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BACKSEAT COMMENTARY ON GAMING AND GAME DESIGN.

**Population Balance issues with Warhammer Online and  
its effects on subscriber retention.**

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## Introduction

This white paper describes the compounding problems server balance issues have in Warhammer Online and how these issues are heading the game towards falling well short of its potential. The paper addresses these issues and offers solutions that could be implemented to correct many of the servers and help delay subscriber cancellation.

## Problem Summary

Due to Warhammer Online's large re-occurring maintenance and server costs compared to most standard release games, it relies very heavily on retaining monthly subscribers that play the game.

Subscribers are always going to be lost for many reasons. This document will focus on the problem of losing subscribers that like the game and want to enjoy the game but for reasons of low server population or server population imbalance between the two sides, are unable to, or rarely able to find enjoyable situations where the game plays as marketed or designed to. Losing even a single subscriber to this situation hurts; losing thousands of them is disastrous for a game trying to grow its corner of the market.

## Problem Detailed

### *Low Overall Population Issues*

A server with a small and/or dwindling population has a lot of drawbacks and problems that affect a customer's enjoyment.

#### -Infrequent Scenario Matches:

Lower population servers tend to have less people queuing for scenario matches which increase the time between being able to enter scenario matches. These scenario matches, especially early on, bring people

into the game right away and help keep them playing. It is a great way to level when scenarios are actively popping and in Tier 4, it is just a nice part of the game and an often used sign for how healthy the server is.

#### -Lack of Open RvR Experience

Like scenarios, in early tiers this brings people into the game, allows them to get some great equipment and have fun doing it. Lack of open RvR makes it very hard to get any of this gear before leveling out of the tier, which can be frustrating. At tier 4, lack of open RvR is a telltale sign of a dying server population. When people are unable to find the WAR experience they are promised and had been hoping for while leveling their characters up to Tier 4, it very quickly becomes an option of re-rolling on another server or cancelling your subscription.

#### -Lack of End game Experiences

The end game relies on many groups of people battling back and forth in order for zones to flip and cities to be sieged. A low population server has a very hard time getting any of this to happen and if you cannot get to the end game content, you feel stuck in your progression. Once people feel like they are not progressing and that the time invested in the character is no longer meaningful or enjoyable, its time for a change.

#### -Poor economy

On low population servers, items are harder to find and can be priced unreasonably. With smaller populations a few people typically dominate the market for many things, price fixing hot commodities

and running other people out of the market.

#### *Unbalanced Server Issues*

When a population for one side is much larger than another side, it brings in its own unique set of issues:

#### -Long waits for Scenario Queues

The side with a much larger number of “active” players will tend to see much longer queue delays, this is straight numbers, if one side has less, the other side gets in a line to fight those lesser numbers, other factors may come into play, but this is the biggest one.

#### -RvR is not the expected experience

Open RvR is typically ruined for both sides on a server like this. The outnumbered side typically gets steamrolled over by large numbers and will often give up quickly or be less likely to log on to try to fight an impossible battle. Influence and realm points are hard to get and progression is very slow.

\*See updates

The outnumbering side often has easier battles due to less opposition, making the battles unfulfilling and infrequent. Influence and realm rank progression is slow as well.

#### -End Game

The outnumbered side will very rarely push all the way to a city. If the perception is that the end game is unobtainable to someone, character progression can seem pointless which leads to little or no desire to continue playing that character.

The outnumbering side, depending on the overall population of the server may be able to push to a city siege, but with not as many enemies to fight, many will question what the point of getting to the end game and increasing their progression of equipment

and skills, this can create a lack of desire to even do so.

### **Previous Options**

#### **-Server Transfers**

Server transfers have so far been the most visibly used option in Warhammer Online to correct server balance issues. So far, it has mainly helped with server population but in many cases has created imbalance between the two sides.

Server transfers leave too much in the hands of customers who do not have accurate information and statistics and cannot predict what other transferring people will do.

When posed with a server transfer, often a server or multiple servers will meet up and discuss what everyone should do. They base these plans off of inaccurate analytic websites and hearsay.

When the dust settles and groups have followed a plan, picked a server at random, or done their own thing entirely, you are likely to end up with a large mess on one or more servers, and may have failed to solve any problems on any servers.

An additional side effect of these large scale transfers is a possible loss of community. Many servers have a healthy rivalry and have gotten to know each other to some degree. When transferring servers all at once, the sense of community can be lost in the crowd.

#### **-Server Merges**

Server merges have yet to be used as a solution, but it gets kicked around

as an idea a lot. While this removes the randomness of what people might do when given choices of where to move to, it has its many drawbacks as well. For example if someone has an alt on the destination and source servers, it is very hard or even impossible to deal with fairly. You also have issues with picking a source and destination server that would be a good match; otherwise you may be fixing a population issue, but creating an imbalance issue. This way could be possible if all source servers were to be closed down in favor of a completely new server.

#### **-Incentives for players to recreate on other servers**

This is a good solution for some players, but many will simply quit before recreating on another server for varying reasons. Some will not want to put the effort into leveling up another character even if the situation may be improved, others will just see it as futile to put in the effort as the same situation may occur again. This leads to guilds falling apart or splitting up which quickly leads to orphaned/disheartened guild members and groups of cancelled subscriptions..

### **Proposed Solution**

The proposed solution from this document is to implement one or more Community Experience Representatives (CERs). These representatives would work to achieve Mythic's population and server balancing goals by going straight to the people it affects and working with those communities to find a solution. These community representatives would make contact with the guild and alliance leaders interested in moving to a different situation and coordinate between them and Mythic to move the pieces into place to make for a

happier subscriber base and more balanced servers game wide.

Because of the smaller scale nature of these moves and the fact they are finely controlled, it will work to solve problems without creating new ones.

### ***WAR!***

On populated and balanced servers, everything seems more fun and WAR is everywhere. People log in and scenarios are popping, there are places that need attacking/defending in RvR and others are looking for PvE. City sieges seem within reach if you can just organize a big enough push. This is how the game is meant to be played and even if things are not exactly how you like them, they are often overlooked because it is fun to play and future changes do not seem so far off.

### ***New Subscribers/Returning Subscribers***

When people are having fun, they are telling their friends, family, game networks and forums that they are having fun. New subscribers start coming in and many subscribers may return if they had recently cancelled their subscription or had stopped playing out of frustration. News of a change to the server and/or change coming to their server situation may bring them back.

### ***Good Will in the WAR Community/Hope***

Many customers feel like Warhammer Online developers are out of touch with what the players

want or the situations that occur on their particular server. Mythic can take some relief in knowing that this is the case in many games that people feel strongly about, but having the community reps can help correct this, at least for the server balancing issues.

Community experience reps would not necessary need to make large, sudden moves between servers to make a difference, in fact just having them out there working steadily and intelligently on it brings hope to many players. If players can see that there is hope for their server in the near future, many will already start to be more active and want to continue gearing up and ranking up to prepare for it, where as before they may have started to or given up hope.

### **Implementation**

1) Define active players for counting/monitoring. The definition for an active player should look at orvr and scenario activity. A player that logs in to do a city instance every couple days can not be weighted as heavily as a player that is actively doing orvr as players that are not actively engaging the opposite faction on their server are not really factoring into balance at all.

2) Monitor and identify the servers in which the population is lower or the balance seems to be off by more then the target values by Mythic's standards for an enjoyable game play experience during prime times during the day for that region (if primetime is healthy, this often boosts other time periods during the day).

3) Analyze the servers and find servers that are compatible with each other for transfers

where population is high on one side on one server and too low on another. Determine the numbers to balance out.

4) Have your community experience reps (CERs) go to work. Meeting with the guild leaders in game, on voice servers, in IRC etc... And determine which are looking for an improved situation for their guild or alliance (depending on numbers) and have them discuss with the guild.

5) Possibly offer guild incentives for a time for guilds that transfer to help with server balance. Make sure the guild knows the issues and only those accounts that are in the guild will be flagged as having the transfer option.

### Summary

A server with a healthy, balanced population is the core foundation for Warhammer Online to survive and thrive in the MMO marketplace.

It does not matter how good your base game is or how well it was developed, if customers log in and do not have an enjoyable experience playing the game, it will not be long before you no longer have that customer.

Using a community rep to take an active, steady approach that involves the server communities on a personal level is a great way to retain subscribers that love the idea and concept of the game, but just are not finding the WAR they envision due to server population issues. These subscribers must not be allowed to

fall through the cracks any longer as each one increases the risk of the game failing completely.

### Updates

In the past year, Bioware-Mythic has implemented a few changes that have been effective in some situations.

1) **Unlimited free trial for tier 1:** This is a pretty good idea as it attempts to keep a very healthy population in the first part of the game where potential new subscribers are introduced to. The trouble is, even people playing for free look probably look for the most active servers, not necessarily the ones that Mythic wants to nurse back to a healthy population.

2) **Free server transfer if you unsubscribe for 3 months:** You can transfer your character to any server (in your region, no chars on opposite faction) that you wish to. The trouble with this is it does not solve any problems. If someone is coming back and their server has been merged into another server, they should have a free transfer anyways to whatever server their friends may have gone to. All other situations are worse. Do you want people unsubscribing for 3 months just to get onto a different server because they are not enjoying their current server? Are people coming back to the game to a server that is not performing well and you want to let them get out? What about the other people on that server. Fix the root population causes of the server and the rest will take care of itself.

**3) Renown and Experience bonuses for low population servers:** This is actually a really good idea. Some people will be attracted to faster leveling and groups of people looking to re-roll may be tempted to try this out. At the same time, looking at the results, it still appears that a very healthy server with guaranteed action seems to draw re-rolls much better than an underperforming server with bonuses.

**4) Renown/Experience bonuses for being outnumbered:** Called against all odds (AAO), this does go a long way in helping getting unbalanced servers become a bit more exciting. The outnumbered realm does tend to come out and fight more with AAO being available and this provides a better experience for both sides.