

# Playing Across the Strait: Chinese WoW Diasporas on Taiwanese Servers

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## Keywords

World of Warcraft, Diaspora, Game diaspora, Player identity, Chinese Players

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of game diaspora is not new in game studies, appearing when a game world ends or is shut down (Pearce 2009). The shutdown of mainland China's *World of Warcraft* (WoW) (Blizzard 2004) servers makes this concrete. WoW entered mainland China in 2005. Chinese players then built a distinct game culture and became deeply immersed in Azeroth (the game's fantasy world) for the next eighteen years. Yet in January 2023, Blizzard abruptly terminated its operations in mainland China, shutting down all servers. Overnight, countless players lost their virtual homes, and their long-standing digital lives were erased. Many were pushed to migrate to the nearest alternative: the Taiwanese servers. The Taiwanese server appears to offer a reasonable alternative: a similar ethnic and linguistic environment, and they had previously served as the destination for earlier mass migrations during previous expansion delays (Lin and Sun 2005; Lin and Sun 2011). But the two regions are also marked by political tensions, different cultural norms, and distinct writing systems (traditional vs. simplified) (Shi 2015). These differences have shaped divergent gaming ecosystems and emergent play practices. Thus, this paper asks:

How do Chinese players negotiate diaspora identities on Taiwanese servers through digital ethnography?

### LITERATURE

Players from the same region usually connect to the same servers, and over time, these servers foster a shared regional or national identity layered onto the broader game culture (Lin and Sun 2011). Within each regional server, players develop their own ways of interacting, playing, and creating content, so distinct play ecosystems emerge from their shared routines and practices grounded in that regional culture (Chen 2012; Pearce 2009). When regional servers shut down, members of these game communities become part of a game diaspora (Pearce 2011).

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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Similar to offline diasporas who experience grief, loss, and dislocation (Safran 1991; Pearce 2009), Salazar (2013) suggests that virtual diasporas also experience nostalgia and maintain attachments to their original communities, even when they are dispersed from their “homeland” server. Through the case of the game *Uru*, Pearce (2009) shows that when the game closed, players began to see themselves as refugees who had lost their homeland. She suggests that *Uru* players constructed discretionary ethnicity, grounded in an imagined homeland, shared values, and a collective identity partially detached from conventional cultural categories. After a server’s/game’s shutdown, players cultivated diaspora identities shaped by prior community ties and experiences of displacement (Pearce 2011).

Earlier work has traced the Chinese “cyber diaspora” on Taiwanese WoW servers during expansion-delay migrations (Lin and Sun 2005; Lin and Sun 2011). But these studies are largely based on Taiwanese players’ perspectives and focus on othering and political identity. In contrast, this paper centers on Chinese players’ lived experiences of forced migration and their sense of a temporary yet prolonged “refuge.”

## **METHOD**

This research employs digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2015) and was conducted over three months, from February to April 2023, the year of the shutdown. Multisited ethnography is used given the field’s emergent nature. Multisited participant observation covered the main spaces inhabited by these players: the WoW game itself (Arathi Basin server on the Taiwanese WLK servers), the National Geographic of Azeroth (NGA) forum, Bilibili, TikTok, and private WeChat groups. The data comprises textual contents from media platforms, recorded verbal interactions during play, and observational notes on in-game behaviors.

Salazar (2013) suggests that a group must exhibit diasporic consciousness to be classified as a diaspora, which involves a shared recognition of dispersion and the formation of a hybrid identity. Following this criterion, players must demonstrate long-term devotion and attachment to the Chinese servers, regarding them as their homeland and to self-identifying as game diasporas. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on players’ self-articulations, particularly when they describe the differences/difficulties they encountered after moving from their original playing homeland. Ambiguous communications were followed up either by asking players for brief clarifications or by checking related discussions across platforms to contextualize their meaning and enhance the interpretative reliability.

## **DISCUSSION**

Through an iterative, inductive thematic analysis that systematically identifies, analyzes, and interprets recurring patterns in players’ self-articulations (Braun and Clarke 2006), the research reveals three major perspectives. Firstly, the shutdown generates a complex, unstable form of digital diaspora. The uncertainty surrounding the reopening of Chinese servers produces an ongoing sense of suspended life: players hesitate to invest time, money, and emotional energy into a server they still view as temporary. This ambivalent attachment echoes traditional diaspora conditions, where the homeland remains central even as displacement stretches on, making it difficult for diaspora players to fully commit to the new environment.

Secondly, the shutdown also ruptures long-standing social ties. Former guild networks scatter, and many players arrive in Taiwanese servers alone. The loss of familiar partners reshapes the game's everyday rhythms, forcing migrants to seek new teammates through social media or rely on raiding services. This further introduces money-driven dynamics that sharply contrast with their previous norms, creating an environment in which financial transactions overshadow leisure (Mandryk et al. 2020). Chinese players feel trapped in a system where everything must be paid for.

Lastly, cultural clashes deepen these tensions. Despite sharing a language, differences in writing, abbreviations, and long-standing political frictions resurface in game chat. Earlier migration waves had already established a template for anti-Chinese resentment (Lin and Sun 2016), and the 2023 influx reactivates those memories. Migrants initially attempt politeness and assimilation, but as their numbers grow, their increased presence enables forms of resistance to Taiwanese norms. This demographic shift ultimately reinforces separate identities on both sides rather than fostering integration.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows the Chinese WoW shutdown produced a digital diaspora marked by uncertainty, fractured social worlds, and cultural friction. At a broader level, this case highlights how regional identities, linguistic norms, and political histories travel with players across servers. The findings also point to the influential role of corporate decision-making. As online worlds continue to fragment and migrate, understanding these diasporic processes becomes essential for game studies and developers managing cross-regional player communities.

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