

World of Warcraft: The Motivations for Playing on a Private Server

Andrew Grudt, Jake Krachman, Kevin Kurtzman

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to identify why some World of Warcraft players play on private servers instead of the official ones run by Blizzard. Private servers are independently owned and operated servers. Many private servers play vanilla, or original release, versions of the game or modified versions of the game. The research was conducted by completing in game interviews on the official Blizzard server Aerie Peak as well as two private servers (the rebirth and Heroes WoW). We also conducted research by reading the forums for both private servers and the official WoW site. In our research, we found that the four main motivations to play on private servers were the price, the close community, the desire to play old content, and the desire to play altered content. By finding the reasons players decide to play on private servers, our research can potentially be used to create a better official game, as well as allow various private servers to better understand their main player base.

Introduction

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are online video games in which the player can interact in-game with thousands of other players in a virtual world. The most widely played of these MMORPGs, World of Warcraft (WoW), is both popular and profitable. In their final report on the number of active subscribers in Quarter 3 of 2015, Blizzard announced that WoW had 5.5 million monthly subscribers (Skipper). While 5.5 million more than other MMORPGs, it is actually a 10-year low for WoW. Part of the continued popularity of the 12 year old game is due to its graphical and gameplay updates every few years

in the form of various expansions. Each new expansion replaces the previous one. But despite the success of the current iteration of World of Warcraft, many players prefer to play on one of numerous private servers, which are neither operated nor supported by Blizzard. These private servers are against Blizzard's end-user license agreement, relatively small, often free, and are usually different in some fundamental way than the official servers run by Blizzard. While the differences from official servers vary greatly by private server, most can be put into one of two categories: either "hero" or "clean" servers. "Hero" servers are private servers where something is fundamentally different about the game, such as the difficulty or levelling up system. In contrast, "clean" private servers are merely a previous version of World of Warcraft. One common type of clean server is that which emulates the feel of the original, or "vanilla" game. Despite the popularity of various vanilla servers, Blizzard has shut them down while failing to create vanilla servers of their own, citing a lack of interest and development difficulties (Nethaera).

Previous academic studies, such as that done by Nick Yee, have focused on player's motivations to play World of Warcraft as a whole. Yee classified the motivations for playing as being either part of the achievement, social, or immersion components of the game (Yee, 773). The achievement component of WoW included advancing in the game and defeating others. Those who preferred the social component sought to interact with other players and build relationships within the game, while those who played for the immersion aspect enjoyed the storyline and lore in the game world. Private servers usually differentiate themselves from official ones in either the achievement or social aspects of the game. A later qualitative study performed by Thomas Debeauvais and Bonnie Nardi (6) looked at the motivations of players to

play on private servers for the MMORPG Ragnarök Online. They found that players enjoyed private Ragnarök Online servers mostly due to better technical features, improved avatar customization, easier difficulty, or an improved social environment. However, there has been no study on the motivations of World of Warcraft players to play on private servers. This study sought to fill that research gap by qualitatively assessing the motivations of players to participate on private WoW servers. We also tested to see if there were any different motivations between players on hero and clean private servers.

Method

To gather the qualitative data for our project, we decided to do a combination of in-game surveys and to analyze the forums on WoW's official website. While looking through the forums, we specifically searched for posts and threads that dealt with private servers and people's opinions of them. Often we used specific questions such as "why do people play on private servers" and terms such as "motivation" and "reasons" with regard to private servers. We then decided to do in-game research, asking players from the private servers Therebirth and Heroes WOW private servers and Blizzard's official Aerie Peak realm a short five question survey that changed depending on whether they were on a private or official server. Both surveys can be found under appendix A.

An emergent coding scheme was used to find the main motivations behind why people were playing on private servers. We separated them by forum posts (N=50), official server responses (N=50), and each set of private server responses (N=25 for both). The we then split up the responses into the prevalent categories that we discovered the majority of the responses lent themselves to. We discovered that there appeared to be four main motivations for playing on a

private server rather than a official server, two of which were universal to the two kinds of private servers and one specific reason to each kind of private server.

Results

From the total amount of data collected, forum posts (N=50) and in-game responses (N=100) we determined four main reasons for playing on a private server. The two general categories are a person's lack of ability to or desire to pay, and the generally closer community. The specific reason for playing on a clean private server was that people wanted to experience World of Warcraft in a form that was no longer available to the official. The specific reason for playing on a hero private server was that people wanted to experience the game's content in a different way than the way that Blizzard was allowing people to experience it.

Can't/Won't Pay for a Subscription

During the in game research on both of the private servers, there were numerous responses (n=10) to the question “Why do you play on a private server” that referenced the inability to afford a subscription or their reluctance to pay for a subscription. The idea of reluctance to pay was also seen in forum posts where a group (n=8) stated that Blizzard shouldn't allow private servers because they were a place to play for free (Killhimnotme). However, the people who claimed that playing for free was a part of the reason they were using private servers (n=7) claimed that they couldn't pay for a regular subscription. A level 34 Night Elf on Therebirth claimed “I play on this private server because I started playing with vanilla WoW and that's the version I like best. Also I'm fresh out of college and money is a thing.” Another player on Therebirth, a level 7 human exclaimed “BECAUSE I'M POOR!” On the Heroes WOW server, a level 78 Blood Elf said “it just isn't worth it to pay for the actual game when I can play

multiple versions for free.” Though most people, especially those still paying World of Warcraft's fifteen dollar monthly fee, consider this as a mildly offensive reason for playing a private server. However, on some level, it appears that World of Warcraft's current game director, Tom Chilton, agrees that paying for the game can get a bit ridiculous. He claims that there will always be a place for subscription games in the world, but if the studio can't keep content fresh then why would people pay for it (Haas). Regardless of what people who pay and people who make say though, people are turning to private servers to enjoy the game for free.

Close Communities

The social aspect of World of Warcraft has been noted as one of the many things that kept players coming back (Yee). However, with the inclusion of cross realm phasing, party finder and garrisons, some participants felt that the social aspect of commercial World of Warcraft has begun to decline. Some players believed group finder to be a negative influence on the social aspect of World of Warcraft, “many players argued that the social experience was part of the ‘charm that came from MMOs’ and contributed to the game’s appeal. These players felt that Group Finder diminished communication and decreased loyalty to a group” (Crenshaw). In the early versions of the game, a player had to be part of a guild, and an active member to have a reliable group for dungeons and raids, now most non-raid guilds are mostly seen as cash cows to help pay for things by new players (Speedslink). It doesn't help that to be in a guild a person doesn't even have to talk to people in the guild. On Aerie Peak, a level 100 Pandaren said, “I think people play, and I certainly play, on private servers because the guilds and communities are so much more welcoming there.” The Pandaren wasn't alone with their opinion, many other players on Aerie Peak (n=22) commented on what they felt was a serious problem with the

communities on the server. However, not everyone thinks that these adaptations to the game play are tearing it apart, in fact from our survey we had only a few (n=3) respond that they felt the community was better on their private server.

Playing Old Versions

This particular motivation was found to be the motivation mentioned by all of the people surveyed on Therebirth (N=25), and a good deal of people on Aerie Peak mentioned it as well (n=18). As Therebirth is a clean vanilla server (The Rebirth), everyone made remarks about how vanilla was their personal favorite version of World of Warcraft. Most responses from Therebirth (n=19) remarked that the game was more fun because it was both more challenging and had a superior story. It has been noted in some forum posts (n=8) that in the original version of WoW, everything from the raids to everyday mobs had the potential to kill you. On the forums Solbranthius, a 100 Blood elf, says, “Back then you needed to plan ahead and remain careful not to pull more than one - or perhaps two - enemies at the same time.” This we experienced when playing Therebirth first hand. In today’s World of Warcraft, a low level paladin can easily destroy three enemies that are all one level higher than him. In vanilla, the paladin runs out of mana quickly, and they would be lucky to take down just one or two of the enemies. In our experience, this raise in difficulty was definitely evident. However, the challenge is not the only reason people gave us as to why they play on clean servers. For some people (n=12) a sense of nostalgia was the primary reason they played on Therebirth. They claimed that it wasn’t only the challenge that brought them back, it was the quest lines, dungeons and overall story. Some people from Aerie Peak (n=18) reported that when they play on private servers they pick their favorite expansion and replay it, simply for the nostalgia.

Different Content

The difference in content was a reason was mentioned by everyone who played on the hero server Heroes WOW, (N=25) but only a few people on Aerie Peak (n=4) mentioned that they played on servers with their own content. Heroes WOW is a server that offers extra races such as the naga, and allows every race to be every class (Heroes). The Naga were cited as the main attraction by most people (n=14) on Heroes WOW. However, people also cited the 255 level cap and pvp options as attractions. Even the current game director Tom Chilton claims that it is the new content that brings people in (Haas). Chilton further remarked that without new and exciting content games stagnate and lose players. While Blizzard does create new expansions for the game, the uniqueness of certain hero servers appeal to many gamers who want an experience different from that of modern WoW.

Discussion

In this study, we concluded that there are three main reasons that people play on “clean” private servers: the desire to play an old version of the game, a better community, and the low cost. On “hero” private servers participants pointed to similar reasons, but instead of wanting to play an older version, they wanted to experience the game in a different way.

Nostalgia is one of the main factors that people play on private servers. Private servers provide a place for people who started in vanilla to relive the quests and struggles which have been altered in the current version of the game. One of the main reasons that Blizzard entertainment has denied the creation of private servers was because they believe after the nostalgia wore off, players would leave the servers and they would be abandoned (Somaliu). Our study concluded that the nostalgic factors did play a role in a player's time in the game, but was

rally the sole reason that they played. Players who said they were nostalgic on the clean servers were a wide variety of levels, and had been playing on the servers for a wide variety of time. We found no correlation between nostalgia and time spent playing on a private server. If Blizzard were to add vanilla servers, the participation on most clean private servers would most likely decline.

Many players who participate on private servers are looking for the experience of a close community. This was also cited as one the main reason for players to play on private Ragnarök Online servers (Debeauvais, 4). Players on both private and official servers believe that the community of World of Warcraft has taken a turn for the worst on official servers. People on private servers believe this lack of community is caused by Blizzard changing the game in order to make it more acceptable to a wider audience. The general consensus among these players was that an effective way that Blizzard could make the game more friendly towards the community would be to make combat harder, along with making groups needed to complete harder quests, dungeons, and raids.

Players on private servers also stated that the simpler game mechanics made the current version of the game too easy. By changing WoW to make it more accessible, many felt that Blizzard left behind the challenges that hard core players desired (Hennibsd). Some players wish to experience the game in its original, hardened form, which is not currently available to players outside of private servers. Players on the private servers said they enjoyed the grind and progression that came with the original version of the game. The creation of vanilla servers run by Blizzard would likely motivate the players who enjoy the challenge of the old game to leave private servers and become paying customers once again.

The final reason that players on private servers preferred private servers over those of official World of Warcraft was that most private servers are free. Some participants in private server interviews commented that they were unable to afford or unwilling to pay the 155 to 180 dollar yearly price for a subscription to the commercial version of the game. This shows that the need for private servers is not only because of gameplay and community, but also because of existential factors surrounding the game. Because many modern MMORPGs are free to play, WoW's high price tag drives away players, sending them to both private servers and other games.

Many participants in the official World of Warcraft server were unaware of the existence of private servers, and those that did know tended to have negative perceptions of them. People on official servers mostly did not understand the appeal of private servers, as they felt the game would be stagnant and a waste of time for developers. Players on official servers did not believe the interest for vanilla was worth enough for Blizzard to create it. Many also criticized the morality and legality of private servers, as they are illegal due to the use of Blizzard's copyrighted assets.

Blizzard's current stance on releasing a vanilla version World of Warcraft has changed in the past year. Previously stating that vanilla servers do not have enough support, after a petition of over 250,000 people was delivered to the CEO of Blizzard entertainment, Mike Morhaime, Blizzard issued a new statement saying that they would consider creating realms that were more true to the core values of the vanilla game. (Morhaime, 1) Players on private servers surveyed by us were not content with this response, with many commenting that they will not return to Blizzard until true vanilla servers are added. This shows that private servers will continue to have

their base players unless Blizzard fully supports vanilla servers. Although vanilla servers would likely draw players back from clean servers, those who play on hero servers would be less likely to return based on just that simple change due to the major differences in those servers. Additionally, it is unlikely that Blizzard could completely replicate the close community feel of small private servers.

One major limit to our research was that on Blizzard's official website, a large number of forum discussions related to private servers were unavailable. This made quality posts relevant to our research harder to find (Blizzard). All the posts that we could find on WoW's website regarding private servers were negative. This may be, at least in part, because Blizzard removed topics that seemed to be pro-private server, making the community seem more ardently against them than they actually were. However, our interviews on Aerie Peak did generally tend to match the negative tone of the forums.

A potential topic for future research could be the analysis of the people who prefer to play on private servers instead of official ones. Because many interviewed on private servers cited nostalgia, it can be inferred that many of them began playing WoW several years ago. But other than that, there is little that this study, or any other has done, that can classify the type of people who play on private servers. Additionally, Blizzard has cited the longevity of vanilla servers as a potential obstacle for creating them (Somaliu). They believe that the interest, therefore the participation, would die off fairly quickly. An in-depth investigation of how long players regularly play on vanilla servers would reveal whether there would be sustained interest in them, or if people would quickly grow tired of them like Blizzard believes they would.

In conclusion, people typically play on private servers for four main reasons: a different feel, a better community, the expensiveness of the official game, and an experience currently not offered by Blizzard. These motivations can be directly attributed to practices and changes made by Blizzard. The company's changes, and lack thereof, to World of Warcraft have created a void that has been filled by private servers. However, it is impossible for any company, especially one with the amount of players that Blizzard has, to make everybody happy. They do their best, but any move to address one of these concerns would likely irritate a large number of players, creating just as many new problems. So while Blizzard would be wise to make some sort of appeal to players on private servers, completely changing the current game would likely not be in their best interest.

References

- Crenshaw, Nicole, and Bonnie Nardi. "“It Was More than Just the Game, It Was the Community”:
Social Affordances in Online Games." *Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)* (2015): n. pag. Web. 5 May 2016.
<<http://sites.uci.edu/nicolecrenshaw/files/2014/01/HICSS2016-Submission292CameraReady.pdf>>.
- Debeauvais, Thomas, and Bonnie Nardi. *A Qualitative Study of Ragnarök Online Private Servers: In-game Sociological Issues*. Irvine, CA: Department of Informatics U of California, Irvine, 2009. *Artifex*. Artifex. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.
<<http://www.artifex.org/~bonnie/Debeauvais-Nardi-RO-private-servers.pdf>>
- Haas, Pete. "World Of Warcraft Might Go Free-To-Play, Blizzard Says." *CinemaBlend*. N.p., 22 Aug. 2013. Web. 9 May 2016. <<http://www.cinemablend.com/games/World-Warcraft-Might-Go-Free-Play-Blizzard-Says-58509.html>>
- Hennibsd "Too Easy!" 3 Mar. 2015. Battle.net World of Warcraft General forum. 4 May 2016
<<http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/13902190104?page=1#1>>
- HeroesWoW*. Web. 10 May 2016. <<http://www.heroeswow.info/>>.
- Nethaera: "To the WoW Community" 26 April 2016. Battle.net World of Warcraft General forum. 5 May 2016 <<http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/17611300963>>
- The Rebirth*. Web. 8 May 2016. <<http://www.therebirth.net/>>.
- Skipper, Ben. "World of Warcraft Subscribers Hit 5.5 Million, Lowest Numbers for 10 Years." *International Business Times RSS*. N.p., 03 Nov. 2015. Web. 7 May 2016.
<<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/world-warcraft-subscribers-hit-5-5-million-lowest-numbers-10-years-1527035>>.
- Solbranthius "Vanilla WoW players - Don't you miss the difficulty?" September 5, 2013. Battle.net World of Warcraft General forum.
<<http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/7426873724>>
- Somaliu: "The Great Wall of 'No'" 17 Mar. 2013 Battle.net World of Warcraft General forum. 4 May 2016 <<http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/8198732508>>
- Speedslink "WoW's decline began in Cataclysm." June 5, 2015. Battle.net World of Warcraft General forum. 7 May 2016
<<http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/18000550803>>

Blizzard "IN-GAME AND FORUM VIOLATIONS" April 2016. Battle.net Blizzard Support 24 May 2016 <<https://us.battle.net/support/en/article/policy>>

Morhaime, Mike "To the WoW Community" April 24, 2016 Battle.net World of Warcraft General forum. 7 May 2016
<<http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/20743584206>>

Yee, Nick. "Motivations for Play in Online Games." *Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. CyberPsychology & Behavior* Volume 9, Number 6, 2006, Jan. 2007. Web. 7 May 2016.
<<http://online.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/cpb.2006.9.772>>.

Yee, Nick. "Why Do You Play?" *The Daedalus Project*. N.p., 15 Apr. 2004. Web. 9 May 2016.
<<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000777.php?page=3>>.

Appendix A:

a. In game- Official

1. How long have you been playing WoW?
2. Do you know what a private server is?
3. Do you or have you in the past played on a private server? If so which one(s)
4. Why do you think people play on private servers?
5. What do you think of Blizzard's attempt at a compromise with "clean servers"?

b. In game- Private

1. When did you start playing WoW?
2. Why do you play on a private server?
3. Why do you think private servers are so popular?
4. Do you still play the current version of WoW? If so then why do you play both? If not then why do you prefer a private server?
5. What is your opinion on Blizzard's attempt at a compromise with "clean servers"?