

## Massively Multiplayer Dark Play: Treacherous Play in EVE Online

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*It's like the Robin-hood tales; taking from the poor and giving to the rich, except it's taking from the dumb and unalert and giving to yourself.*

In the dark, hyper-capitalistic and dystopian ruthless game of *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003-2013), trust is a valuable commodity. Unlike the vast majority of other modern MMOGs which *design out* the possibility for Dark Play involving theft, treachery, malfeasance and betrayal; CCP Games have *designed for* it at a massive and unparalleled scale. Except for disallowing technical exploits, players are not restricted from deceiving, tricking, lying and generally being dishonest towards other players in the pursuit of game goals. This has manifested itself in the pervasive and common occurrence of scamming, stealing and espionage, and what Nick Combs refers to as a “culture of mistrust” (2007). The ruthlessness of *EVE* has permeated every fibre of its play and the number one rule hammered into each new player is “DON'T TRUST ANYONE”.

This chapter explores why *EVE Online* players engage in the Dark Play of theft, betrayal and treachery. It is dark because there are victims; the *EVE Players* in this study are stealing from other, real *EVE Online* players. This chapter is thus distinct from many of the other chapters in this volume as it is discussing a type of Dark Play from which its darkness emerges not from problematic game content or ‘dark’ individual player experience, but from interactions between players that would be unethical or immoral outside of the game context. While play has traditionally been understood in the Western academic tradition as being a “normatively positive” (Malaby 2007) and voluntary experience, victims of this type of Dark Play are often enormously upset, and many victims to the participants of this study have quit the game following being betrayed. This chapter therefore focuses on understanding what is *fun* about playing treacherously, and playing darkly with others.

In total, the participants in this study have stolen over \$40,000 worth of virtual goods from other players. They have done so by any means necessary; ransoms at gunpoint, conning access to shared resources, trickery, misdirection, and false promises. Based upon 22 interviews with a wide variety of *EVE Online* players, I argue that players who engage in this type of Dark Play (defined as treacherous play) are playing a form of player-versus-player (PvP) combat in which *social skills*, rather than *game skills* such as accuracy, speed or game knowledge, are the domain of competition. Consequently, through this understanding of its practice and appeal I argue that (within the context of *EVE Online*) it is not dark at all. In the discussion section, I will explore the implications of this understanding and argue for the untapped potential for deception and trickery as a fruitful design space for game-play.

In the following sections, I will parse out the concept of ‘treacherous play’ and contextualise this within the existing academic research around dark and anti-social player interactions in multiplayer games. Throughout, I’ll introduce the unfamiliar reader to the MMOG of *EVE Online* and highlight how CCP Games have *designed for* this type of Dark Play. Following this background and context, I’ll present the method and results from this study.

Though each individual player is most likely to have discovered this form of Dark Play through word of mouth or observation, a small number of elements can be identified as having played a major role in legitimating ruthlessness as a type of play in *EVE Online*; the powerful rhetorical tool of sandbox, a small number of game mechanics, a clear distinction between technical and social exploits, and *EVE*'s representation in a broad variety of game paratexts (Genette 1987, Consalvo 2007). Thus, through contributing to our understanding of how *EVE* has become a *ruthless game*, this chapter also contributes to understanding scamming and stealing as play, rather than an anti-social transgression, through demonstrating how it is situated to players as a legitimate domain of competition in the multiplayer game.

## Defining Treacherous Play

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*One particular player begged and pleaded not to be destroyed, he willfully transferred everything he owned, wallet, assets, and all, to keep his ship alive. He warped back to the mission only to see us blow his ship up, and collect the salvage and valuable modules. He never logged back in.*

*EVE Online* is a ruthless game. That is, it is a game where players are lawfully afforded the opportunity to act in ways that have great, negative consequence on other players. Doing so offers the player in-game advantage, but it is not necessary for the player to act this way (they are afforded a choice). For this reason, Miguel Sicart (2011, 218) considers *EVE Online* an example of a game closest to “ethical soundness”, as it affords players these ethical choices. It is thus distinct from the ‘feel bad games’ discussed by Staffan Björk elsewhere in this volume, in which the games are designed such that players *must* act in a way that causes consequence on another player in order to win the game. Ruthless games like *EVE* are therefore characterised by players making conscious (and thus ruthless) decisions to cause consequence on other players for their own personal advantage. In other words, the darkness of *EVE Online* exists within players, rather than the design of the game itself.

Ruthless play is the type of game-play uniquely afforded by this genre of game. It is game-play with an unnecessary and consequential impact on another player, it is within the rules of the game, and provides the ruthless player with an in-game advantage. Though there are a number of different fashions in which ruthless play can be *unnecessary*, in *EVE Online* it is a result of the ambiguous state of social relationships between players. Unlike MMOGs such as *City of Heroes* (NCsoft 2005-2012) which has two opposing factions (‘Heroes’ vs. ‘Villains’), *EVE Online* players are not placed into clearly delineated team structures. At any given moment, no matter where in *EVE*’s vast virtual universe you are, any other *EVE Online* player encountered is ambiguously friend or foe.

Unusually for games in the MMOG genre, death in *EVE Online* is consequential - if you ‘die’, your ship is ‘lost’ and permanently destroyed. Often, players will fly ships worth more than several months of game time (the most expensive ships are worth more than \$8,000), presenting the possibility for significant consequence should they be killed. This is in contrast to, for example, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004-2013) in which death only presents a minor setback (see Klastrop 2008). When destroyed, a player’s ship turns into a ‘wreck’ that can be salvaged for parts worth a significant sum; thus killing another player affords in-game advantage. Through this atypical configuration of death, player-versus-player combat (PvP) in *EVE Online* becomes a form of ruthless play. It is unnecessary game-play with a consequential impact on another player, which affords in-game advantage.

Treacherous play is a subset of ruthless play which specifically involves betrayal, that is, the violation of a contract or trust. As noted by Craft (2007, 123) “*in the EVE universe, acts of theft are inextricably tied to acts of betrayal*”; in order to steal from me, I had to grant you access to my property in some way. In granting that access, there is a presumptive (or often

verbalised) contract that you will not steal from me. In this way, thievery in *EVE* is treacherous. It is consequential as goods remain stolen; victims of theft have no recourse in *EVE Online*. Most MMOGs employ complex legal documents to restrict online play by stipulating certain specific (or broad categories) of activities as forbidden in the multiplayer environment. These typically take the form of End User License Agreements (EULA's), Codes of Conduct (CoC), or Terms of Service (ToS). Much of the content of these documents restricts against illegal conduct (e.g., harassment) or protects the developer from potential legal ramifications. However, these documents also serve to formalize the informal rules of the game. For example, *World of Warcraft's* ToS stipulates:

you agree that you will not, under any circumstances ... disrupt or assist in the disruption of ... any other player's game experience (Blizzard 2012).

Violating the ToS can result in a suspension or ban from the game by Blizzard moderators. While *EVE Online* does have a EULA (CCP Games 2012), it provides no such broad restriction, and numerous official materials state that (as long as the play does not involve the use of technical exploits) conduct such as scamming or stealing is a "legal in-game cheat". For example, the 'Scams and Exploits' wiki page on the *EVE Online* website states:

As can happen in the real world, someone in EVE may try to cheat you out of your hard-earned possessions... A scam is what happens when someone takes advantage of your misplaced trust, temporary confusion or ignorance of game rules, and robs you via legal in-game means. When this occurs, there is nothing the Support Team can do for you. Although low and despicable, scams do not violate any game mechanics and cannot be compensated for by the GMs, nor can the scammers generally be punished for their actions.

This appeal to the 'real world' (in contrast to a 'game world'), along with CCP's hands off approach to moderation has an enormous role in shaping the ruthlessness character of *EVE Online*, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Thus it is through the way treacherous play such as thievery and scamming are legal, and victims have no recourse, that they are examples of ruthless play.

Another example of treacherous play in *EVE Online* is ransoming. A common practice in *EVE* is to attack other players (generally those doing 'player versus environment' activities, such as Mining or completing missions), destroy their spaceship and scavenge the wrecks for parts that can be sold on the game market. A typical instance of *EVE* combat lasts several minutes; aggressors must thus be equipped with 'warp scramblers' (ala Star Trek) and 'stasis webifiers' to prevent their prey from escaping (or cooperate with another player). As *EVE Online* players are unrestricted in communicating with each other (players can communicate directly, and can communicate in 'local chat' with all other players in that solar system) aggressors frequently offer, during these minutes of combat, to ransom their victim's ships; demanding a payment that exceeds the value they might gain from salvaging the wreck, but is much less than the cost to that player of purchasing a new ship.

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Players are thus afforded an opportunity for treacherous play; accept the ransom, but kill the player and loot their ship's wreckage anyway. The 'skill' of this form of play is in convincing the victim, somehow, that you will honour the agreement. It is a bastardly, ruthless and treacherous type of Dark Play.

## Darkly Playing with Others in Multiplayer Environments

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A broad volume of literature exists which has engaged with problematic and subversive behaviour between players in multiplayer games (e.g. Foo & Koivisto 2004, Consalvo 2007, Mortensen 2008, Stenros 2010). Indeed, this academic work has demonstrated the benefit of examining play which exists on the boundaries of acceptability; challenging assumptions made about the way games are negotiated and experienced by players. In this section, I'll briefly be discussing many of these studies in order to distinguish ruthless and treacherous play from cheating, griefing and other types of subversive, deviant or anti-social play which has been previously studied. I argue that in a number of essential, salient ways treacherous play such as stealing, scamming and espionage in *EVE* falls outside of any phenomenon previously examined.

Bernard Suits (1978), the pre-digital French game studies philosopher discusses three types of 'non-orthodox' player types in games; the triflers, the cheaters and the spoilsports. Suits summarizes these categorizations as being "triflers recognize rules but not goals, cheaters recognize goals but not rules, and spoilsports recognize rules nor goals" (1978, 59). Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's (2004) *Game Design Reader* draws upon these three player types, along with earlier work by Huizinga (1938), but further invokes concepts of the *spirit* of the game and the *implicit* rules in order to define them. They add to Suit's trio the 'unsportsmanlike' player type, players who "do anything they can to win" but in order to do so, "violate the spirit" and implicit rules of the contest (2004, 271). The preoccupation of these player types with the rules of the game neatly defies categorization of ruthless play, which violates no spirit, implicit or formal rule of *EVE Online*, and recognizes the hyper-capitalist goals of the virtual world. However, such structuralist approaches to games and play types have grown unpopular (see Montola 2012), particularly in response to the modern digital landscape of play.

The seminal work on the phenomena of Cheating is Mia Consalvo's *Cheating* (2007). While traditionally understood as a transgressive and non-playful act, Consalvo argues that cheating (loosely defined in multiplayer games as 'gaining an unfair advantage', such as hacking the client to make your character stronger) is inherently playful and reflects the nature of digital games as spaces for experimentation. Such a definition encompasses scams in *EVE* (see Consalvo 2007, 118-119 for a discussion of an infamous *EVE* scam), though this definition is purposefully left open to facilitate understanding the dynamic social and cultural character of cheating in online games. Similarly, Jonas Smith (2004, 5) sees cheating as an "altogether social construction" and as a form of 'extra-mechanical conflict' similar to griefing and other local norm violations.

More drastically, Torill Mortensen (2008, 208) treats cheating as "a re-creation of the game, as it depends on the rules", while Fields and Kafai document (2009) the reappropriation of cheating as a form of learning in games education. Dumitrica (2011, 21-22), through the lens of *Neopets* (1999), understands cheating as the product of a culture "embedded in and recommended by the structure" of the neo-liberal capitalistic discourse of many modern

online gaming environments. Darryl Woodford (2013), drawing on examples from the online gambling industry, argues for the concept of ‘advantage play’ as a phenomenon distinct from cheating, necessary in order to ‘loosen up’ the regulation of online environments. He defines advantage play as play “in which the player is able to turn the mechanics of the environment to their advantage without breaching the rules of the environment” (2013).

Grounded in their investigation of ‘botting’ in the MMOG *Tibia* (CipSoft 1997-2013), De Paoli and Kerr (2009a, 2010a, 2010b) instead approach cheating as a socio technical process and attempt to go beyond defining cheating as that which provides unfair advantage. They argue that such a definition or initial approach limits theoretical and empirical investigations; cheating should be understood through the concept of assemblage (DeLanda 2005, 2006) in order to focus on the inter-relational dynamics of games. Through a theoretical analysis of MMOGs as assemblage, they argue that cheating is an *imbroglio*, “the entanglement – as interrelation – of different elements, whose purpose is to obtain a successful trick as result” (2010) and illustrate the necessity of understanding all the elements of the MMOG system (architecture, rules, anti-cheating efforts, the code) to understand cheating as more than just a violation of rules.

A modern digital iteration of Suit’s *spoilsport* is the griefer, commonly categorized as anti-social behaviour in which the griefer intends to ruin the experience of others, often as an act unrelated to the winning conditions of the game (Bartle 1996, Smith 2004, Yee 2005, Gregson 2007, Callele 2008, Chen 2009, Ross 2012). Chesney et al. (2009) define griefing more loosely, as ‘unacceptable’ behaviour in online games, such as repeatedly killing new or weaker players, broadly redefining the boundaries of the grief player to include Salen and Zimmerman’s unsportsmanlike player. Check Yang Foo and Elina Koivisto’s (2004) thorough investigation of griefing avoided a single broad definition of the practice, instead suggesting four categories of griefing; harassment, power imposition, scamming and greed play. Based on interviews with players, they explain that these categories differ through explicit content, the kind of rules the play style breaks and the developer and player perceptions of the play style. Only harassment is distinguished by intent to cause emotional distress (key to most other definitions), whereas power imposition relates to demonstrations of power, and ‘greed play’ is akin to Salen and Zimmerman’s unsportsmanlike play.

Foo and Koivisto argue that scamming and theft exists within the grey area of griefing, as some players may desire to role-play as “unsavoury characters” (2004, 5), and consequently abuse misplaced trust as part of that role-play. Based on their interviews with players of popular MMOGs (such as *Everquest* (SOE 1999-2013) or *Star Wars Galaxies* (SOE 2003-2011)), they believe the demarcation as griefing lies in the exploitation of game mechanics and involvement of identity deception or promise breaking. However, Foo & Koivisto make an implicit assumption found in many dealings and discussions around treacherous play; that stealing or scamming is inherently transgressive, and a problematic occurrence in multiplayer games. As the MMOGs involved in their study all forbid identity deception and promise breaking, they overlook the occurrence of ruthless play a ruthless game such as *EVE*; games which permit and encourage these types of activities.

As with cheating, several studies have refrained from making *a priori* judgements in their approach towards the intent or nature of grief play. Similar to Holin Len and Chuen-Tsai Sun's (2007) approach towards the Taiwanese concept of the 'White-Eyed' player, T.L. Taylor discusses grief play and cheating as socially produced and contingent categorizations (2006, 51-52) that are heavily involved in the exploration and construction of the boundaries of play in MMOGs. Jaako Stenros (2010) approached griefing using frame analysis, viewing griefing as an alternative way of framing the activity of playing. Drawing on this approach, he argues that "the griefer is not playful within the rules, or in relation to the rules, but she is in a paralytic mindset while interacting with other players" (Stenros 2010, 14). As such, Stenros argues griefing can be more appropriately understood as 'playing the players' in multiplayer online games, rather than the game itself. These two approaches to the phenomenon of griefing are particularly useful in understanding ruthless and treacherous play.

The closest play categorisation to treacherous play is found in Brian Sutton-Smith's (1959) concept of forbidden play; "normally taboo behaviour" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 478) in society which becomes heavily structured and permitted within the game space. The examples upon which Sutton-Smith draws are kissing games, but Salen and Zimmerman open the concept up to all types of in-game conduct that exist, and are ludic, as a result of the broader social context in which they are forbidden. Elena Bertozzi (2008) also argues that such practices are "necessary to test and reinforce the boundaries of acceptable behaviour" outside the game world. Based on interview data, I will argue that treacherous play in *EVE Online* is a far more complex activity than *Spin the Bottle* that does not simply exist *in situ* with the well-established social norms against stealing, betrayal and trickery.



## Method

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22 participants were interviewed for the purpose of this study. Participants were overwhelmingly male, with only one female. The single female participant was despite considerable effort over the course of this research (several months) to recruit female players who engaged in scamming and stealing in *EVE*. I do not believe this is indicative of a gender bias in the practice of treacherous play in *EVE*, but reflective of *EVE*'s overwhelmingly male player-base. Unlike other MMOGs, which routinely have 40 - 50% female players, it is suspected *EVE* only has ~2% (Bergstrom 2012). All players were asked contextual questions (age, gender, location, profession, player history) before turning to a semi-structured interview format, utilizing the opportunity to encourage unprompted thoughts, observations and detail. Interviews were principally conducted via text, though some occurred over Skype and others offline. Over the course of data collection, many respondents re-established contact to provide new vignettes and reflect upon their experience. Ages ranged between 18 and 33, and the majority of participants were in ICT related industries (though again reflective of the wider demographics of *EVE* than an occupational proclivity to treacherous play). Some exceptions included a composer, two homemakers and a serving member of the American Army in Afghanistan who committed scams and thefts from base.

As a participant observer of one of *EVE Online*'s largest persistent-player group, the majority of participants in this study were recruited from within *TEST Alliance Please Ignore* (for more on *TEST*, see Bergstrom et al. 2013). This circumvents noted issues (Woodford 2012) in applying traditional virtual world methodologies (e.g., Boellstorff et al. 2012) to non-avatar environments. As a result of various studies conducted (and since published) of, and through this Alliance, my *EVE Online* capsuleer *The Questioner* has a verified identity within the community and access to players and insight that might otherwise be withheld from an outsider. Such social capital has been particularly beneficial in conducting this study, which involved speaking to players about their participation in a frequently vilified practice, particularly in non-*EVE* texts. However, my history as an *EVE* player, publication of objective papers on *EVE*, and proven respect of participant anonymity, meant players were willing to be open about their justifications and opinions leading to fruitful results.

Interviews were conducted and analysed using grounded theory informed methods (Strauss 1987). As is the case with grounded theory research, early interviews heavily informed the questions asked in later interviews. However, all participants were asked the same initial questions, though discussions often became tangential. Interview transcripts were coded and analysed, with categories and analysis being conducted throughout data collection. This also informed the ongoing data collection, particularly with respect to participant selection. In the following results section, I explore and explicate the most prominent theme regarding the enjoyment of treacherous play. To quote Phillips (2011), "all quotations are subject to a flashing neon "[sic]".

## Results: The Fun of Treacherous Play

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In this chapter so far I have defined the concepts of ruthless and treacherous play, and overviewed the extant literature which has dealt with transgressive or ethically questionable activities in multiplayer games, and, grounded in the phenomenon of stealing and scamming in *EVE Online*, demonstrated how treacherous play – lawful, unnecessary and consequential play that involves betrayal - is distinct from play previously studied. Before discussing how CCP Games have constructed this ruthless virtual world, I will now provide an account, based on these on interviews with 22 participants, for why players engage in treacherous play and the *fun* they have when doing so.

### Treacherous Play as a Social Competition

Each participant in the research was asked seven contextual questions at the beginning of their interview. The following response to the seventh question highlights the extent to which scamming and (in this player's case) espionage are competitions of interpersonal relationships:

INTERVIEWER: How do you normally play? (PvP, industrial, market etc)

RESPONDENT: PvP, Rattin, industrial and people, I have multiple accounts.

To this player, who habitually infiltrates enemy alliances in order to weaken them (either through financial thefts or fostering social instability), their treacherous play is simply a style of playing *EVE Online* like 'raiding' or 'role-play' are a styles of playing *World of Warcraft*. That they refer to this style of play as 'people' offers insight into what the experience of treacherous play entails. I asked Participant 8 "How hard is it, in your opinion, to scam? Could anyone do it if they tried?" The following response similarly highlights how players feel social skills – that is, the management of interpersonal relationships – are a necessary skill in scamming:

I don't think anyone could do it, you need to be able to lie well, feed them some truth, then lie again, and always keep notes of everything you and they say. a lot of effort goes into maintaining a good lie (Participant 8)

This comment also highlights the extent to which players feel there is work and effort involved in a scam. The following response also echoes this sentiment:

I'm a natural salesman (not to be confused with market nerd), it only makes sense that I'd use my ~words~ to make ISK instead of shooting red crosses [a colloquialism for PvE] (Participant 20).

Many of the participants interviewed were astutely aware regarding the extent to which their social skills played a role in the success of their scamming and treachery. Participant 1, when discussing his first forays into scamming, said that he "learned a lot about conversational dynamics," which he recognised as essential as his scams became more complex. In addition to social skills being an important skill to learn to become better at scamming online, this

participant noted the skills learnt through his experiences playing treacherously as having translated to offline social contexts:

I started playing when I was 16 or 17 years old, I was in High-school at the time and not very popular. During my time griefing other players and later being a con-man of sorts helped tremendously with my personal life. I learned, through my avatar, the functions of social interaction, I learned that the worst thing anyone can ever say is "No", I grew from it, and while I was nowhere near as malicious in real life as I was in game, it helped me become more social and lose my social anxiety altogether. By the time I started college I was fearless of being socially awkward, made a great many friends.

Thus, it becomes clear through these varied accounts of their experience engaging in treacherous play that they are interactions between players in the social domain. But what is key, particularly towards understanding treachery and betrayal in the context of any other form of competition in multiplayer games, is the extent to which the very *appeal* of the activity was grounded in the social interactions:

I guess it's about the politics and the interactions with people for me. (Participant 2)

The scams I do take a lot of social engineering. When they work out, I feel pretty proud and superior (Participant 12)

Another interesting element invoked by players was the variance in challenges provided by them being *social* interactions. No two 'marks' are the same when interacting socially with players in a multiplayer game. Through leveraging social interaction as a domain of competition, CCP have opened up a vast realm of content for players. I asked Participant 1, who briefly stopped scamming before returning to the practice, what it was that scamming offered, and why they had returned to it:

I missed the hunt, the search for a target. Looking through their contracts, looking up their killboards, finding out if their corpmates are possible targets as well.

The experience of Participant 7, the only female participant in the study, further demonstrates the social domain and appeal of scamming and theft. Specialising in large-scale corporate heists (often exceeding \$1,000 value), she consciously leverages her gender in the overwhelmingly male game as a tool to her advantage. To her, the most satisfying scams are the ones which affirm her absolute social manipulation of the members of the corporation she was stealing from, and additional satisfaction is gained from seeing if she had correctly predicted how certain player's would react.

These responses illustrate how treacherous play can be understood as a form of *competitive play*, in which social skills are the domain of the challenge. We see overlap in this conceptualization with Jaako Stenros' (2010) concept of griefing as 'playing people', understood as ludic social engagements. The distinction lies in the motivation of engaging in

this type of activity; for the purpose of in-game advantage rather than to provoke a negative reaction or annoy the other player.

### **'Ninja Looting' and Ransoming as Treacherous Play**

A significant number of participants in this study also participated in 'ninja-looting', a type of play in *EVE* which would be likely considered griefing in other MMOGs. Some areas of *EVE*'s virtual universe are designated as 'high-security'; a powerful non-player race called 'CONCORD' patrols these areas and swiftly destroys any player who, unprovoked, attacks another player. Playing in high-security space, the ninja-looter would fly in a weak (but fast) ship and take the items dropped by non-player characters killed by other players running missions. This act allows the other player to shoot at the ninja-looter without repercussion from CONCORD (they have been provoked), but if the player shoots the looter, the looter can also shoot back (having been provoked). While many ninja-looters might just profit from the loot they steal, others goad players into shooting them so that they can return in a powerful ship (or be joined by friends) and kill the player. In some cases, that weak, fast ship might actually have been equipped with the tools necessary to hold the victim in place until back-up can arrive. This commonly results in them attempting to ransom the player, demanding millions of ISK under threat of destruction.

As noted earlier, ransoming a ship trapped and under attack requires social interaction to convince the victim it is worthwhile (e.g., that they won't be killed after paying ransom). But simply ninja-looting without ransom is also treacherous; the victim must be led to a belief that the player's intent is simply to ninja-loom, is flying a weak ship, and is alone. To return and destroy that victim is a betrayal of that falsehood the ninja-looter has constructed. I asked one player who engaged in both scamming and ninja-looting what he enjoyed differently about the two activities;

Honestly they're both very different activities, and yet also fundamentally the same thing. There's more of an "active" rush involved with looting from someone in order to goad them into aggressing you in order to destroy them, whereas the scam can be a longer more cold-blooded endeavor. In either case, what you're doing is exploiting emotion, either in trust or the gut reaction to, well, react, and using your own pre-planned actions to trump their unplanned reactions. You have engineered and controlled a scenario in which someone else incorrectly perceives that they have control or power, to their downfall. So again, different, but yet fundamentally almost the same thing, and I enjoy them both (Participant 4).

What Participant 4's response demonstrates is the extent to which both activities hinge on deception and emotion – two elements firmly within the domain of social skills – and achieving in-game success through betrayal. So while the social interactions are entirely non-verbal, they are still present, and a form of treacherous play. In fact, 5 participants of the study mentioned how they had 'transitioned' into scamming through their experience ninja-looting, and identifying this social element of the practice fits with this significant link.

Demonstrative of the ruthlessness of *EVE* players I asked a different participant if he ever killed someone after they paid ransom. His response was “every time”.

### **The Commodification of Trust in *EVE Online***

Another testament to understanding scamming and espionage in *EVE* as a form of social PvP is the extent to which trust – an inherently social construct - is considered a commodity by treacherous players in *EVE Online*:

Trusting anyone in *EVE* is a foolish move. That trust gives me money and my lack of trust helps me keep it (Participant 12).

If there's one thing that scamming for a few months helps with, it's tuning yourself to gauging the trustworthiness of other people (Participant 5).

Understanding trust as a commodity correlates with player accounts of 'constructing' or 'growing' trust over time through social interactions. Extending this conceptualisation, trust can be seen as being used as a form of collateral in negotiations in effort to mitigate risk. We can therefore understand an instance of treacherous play as a player ‘spending’ trust, since violating trust spends it. A successful treacherous play occurs in an instance where that trust can be redeemed for something more valuable; financial gain, social power, or perhaps the downfall of an enemy alliance.

This is one case where exploiting trust by growing it is more profitable than backstabbing and running with a ton of stuff (Participant 5).

As highlighted by Staffan Björk earlier in this volume, games which force betrayal hold reputation as those which most provoke some of the strongest negative emotional reactions following the game play. That betrayal of trust is frequently vilified as a form of Dark Play offers insight into how multiplayer game arenas are traditionally constructed; as ones in which trust is *not* a commodity, but considered a given. This has been elsewhere theorised as a common, implicit particular of the ‘lusory agreement’ (Bergström 2010). However, not all victims of a treacherous play in *EVE Online* are explicitly upset, and those that go as far as quitting *EVE Online* are likely a very small minority. Indeed, it is my perception from my studies of *EVE*, and the perception of nearly all the participants in this study, that most victims accept that they had misplaced their trust, and (similarly to any other loss in the consequential MMOG of *EVE Online*) move on, remembering the ‘number one rule’ they were told when they first began playing - “DON’T TRUST ANYONE”.

These vignettes illustrate how the construction of *EVE Online* as a space in which treacherous play is understood as permitted plays a role in mitigating its darkness. It is in this transformation, from anti-social transgression to legitimate form of competition, that treacherous players find a pleasurable experience. In the following section, I will discuss further how CCP Games have carefully designed *EVE Online* as a space in which treacherous play can safely occur.

## Massively Multiplayer Ruthless Game

*Everyone who plays eve understands how harsh of a world it is. If they don't, they need to learn. If I have to be the one to teach them I will.*

Overwhelmingly, participants were aware of the perception of their chosen play styles as being problematic, anti-social or even immoral. With the exception of two players, all participants defended their engagement in this type of Dark Play, arguing that they only did so because it was not against the rules of *EVE Online*. Such defence correlates with conclusions drawn about the appeal and enjoyment of the practice in the previous section of this chapter, where I demonstrated how treacherous play in *EVE Online* is treated by players as a form of player-versus-player combat, in which social skills are the domain of combat. Consequently, it is necessary to understand the complex factors that have led to *EVE Online*'s pervasive ruthlessness, and how context matters when evaluating the darkness of play in multiplayer environments.

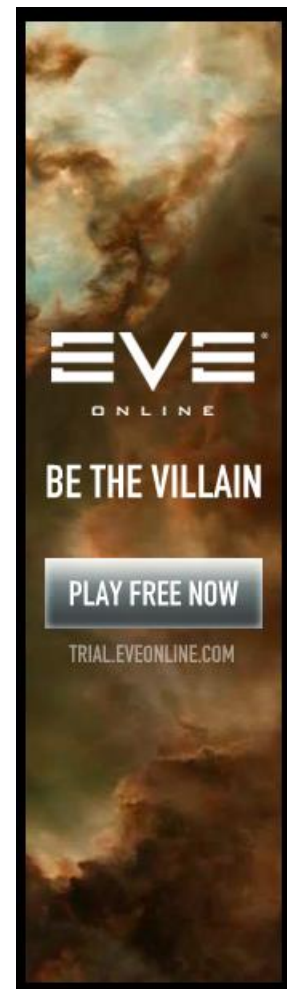
Of those participating in this study, a little over half (n=13) 'discovered' this form of Dark Play through being, or almost being, the victim of a scam or theft. However, a small number of elements can be identified as having played a major role in legitimating treachery as a type of play in *EVE Online*; *EVE*'s representation in a broad variety of game paratexts (in particular the powerful rhetorical tool of sandbox), a small number of game mechanics, and a clear distinction between technical and social exploits.

### Paratext representations of *EVE Online*

Paratexts is a literary interpretation concept developed by Gérard Genette (1997), and introduced into game studies by Mia Consalvo (2007). Paratexts are materials which frame a text (such as a book, or in this case, game) and through doing so, influence its interpretation. In the case of games, these constitute a broad range of texts in a variety of media; for example video trailers on YouTube, banner ads on websites, gaming magazines, discussions on social media or blog posts about successful scams. It was evident, speaking with players, how many were attracted to *EVE Online* by the tales they had read online and in print.

I was drawn to EVE, like many people, by the tales of espionage and sabotage.

The stories reported in gaming (and often mainstream) media represent the most spectacular, brazen or profitable heists and scams, and echo the fictional setting of *EVE Online*; in a dystopian hyper-capitalistic universe, with a history marked by betrayal and treachery (e.g., Good 2011). These reports and fiction frame the interpretation and experience of *EVE Online* and heavily inform the development of *EVE*'s informal rules that commend treacherous play.



CCP Games evidently recognise this element to *EVE*'s ongoing success in attracting new subscribers. Figure 1 is a banner advertisement which explicitly advertises the ability to be a villain in *EVE*. The March 2011 trailer to *EVE Online* with nearly 2,000,000 views, 'A Future Vision', cinematically depicts an *EVE Online* capsuleer betraying *DUST 514* (CCP Games, 2013) soldiers (a PS3 first-person shooter, linked into the *EVE* universe). So while not all players are aware of the presence of ruthless play in *EVE Online* when they first begin to play, the broad variety of villainy and betrayal in *EVE Online* paratexts plays a major role in framing the interpretation and development of these nefarious activities.

### **EVE is a Sandbox, or Just Like the Real World**

The most pronounced concept in these paratexts is the notion of 'sandbox'. The term sandbox is often used ambiguously in gaming culture to refer to games that have a lack of linear narrative; e.g. *The Sims* (Maxis 2000), and/or have an open-game world; e.g. the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar Games 1997-2013), and/or have an entirely customizable game world; e.g. *Minecraft* (Mojang 2009) or *LittleBigPlanet* (Media Molecule 2008). That is, the term alludes to the *comparative* open-endedness of a game with regard to a particular element of the game's design. Thus, in *EVE Online*, sandbox refers to the player driven nature of most interactions in the game, and the comparative lack of restriction on these interactions.

This notion of sandbox frames the way players understand *EVE Online* to function in comparison to other MMOGs, like *World of Warcraft*, in which players have little effect on the virtual world they inhabit, and play is principally found through interaction with the static environment. This sandbox nature is sometimes also phrased with *EVE* being 'just like the real world', as just like in real life;

you can choose to be or do whatever you want in Eve, and if that means plotting to trick a group of individuals into naively trusting you enough that they surrender billions of isk worth of cash and assets to you, so be it; welcome to the sandbox.

This demonstrates how this particular paratext has an enormous role in legitimizing scamming and stealing in *EVE Online*; to quote another participant, in the sandbox of *EVE Online*, "anything is possible".

### **Game Mechanics**

MMOGs are complex socio-technical assemblages (De Paoli and Kerr 2009, 2010b, DeLanda 2002, 2006), thus, there are numerous elements of the technical design of *EVE Online*, along with these social and cultural factors, which play an important role in constructing *EVE* as a ruthless virtual world. Multiple participants identified the consequentiality of death in *EVE* – if you die, your ship is lost and permanently destroyed – as playing a major role in enabling certain types of treacherous activities such as ransoming:

The mechanics of EVE online make it possible to engage in these activities... Again, this [ransoming] is only possible through EVE online, because a loss is a loss, there is no respawn.

While defining treacherous play earlier in this paper, I also identified the ambiguity of social structures as being essential in crafting *EVE* as a ruthless game. While most multiplayer games formalize relationships between players, typically allocating them into opposing teams, *EVE Online* affords players no such clarity. As a result, any other *EVE Online* player encountered is ambiguously friend or foe. In consequence, deception regarding relationship status tactically enters into all forms of player-versus-player combat. Scamming and theft can thus be seen as an extension of these practices into the social domain. Were the status of social relationships clearly or formally delineated, it is unlikely that such practices would occur. This is further complemented by the extra layer of mediated communication that *EVE Online* is afforded as an online game. Players are afforded a broader range of identity and communication scams than the collocated players are in games like *Intrigue* which also involve betrayal (see Björk, elsewhere in this volume).

### **A Clear Distinction between Social and Technical Exploits**

Though I have elsewhere referred to *EVE Online* as *unbounded* (Carter and Gibbs 2013), there exists a rigidly enforced limitation on player conduct in *EVE Online*; against technical exploits. As noted earlier in the paper, *EVE*'s EULA and tutorial materials distinguish between scamming and exploits. A scam is defined (CCP Games n.d.) as;

A scam is what happens when someone takes advantage of your misplaced trust, temporary confusion or ignorance of game rules, and robs you via legal in-game means.

Whereas an exploit is defined as;

An exploit is when someone bypasses normal game mechanics, such as by utilizing a bug in the game, allowing him to take advantage of other players without them having any means of preventing it whatsoever.

This clear distinction, between social trickery and hacking the client, opens up the possibilities for the *EVE Online* sandbox. It invites players to forget the established norms against stealing and theft found in other multiplayer games (and in real life), and explore a new space, the boundaries of which are clearly defined as lying at the technical configuration of the environment. The particular language used by CCP to establish this distinction has also resulted in players defending scamming as "*fairly unfair*"; any player can use trickery, deception and betrayal to gain advantage in the game. They use this to argue that any type of scheme is acceptable, as long as any other player could have also employed that same scheme. Without this clearly articulated ceiling on acceptable conduct in *EVE Online*, players would be less likely to accept the broad range of scams (particularly the most extreme cases of espionage and investment schemes) as a legitimate part of the game.

Players' accounts of their experience after realising they were scammed depict a 'realisation step'; the realisation that the rules in *EVE* are different to other MMOGs. If they themselves could have done that same scam, it is acceptable (there is no 'unfair advantage'), and they are



a victim without recourse. The rigid distinction between social and technical exploits clarifies where the boundaries lie, and in doing so, reveals clearly the space players have to explore:

First I was dumbfounded. Then irate. Then dejected. Then curious. Here was a game mechanic specifically designed to screw over other players. Not only was scamming allowed, but it was apparently encouraged by CCP.

And so, I began to wonder how I could do the same.

## Discussion

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*I realize this would all seem extremely, well, bizarre and somewhat silly to someone who doesn't play Eve. But Eve is after all a game, and I truly believe games should be fun or you're doing something wrong; this is where we were finding our fun.*

*EVE Online* is a dystopic, hyper-capitalistic virtual world in which many players, through treachery and betrayal, exert considerable effort to trick and rob other players. This type of Dark Play is a permitted, and often celebrated, practice within the game world. In this chapter, I've defined this style of play as *treacherous play*, a type of ruthless play – legal, but unnecessary play with a consequential impact on another player for game advantage – which involves betrayal.

The darkness of this play clearly emerges from the extent that theft and betrayal are a universally condemned deviance, across legal systems and cultures. Within the game context of *EVE Online*, an additional layer of darkness emerges; players are not forced nor required by the design of the game to engage in treachery. Those who do engage make a conscious, personal decision to disadvantage another player for their own personal gain. In other words, the darkness of *EVE Online* exists within, or emerges from, players, rather than the design of the game itself. In consequence, this chapter has focused on the player experience of treacherous play.

Based on data from interviews with 22 *EVE Online* players, I have argued the appeal, and player experience, of treacherous play is congruent with the experience, and appeal, of any form of competitive multiplayer game. Whereas the appeal of chess, for example, is found in establishing superiority in the domain of that competition (skill at chess), treacherous play in *EVE Online* is a form of social player-versus-player combat, in which *social skills* are the primary domain of competition. The challenge and appeal is therefore grounded in the treacherous player's ability to deceive other players, and those player's ability to detect they are being deceived.

I've further argued that a necessary condition for this modality of enjoyment is that it be within the rules of the game, and identified key factors in the socio-technical assemblage of the *EVE Online* MMOG that have resulted in this unusual play culture; its representation in paratexts, the unusual framing of 'sandbox', high consequence and ambiguous team structures, along with a clear distinction from the developer between social and technical exploits.

Thus, though this type of play represents a clear example of Dark Play, I've demonstrated how it bears no immoral, subversive, transgressive or anti-social qualities within the context of *EVE Online*. While in practice the victims of an instance of treachery may be upset, such negative feelings are a result of being unfamiliar with this style of PvP, rather than an inherent darkness or immorality to the act of betrayal. This is likely because betrayal is such an unusual tactic available to players in multiplayer games, where trust is conventionally considered a 'given'. Experienced players of *EVE Online*, aware of treachery as a domain of competition, are significantly less likely to report unusually strong negative feelings. These conclusions further speak to how games can play with dark content in unproblematic and ethically responsible ways.

Though this chapter has focused on players who play *EVE* darkly, a pertinent question is raised; what is the appeal and motivation of engaging in a game in which you can't trust anyone? What is fun about being stolen from? Indeed, this question can be asked of any form of player-versus-player combat; what is fun about losing at *Chess*? About being killed in *Halo* (Bungie 2001)? The appeal lies not in the bounded experience of loss, or failure, but in the holistic effect of the possibility of failure in the social domain. Risk, after all, is exciting, and the presence of treacherous play ensures social interactions are significantly more risky, and consequently, more intense and engaging. This lends to *EVE Online* having an enhanced social experience and the development of stronger social relationships.

In this chapter I have portrayed *EVE Online* as having a homogenous player culture, with uniform attitudes towards scamming and this form of Dark Play. In an MMOG of over 500,000 players, this is evidently reductionist; numerous dissonant voices exist within the *EVE Online* community that dislike or abhor this emergent style of play. Elsewhere, Chris Paul (Paul 2011, 264, Paul 2012, and elsewhere with Bergstrom et al. 2013) has written regarding *EVE*'s new player experience, arguing that its elevated difficulty has a role in homogenising the player base. Those players who fail to seek help or external resources to overcome the difficulty of *EVE Online* are unlikely to remain subscribed. I similarly contend that the elevated darkness of Treacherous play homogenises the player base; those who dislike it are not likely to remain subscribed, in objection to supporting a company which endorses such 'abhorrent' play. Problematizing this, however, is the lack of comparable sci-fi MMOGs in the game market; players attracted to the sci-fi setting and play, but not *EVE*'s ruthlessness, are left with no alternative than to play *EVE Online* and be subject to the treachery of other players.

Yet despite this, I have argued in this chapter that treacherous play can, in certain contexts, contribute to a positive play experience in multiplayer games. As these types of play are typically condemned, forbidden or entirely restricted, I further argue that there is a comparatively untapped design space for enjoyable and attractive play experiences which involve deception, treachery and betrayal. While further research is necessary to understand how treachery can successfully be implemented as a play space in different games, fictions and genres, I believe that *EVE Online* demonstrates how treacherous play can offer the

Pre-print

opportunity for new, exciting player experiences that may sustain consumer interest and distinguish a digital game in the competitive online multiplayer game market.

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