

# From Tinkerers to Software Archivists: Examining the Edges of World of Warcraft Private Servers

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## Keywords

World of warcraft, private servers, mmo, game design, co-creation, software preservation

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Standing on the stage of Blizzcon 2017, J. Allen Brack, the Executive Producer of *World of Warcraft*, took an unexpected turn to a discussion of ice cream flavours. This joke was all in an effort to make the announcement of the official ‘vanilla’ *World of Warcraft* Classic servers (KareemNatic 2017). The term vanilla is a colloquial term for the version of the game without any game expansions. This announcement validated the efforts of many projects to create private servers based on the original game (Daemon 2016a). However as the most visible part of the wow private server community, these classic or ‘Blizzlike’ (MakoRuu 2019) servers only represent one of the range of activities in the private server space.

Private servers are emulated versions of Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games (Debeauvais and Nardi 2010). These instances of the game typically fall outside the End User License Agreement and Copyright of the game. Prior research such as the work done by Crenshaw, La Morte, and Nardi (2017) has examined the perspective of player experience and motivations in *World of Warcraft* private servers. Further, as more games move towards online models, MMO private servers can inform the practices of video game preservation through emulation, which is becoming an increasingly important technology for preservation (Acker 2020).

In this presentation, we will discuss the practices of three private servers in order to highlight the variety of game design and development activity in the *World of Warcraft* private server space.

The first case study is Nostralia, an Oceania focused Blizzlike *World of Warcraft* server. This server focused on replicating the original released version of *World of Warcraft* for a specific community of players in the Oceania region. It shut down shortly following the launch of the *World of Warcraft* Classic declaring that it had served its purpose (“Nostralia” 2020).

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2022

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The second case study is Ascension, a so-called ‘funserver’ (Yvanung 2020) that takes *World of Warcraft* assets and systems and repurposes them with new game systems and experiences (“Ascension Classless | Classless Game” n.d.). This server extends the *World of Warcraft* client with a custom launcher that allows the developers to update and customise the game client. Based on a modified version of the 2008 *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, the Ascension private server and client adds new content, materials and animations including some derived from subsequent editions of the game.

The final case study is the Alpha Project, dedicated to the preservation of pre-release versions of *World of Warcraft* (“Alpha Project” n.d.) including the early friends and family alpha 0.5.3. This version of the game was never publicly released and included many early iterations of game systems, graphics, user interfaces, and zones that changed before release. Though not publically available, this pre-release version was often seen in previews in the gaming press. The digital archeology of developing the server core systems includes searching through footage and screenshots of the early game press to develop the server core supporting an available official Blizzard 0.5.3 client.

Through these case studies, this research demonstrates the vibrant and complex range of activity and interest in *World of Warcraft* private servers beyond the simple piracy of a video game. Following our examples, engaging with nostalgia driven play in Nostralia, co-creation for expanding the game experience in Ascension WoW, activities towards preservation with the Alpha Project. This turns our attention to the rich and diverse creative and developer communities that surround the use of private servers in *World of Warcraft*.

## BIO

Geoffrey Hill is a PhD candidate at School of Computing and Information Systems at The University of Melbourne, Australia, and Chair of Games Courses at SAE Institute, Australia. His research focuses on video game co-creation communities and practices, with a focus on private server communities.

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Melissa Rogerson is a lecturer in the School of Computing and Information Systems at The University of Melbourne. Her research examines the experience of playing boardgames in both physical and digital forms, as well as the characteristics and motivations of hobbyist boardgame players, designers, and developers, applying techniques from human-computer interaction to the study of games and play. She is currently researching the functions and uses of digital tools in tabletop games.

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