

# Ruthlessness as a Hyper-Social form of Play

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## ABSTRACT

EVE Online is a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) first released in 2003 by the Icelandic developer CCP Games. Since then, EVE has received dozens of expansions modernizing the MMOG's graphics and game play. CCP Games recently announced that EVE Online had reached over 500,000 active subscribers, bucking the trend in the MMOG market against the monthly subscription model. This paper discusses preliminary results from a study investigating one of its most unusual qualities; the condoned presence of scamming and stealing.

On the official Wiki page, CCP Games distinguishes between scams and exploits, with the former being permitted. A scam is defined as when "*someone takes advantage of your misplaced trust, temporary confusion or ignorance of game rules, and robs you via in game means. When this occurs, there is nothing the Support Team can do for you.*" Through a broad assemblage of paratexts (such as trailers, developer blogs, in-game quests and narratives) CCP have further established this *unbounding* of player conduct. The result is a ruthless virtual world in which deceptive conduct, trickery and malfeasance are pervasive. Popular examples often reported in gaming and mainstream media are fraudulent Ponzi schemes involving hundreds of deceived players, month long extortions involving billions of in-game credits, contract killings and espionage. Similar occurrences are found (and are condoned) in EVE's eSport (Carter & Gibbs, 2013).

We interviewed 27 players engaging in these activities - what we call *ruthless play*. This is conduct such as stealing, ransoming, scamming and fraud; in-game acts that involve deceptive conduct or trickery that unnecessarily disadvantage another user. Due to its occurrence in a multiplayer game an essential element of ruthless play is the presence of a victim - the deceived user who suffers significant negative impact as a result of a ruthless act. Consequently, there are important ethical and social implications associated with a virtual world in which the victimization and oppression of other users is permitted, acclaimed and sought after. As such, an in-depth discussion of the motivations and justifications driving ruthless players is warranted.

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One of the main criticisms leveled at user engagement in ruthless play is that the act itself is inherently immature and/or anti-social. These critics argue that to play ruthlessly is indicative of a lack of understanding of social norms, social immaturity or even psychopathic tendencies. Contrary to this perspective, we argue that that players who engage in ruthless play in EVE Online are conducting (and treat it as) a form of player-versus-player combat in which *social skills*, rather than *game skills* (such as accuracy or speed), are the domain of competition. This is best exemplified by one participant who referred to their play style, in the context of other play styles like ‘player-versus-environment’, as ‘playing people’. Furthermore, its conduct within EVE Online, a *ruthless game*, disallows categorization as transgressive or critiques as indicative of a player unaware of social norms. The majority of players in EVE Online who play ruthlessly only do so because it is permitted by EVE Online's developer.

### **Keywords**

EVE Online, scamming, theft, ruthless play.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Carter, M. and Gibbs, M. “eSports in EVE Online: Skullduggery, Fair Play and Acceptability in an Unbounded Competition”, in Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games. (Chania, Greece, May 2013), pp. 47-54.