the player participants, but also in the black market of products and services supporting the development and hosting of private servers.

CONCLUSION

Our examination of the undocumented history and practices of these servers contributes to the understanding of preservation, co-creation and participation in always-on internet-connected video games. It explores the practices, skills, and motivations of private server community participants and their complex and multidimensional relationship with the commercial game and its publisher.

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