

Constructing the Ideal *EVE Online* Player

Kelly Bergstrom

York University
4700 Keele Street
Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3
kelly_bergstrom@edu.yorku.ca

Marcus Carter

The University of Melbourne
Parkville VIC 3010, Australia
marcusc@unimelb.edu.au

Darryl Woodford

Queensland University of Technology
Z1-515, Musk Avenue
Kelvin Grove QLD 4059, Australia
dp.woodford@qut.edu.au

Christopher A. Paul

Seattle University
901 12th Avenue
Seattle, WA, USA 98122
paulc@seattleu.edu

ABSTRACT

EVE Online, released in 2003 by CCP Games, is a space-themed Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG). This sandbox style MMOG has a reputation for being a difficult game with a punishing learning curve that is fairly impenetrable to new players. This has led to the widely held belief among the larger MMOG community that “*EVE* players are different”, as only a very particular type of player would be dedicated to learning how to play a game this challenging. Taking a critical approach to the claim that “*EVE* players are different”, this paper complicates the idea that only a certain type of player capable of playing the most hardcore of games will be attracted to this particular MMOG. Instead, we argue that *EVE*’s “exceptionalism” is actually the result of conscious design decisions on the part of CCP games, which in turn compel particular behaviours that are continually reinforced as the norm by the game’s relatively homogenous player community.

Keywords

EVE Online, Massively Multiplayer Online Games, players, community, design

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INTRODUCTION

Set in a future where humans have perfected long-range space travel, *EVE Online* (*EVE*) (CCP Games 2003) is a Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) that takes place in the fictional universe of New Eden. Players enter into this gameworld as a pilot of a small spaceship and are tasked with staying alive. Beyond the goal of survival, *EVE* places few constraints on its players. Marketed as a “sandbox” style game, players are free to follow their own interests and play preferences including (but not limited to) exploring, roleplaying, gathering resources, manufacturing in-game items, accumulating in-game capital, and/or participating in large-scale player versus player (PVP) battles to control and conquer in-game territory.

Released in 2003 by CCP Games, *EVE* has grown to over 500,000 subscribers with no sign of the player attrition currently plaguing other popular MMOGs, like the drop off in subscriptions to *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) (Blizzard 2004) that is a focus of popular recent gaming press coverage.¹ Despite its longevity and increasing player population, *EVE* remains relatively understudied compared to other popular MMOGs (Paul 2011a). Aside from the few studies that have placed this game at the centre of their investigation (Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop 2012; Feng, Brandt, and Saha 2007; Bergstrom 2012; Woodford 2013a; Woodford 2013b; Carter and Gibbs 2013; Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold 2012) and a handful of studies that use *EVE* as a case study as part of a larger investigation (Blodgett 2009; Paul 2012; Bainbridge 2011; Rossignol 2009), citations for research about this particular game and its players can be difficult to locate.

Bergstrom, de Castell and Jenson (2011) have argued that the scant research about *EVE* becomes particularly clear when compared with the richness of knowledge about the gameworld of *WoW* and its player community. Indeed, when surveying the literature about *WoW*, it is possible to find studies that have approached the game from a diversity of disciplines, methods, and theoretical understandings. For example, the affordances of *WoW*'s software have been interrogated ranging from studies of computer mediated communication to observe who communicates with whom and for what goals (Nardi and Harris 2006; Eklund and Johansson 2010; Ang and Zaphiris 2010), to documenting the way gender and racial stereotypes play out through the Non-Player Characters (NPCs) that populate the gameworld (Bergstrom et al. 2011; Bergstrom, Jenson, and de Castell 2012; Corneliussen 2008; Langer 2008). Analyses of *WoW* extend to the structures of the game (Taylor 2006a; Taylor 2009), the implication of language and design in the game (Paul 2010), and the discourse of players who communicate outside of the gameworld (Paul 2011b; Wenz 2013). When directly compared to the wide range of nuanced investigations conducted about *WoW* and its players, substantially less is known about New Eden and those who spend their leisure time within this gameworld. Because of *EVE*'s unique design appeals, we contend that better understanding *EVE* offers a platform on which to complicate notions of game mechanics and game communities prevalent in studies of other games.

A brief introduction to *EVE Online*

As a sandbox game set in space, CCP's game has been designed in such a way that seems to draw on few tropes commonly associated with the long tradition of fantasy-themed MMOGs such as *WoW*, *Rift* (Trion Worlds 2011), *EverQuest* (Sony 1999), *Dungeons & Dragons Online* (Turbine 2006), *Age of Conan* (Funcom 2008), etc. Unlike many of these fantasy-themed titles, players do not interact with each other via a humanoid avatar, nor do they find themselves having to “grind for xp” within the gameworld of *EVE*.² Instead, players are represented in the gameworld as a disposable, interchangeable spaceship.

Unlike a humanoid avatar whose base cosmetic appearance stays relatively consistent as a player progresses through the game (i.e. an avatar's weapons or armor may change, but their stature, hair colour, and facial features stay the same), this ship is *not* a permanent in-game marker of a player. Ships in *EVE* are frequently destroyed and replaced with different vessels that are not necessarily cosmetically consistent. In addition to departing from conventions of how a player is represented in the gameworld, *EVE* also differs in the mechanics by which one's avatar "levels up" or increases their skills and abilities. A player's character in *EVE* does not get stronger by completing quests or killing hostile monsters, two activities commonly found in the MMOGs mentioned above. Instead, a character will only gain skill points over time. No mechanics exist to increase the speed at which new skills and abilities are learned. This has the implication that *EVE* is not necessarily a level playing field: a player creating an account today will never have as many skill points as someone who has been playing *EVE* since the game's original release to market. This differs dramatically from many other MMOGs that have a "max level" where avatars will no longer gain new or improved abilities and the differences between avatars (no matter when they were created) will eventually flatten out. Given these departures from typical MMOG conventions, it is unsurprising that when *EVE* is mentioned in passing by academics and journalists, it is frequently referred to as an "odddity". The occasions in which *EVE* news penetrates broader gaming press typically only highlight the most unusual or bizarre occurrences such as players scamming each other, the theft of in-game assets, or reports of in-game espionage – see for example Drain's (2012b) list of the "top ten" *EVE* scams recently reported on the MMOG news site *Massively.com*.

EVE's reputation as an extremely difficult game, combined with the game's reliance on science fiction themes, is frequently held up as an explanation for the game's lack of female players. With 96% of the *EVE* player population being male (Leray 2013), and the majority of these players being white and older than the average player of other MMOGs (Bergstrom 2012), this is a game with a fairly homogenous player population. Community discussions often dismiss this gender disparity through stereotypes of what constitutes "male" and "female" gameplay preferences.³ The homogeneity of the player community is frequently explained by the assertion that players who are attracted to *EVE* must be "inherently different" than those who prefer to play more conventional MMOGs, and the game mechanics of *EVE* are unattractive to female players. However, this assumption that *EVE* players are somehow unlike the players of any other MMOG discourages investigations of how some players become members of this MMOG community, and how other potential players may be filtered out. Recognizing that players do not participate in their MMOG of choice in a vacuum, this paper is an investigation of *EVE* and its players who participate as part of an assemblage (Taylor 2009) or mangle (Steinkuehler 2006) of play.

Motivation and Context

We contend that by investigating a game at the periphery of its genre, *EVE* serves as an example to illuminate aspects of game design or player culture that have become taken for granted in more widely studied and/or mainstream MMOGs. The disciplinary oversights and partial pictures that come from focusing too much on one genre or game have been discussed by Begy and Consalvo (2011), who draw attention to researchers' emphasis on fantasy-based MMOGs over other subgenres of this type of game. In their introduction to their investigation of *Faunasphere* (Big Fish Games 2009), a MMOG with gameplay mechanics more in line with casual games than with *WoW*, Begy and Consalvo argue that most of our academic models for investigating player motivations

and preferences are heavily grounded in the observation of fantasy-based MMOG play. In this case study of a MMOG that much like *EVE*, departs from the lore, conventions and mechanics typically associated with the genre, Begy and Consalvo call for greater contextualization of play through a deeper understanding of how the story and mechanics of a game, combined with player communities, compel certain actions that may not fit with current models based on fantasy-based MMOGs. In our own paper, we build on Begy and Consalvo's call to take a less traveled path and present research about a MMOG that is firmly situated outside of the fantasy genre.

This paper brings together the work of four researchers who approach their study of *EVE* from different disciplines and methodologies, with the goal of drawing attention to the specific actions and behaviours observable in this gameworld that first appear to be emergent qualities of this player population. These actions and behaviours, we argue, have become the means by which *EVE* has developed a reputation for "exceptionalism" that it is a game that is only attractive to a particular demographic of players. We argue that an *EVE* player is *not* somehow inherently different than a player of any other MMOG. Instead, this particular instance of software and surrounding player community acts as an ideal case study for demonstrating the ways in which game mechanics purposefully and/or inadvertently shape player activities and interactions. These design choices compel specific sorts of actions from a player-base that may be in turn misread as unique attributes found only among those players populating the online world of New Eden. Our goal is to provide a series of concrete examples to illustrate how the archetypal *EVE* player is constructed, molded, and continually reinforced by the sociotechnical assemblage (De Landa 2004; De Landa 2009; De Paoli and Kerr 2009) that is "*EVE Online*".

WHAT MAKES *EVE ONLINE* 'DIFFICULT'?

The reputation of *EVE* being a difficult game is not entirely inaccurate. In one of the few academic investigations of this game, Paul (2011a) conducted a detailed analysis of the *EVE* introductory tutorial. Finding the game's introduction goes out of its way to actively *discourage* new players from continuing their participation, he argues that the tutorial is lacking crucial information. Therefore, in order to be successfully inducted into this game community, novices must seek out more experienced players to act as guides. Paul theorizes CCP's possible motivation for introducing new players to the game in such a manner:

Should a new player fail to seek out other people or external resources for help, they are not likely to stay long in New Eden, a decision that decreases the size of the likely audience for *EVE*, while making the player base more homogenous and stickier for those who fit the narrowed target demographic. (Paul 2011a, 264)

The new player experience has also been investigated by Bergstrom (forthcoming), who builds on Paul's earlier work in her investigation of *EVE* "newbie guides" (unofficial, player-authored "learn how to play *EVE*" guides) which serve an example of a resource that exists outside of the official in-game tutorial. Through a content analysis of popular new player guides, Bergstrom argues that the use of coded language works as a sort of filter, welcoming some player demographics and excluding others, which could be working to reinforce the homogeneity of this online community. In a very different study of the *EVE* player community, the rate at which players disengage from this particular gameworld was quantified by Feng et al. (2007) who reported that 30% of new *EVE* players will quit after one month, and 70% of new players will quit about a year after

creating an account (22). These studies both corroborate Paul's characterization that *EVE* is a game that many players will investigate, but few will become more permanent members of this MMOG community. In our own investigation, we build on Paul's foundational work to further explore the means by which the homogeneity of the *EVE* player community can (at least in part) be related back to the design decisions made by the game's developer. Here, we add further examples of how the ideal *EVE* player is constructed, rather than entering the game with fully formed tastes, play preferences, and conceptions of what makes an ideal *EVE* player.

GAME DESIGN AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PLAY(ERS)

As described above, *EVE* stands apart from the majority of MMOGs in several ways, but perhaps the most significant is in the sense of "emptiness" that it generates through its gameplay. By emptiness we do not necessarily mean the barrenness typically associated with space travel and/or exploration, but instead we use emptiness to describe to how little activity actually happens within the game client. Instead, the "backchannel", communication that happens outside of the official game software (for example via voice communication software such as Ventrilo or Team Speak, or through instant messenger services such as Jabber), is where much of *EVE* actually takes place (Bergstrom et al. 2012). This play outside of the game client, especially actions involving subterfuge or espionage against other players, is referred to as the "*EVE* metagame", described in detail by Carter et al. (2012). While other gaming environments also have substantial meta-game components (see for example, Taylor's (2006b) extensive description of the *EverQuest* metagame) the feeling of emptiness in New Eden is reinforced and amplified by the game's lack of humanoid avatars present during player-to-player and player-to-NPC interactions within the gameworld.

In the fantasy-themed MMOGs referenced throughout this paper, combat usually takes the form of a player's avatar squaring off against a hostile NPC where the actions of combat are fully animated. In games such as *WoW* an avatar is depicted on a player's computer monitor and this avatar will steady their sword before drawing back to land a critical blow on a foe, or their avatar's hands may glow brightly as they cast a powerful spell in an attempt to heal other players who have taken damage in battle. Whether these animations depict first person (i.e. seeing hands in front of you performing these actions) or third person (i.e. seeing an avatar from head to toe performing these actions), something exists on screen in which the player can identify with. In *EVE*, a player's character is represented through a third person rendering of their ship, and while weapon fire is visible and animated, there are few visual indicators that connect a player's keyboard presses or mouse clicks to what is unfolding on screen.

Furthermore, hostile NPCs or enemy players are often engaged from long distance and are represented by a small square target, illustrated in figure 1. This graphical minimalism is helpful for allowing *EVE*'s software to run on lower end computers and/or slower Internet connections, but this design decision also has the additional effect of reducing the feeling that one is in combat, battling against hundreds of other players. Outside of the notorious PVP battles that *EVE* is largely known for, the game's Player vs. Environment (PvE) content, known as "mission running" is designed as a primarily solo activity. While players are able to help each other complete missions, and this is a strategy adopted by a number of players with missions at more advanced levels, this cooperation is not explicitly required through the design of the environment; a sharp contrast to the genre convention of group quests, dungeons, and/or raids.



Figure 1: A screenshot depicting combat in *EVE Online*. In the foreground, the player's own ship is visible. The squares in the upper left corner represent other ships piloted by other players and/or NPCs.

Image from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EVE_Combat.png

The traditional humanoid avatar can be traced from early text MUDs through to contemporary MMOGs such as *EverQuest* and *WoW*. While sometimes be taken for granted as a design element in this genre of games, this particular affordance warrants investigation to better understand the use of avatars in game design and their influence on what sorts of play and interactions are observed within a gameworld. The avatar and its implementation encourages a play style mimicking human social behavior, and the implicit limitations on speed, movement and so forth, based on real world physics, encourage the creation of social spaces (Woodford 2013a). Across MMOGs featuring humanoid avatars, the convention is to route players through choke points as they head to trade hubs or other social structures, increasing the likelihood of interactions with other players. In contrast, a player's representation in *EVE*, a replaceable capsule travelling at high-speeds across vast stretches of empty space, does not lead itself to the formation of these choke points. Furthermore, the auction houses or trading hubs common in other MMOGs and useful for conversing with other players while they are idle (or at least not actively participating in combat) where players are more amenable to conversation (Bergstrom 2009) are absent in *EVE*. Instead, the trading system of *EVE* allows players to sell their goods without ever having to be co-located with their trading partners. This departure from avatar-focused play impacts on the ability of researchers to study *EVE* (Woodford 2013a), as well as having an impact on the way in which identities are constructed by players (Carter, Gibbs & Arnold, 2012). Significant to our own argument is just how much this departure from avatar-mediated play shapes the behaviour of every player in this particular environment, and in doing so creates the illusion of separation between the players of *EVE* and other games in the genre. We argue that the cultivation of exceptionalism (or, that “*EVE* players are different”) begins right from the introductory tutorial, which we will now analyze in detail.

LEARNING TO PLAY *EVE ONLINE*

Given that *EVE* departs from so many of the conventions that are pervasive in other MMOGs, it is reasonable to assume that the tutorial system acts as one of the primary ways new players are introduced to and become familiar with the play mechanics for this particular game. Because the game's design is predicated on creating a sandbox for play, the richness of the game is largely shaped by interaction with other players, which means that new player must learn both the technical elements of the game and the social aspects of the community – *EVE*'s tutorial attempts to accomplish both tasks. Although most games have tutorials to teach players what to do and when to do it, the tutorial in *EVE* is particularly notable because of the intricacies of the game and the horrifically steep learning curve that many new players slam into headfirst. Plenty of commentary about *EVE* references how hard the game can be for new players, including academic analyses that contend that the difficulty curve is a key piece of honing the community of *EVE* players (Paul 2012; Paul 2011a) but a reassessment of previous investigations of how players are brought into *EVE* (most notably in Paul's (2011a) detailed analysis of the tutorial aptly titled "Don't Play Me") is warranted in the wake of CCP's recent and thorough redesign of the *EVE* new player experience.

In the lead up to the launch of *DUST514* (CCP Shanghai 2013), *EVE*'s new console companion for the PlayStation 3, CCP gave a team of developers a month to rebuild the in-game tutorial to try to better integrate new players into the game (CCP Greyscale 2012). CCP identified a number of trouble spots in the tutorial where players were most likely to quit playing the game and made several changes to try to reorder when players would learn key skills and change the look and feel of the tutorial. Given the short time frame for revisions, the team was unable to make major alterations to the tasks required of new players, so most of the changes revolved around the game interface, like switching the colors and appearance of the tutorial window or introducing a new way to mark things on a player's screen. The redesign focused on the first 90 minutes or so of a new player's time in the game in an attempt to get more players into the career missions that teach core game concepts to a greater degree of depth. The new tutorial was largely met with praise by the *EVE* commentariat (Drain 2012a), but several key issues remain.

A primary issue with the tutorial is that it is built on a notion of telling, not showing. Although the tutorial is designed for players to do things and then click 'next' on the tutorial interface, the list of instructions rarely explains why players need to do certain things or sometimes even how to do them. Often there are multiple ways to accomplish the same request, which can leave a player confused about how they are supposed to complete what is asked of them. After the revision, the tutorial is still predicated on reading instructions in the bottom right corner of the screen and then searching for how to implement them on the main *EVE* user interface. The new text and anchoring icons help, but the reliance on telling players what they should be doing leaves a substantial amount of room for misinterpretation. Errors of that kind are likely to be compounded as well, since there is nothing keeping a player from deviating from the designed plan and getting lost in menus (or in space).

Beyond the structure of learning in the tutorial, two additional factors combine to present a substantial hurdle to entry for those seeking to immerse themselves in New Eden. Unlike many other games, *EVE*'s tutorial is not really based on a limited, streamlined interface for new players and its status as a unique game means that players are unlikely to have prior experience that readily ports to *EVE*. Most in-game tutorials are built around a framework of teaching that slowly reveals new elements of play, giving the player one

or two new tasks at a time and gradually getting their feet wet. Even with the revisions intended to ease new players into the game, *EVE* throws players into the deep end with 17 icons on the left side of the screen, a befuddling chat interface, menus that pop up over other menus, and so many choices new players can feel like they are drowning. This quick immersion into a relatively complete version of the *EVE* user interface is compounded by the lack of other games like *EVE*. Many MMOGs are able to scaffold knowledge from one game to another, for example *WoW* players could have learned game basics (such as right click to pick up items) from any of a wide variety of other fantasy-based role-playing games. *EVE*'s skill queue is completely different than the way experience is earned in many other games and its disposable ships stand in stark contrast to the penalty (or relative lack thereof) for death found in other games. *EVE*'s rich community is dependent on interaction with others, which runs in opposition to industry multiplayer trends that enable playing with others while barely exchanging a word (Eklund and Johansson 2010). *EVE* is a strikingly different game that departs dramatically from the mechanics of other popular MMOGs that players may have participated in previously, which is a key factor in complicating new player efforts to smoothly assimilate into New Eden.

When compared with previous investigations of the *EVE* new player experience (Paul 2012; Paul 2011a) the rhetorical effect of the difficult new player experience remains. *EVE* depends on a group of players seeking each other out and being willing to interact with each other. The sandbox that is *EVE* requires players to assent to a certain level of freedom and the recognition that many of the least important lessons in *EVE* are related to game mechanics. *EVE* is defined by the exchanges and stories that are driven by players and player-populated corporations. Although guilds and social ties are a rich part of any online world, *EVE*'s game is a mere setting for interaction. As such, the important part of the tutorial is more about driving new players into interplay with others. The more the tutorial focuses on trying to teach new players complex parts of the game interface, the less *EVE* is able to showcase what it actually does well. Although the acknowledgement by CCP that the tutorial needing to be redesigned is an important indicator that the introduction to *EVE* is perhaps lacking, the “new” new player experience still communicates just how cold and alone New Eden can be on one's own. But what happens to those who “survive” the tutorial and begin looking for an in-game social network? Next, we turn our attention to in-game activities to demonstrate how design considerations work to shape the types of relationships and bonds created and emphasized as important amongst *EVE* players.

TEST ALLIANCE PLEASE IGNORE BE NICE TO NEW PLAYERS

While missions and other PVE content (described above) are possible to complete as solo tasks, players still find themselves needing some sort of social support network to survive in certain areas of New Eden. In *EVE*, player death carries harsher consequences than in other MMOGs. If a ship sustains enough damage from attacks, it will permanently explode. Anything a player was carrying in their ship's cargo hold (including PLEX, a credit for subscription time that has a real world currency exchange rate) will also be destroyed or be available for looting by other players passing by the wreckage. New Eden is divided into zones of varying “security levels” ranging from high-sec (“high security”) to null-sec (“no security”). While undertaking a hostile action against another player in a high-sec zone will provoke the inevitable wrath of Concord (the NPC police) who will come to an ambushed player's aid, in null-sec players finding themselves under attack are left to fend for themselves. Instead, trusted fellow players become one's support network,

sharing intelligence regarding the location of hostile players, and coming to one's aid when under attack. Put simply, in null-sec there is safety in numbers.

Like guilds in *WoW* and clans in *EverQuest*, *EVE* offers players the opportunity to join together in persistent social groups. Situated within *EVE*'s hyper-capitalistic narrative, these formalized groups are known as 'Corporations', which may band together to form powerful 'Alliances'. Ranging from a handful of players cooperating on industrial production, to vast globalized empires with over 10,000 individual players, membership in these groups unlocks access to otherwise inaccessible modes of play. For example, Alliances are able to claim sovereignty over 'unclaimed' territory in *EVE*'s vast universe, and exploit the resources in that zone for collective profit. The largest of these (with 12,498 members at the time of writing this paper) is "TEST Alliance Please Ignore" (TEST). In the following section we describe TEST's approach to combat and how its unique approach to 'welcoming' of new players can be seen to have led to the Alliance's in-game success.

Even after a player begins to grasp the mechanics of gameplay, the social landscape of *EVE* can remain difficult to navigate; a culture of distrust makes it difficult to begin creating an in-game support network. With scamming and theft of in-game items *not* being a violation of *EVE*'s terms of service, new and/or naive players are frequently preyed upon by more experienced players looking to make a quick profit by unscrupulous means. New players are also at an additional disadvantage because they will never have as many skill points as someone who has been playing the game since the game's release. With the amount of skill points limiting the types of ship one can fly (and by extension, one's effectiveness in driving off attacks from enemy players), new players are often seen as undesirable and/or a burden on the Corporations they join. In many cases it is only after they have learned enough skills to be useful to a Corporation that new players will begin to see the doors open to the necessary social networks they need in order to survive in null-sec.

While new players may be shunned by established Corporations until they have "learned the ropes" sufficiently to survive in the lawless areas of null-sec, TEST provides an interesting case study of a group of players who have used the sandbox design of this game to reimagine the utility of *EVE* accounts that are only days old. The principal manifestation of this tolerance of new players in TEST's culture is epitomized in the concept of the 'newbro', the Alliance's nickname for new players. The term newbro is a variation on insults like Newbie or N00b, monikers given to new (and thus unskilled) players. TEST players use the term interchangeably for new male and female players; there is no feminized or gender neutral version of this nickname. Newbro helps reinforce the prevalent attitude espoused by players (and CCP Games – see Rehard (2013)) that *EVE* is a game of interest to a male audience, and comprised of a community that imagines itself to be solely comprised of male players.

Hardly unique to *EVE*, n00b and its variations are insults used across gaming genres, frequently used to single out a player as being inadequate and/or unskilled at the action they are attempting to perform. In a reversal of this application, rhetoric surrounding the concept of newbro in TEST is largely positive. The use of the term "bro" (short for 'brother') welcomes new (male) players rather than informing them they don't belong. In *EVE*'s overwhelmingly difficult game environment that is notoriously intolerant of new players, the very specific context of TEST gives new players the opportunity to ask questions. Mistakes are tolerated and encouraged, and experienced players who do not

show patience for newbros are condemned and exiled from the group. However, this is not to say that TEST's welcoming of newbros is purely done out of goodwill to assist new players who will then move on to other endeavors. Instead, we point to specific game mechanics implemented by CCP Games and capitalized upon by TEST whose culture of acceptance is a way to compel new players to provide TEST a tactical advantage.

Large alliances in *EVE* often have "fleet doctrines", that is, specific ship combinations that players are required to conform to in order to participate in large fleet battles (PVP encounters which can often exceed 750 concurrent players). In essence fleet doctrines are simply larger and more complex versions of the group composition required to be successful in the 10, 25, or 40 person raids that make up the "end game" of *WoW* (Chen 2012; Taylor 2006a). Just like raids in other MMOGs, a fleet will be most successful if it has the necessary balance between those who are responsible for inflicting damage on enemy players, and others who are responsible for repairing the damage dealt by the enemy to their fleet. In *EVE* the strengths and abilities of certain weapons and ships are constantly in flux; updates and patches to the game software might increase the damage of one weapon type while weakening others, and expansions may introduce new types of ships that necessitate rebalancing the rest of the fleet. These minor changes encourage theorycrafting (see Paul (2011b) and Wenz (2013) for theorycrafting described in relation to other MMOGs), and prevent specific fleet doctrines from becoming dominant and homogenizing the play experience. CCP observes how ships and weapons are used by the player community, and use this information to tweak and modify the game's mechanics on an ongoing basis. In-game items that are too powerful will be quickly rebalanced, as not to provide the players with access to these items an unfair advantage over those who currently do not. These rebalancing efforts for the most part do not take into account TEST's unorthodox approach to null-sec battles.

While balancing is often focused on expensive items utilized by those who have been playing *EVE* for months or years, TEST has focused at least part of their efforts to best learning how to utilize ships that are flown by the newest players. The Rifter is a combat frigate: a small, inexpensive yet fast ship that requires few skills to operate. Players are usually able to fly them within a week of activating their *EVE* account. Because of their disposability and low cost, Rifiers play an essential role in nearly all TEST Alliance fleet doctrines, taking on the role of the "fast tackle". To explain the role of a fast tackle, some background information about *EVE* ships is necessary. When attacked, a ship in *EVE* can simply 'warp' away. To do this, a player must engage their warp drive (which is actually quite similar to the warp drive commonly featured in the iconic sci-fi series *Star Trek*), allowing them to escape from the range of the aggressor. Rifiers can be fitted with a jammer to disable a nearby ship's warp drive, preventing escape and allowing a fleet's slower ships (fitted with far more deadlier weapons) to catch up and destroy the enemy's vessel. As a result, all new players are strongly encouraged to learn how to fly a Rifter as fast as possible, and TEST provides these particular ships to new players in the Alliance at no cost.

As important as Rifiers are to TEST's preferred fleet doctrines, it is also important to emphasize that the utility of these ships is due to their disposability. Players flying a Rifter into a PVP battle will be among the first to die, spending the majority of the battle on the sidelines rather than as part of the action. Figures 2 and 3 are examples of TEST Alliance 'propaganda' understood as Burnett's (1989) conceptualization as a type of persuasive communication in the service of an ideology. These images produced by

experienced players are specifically targeted towards newer players to reinforce the positive rhetoric around newbros and the essential role that Rifters play in *EVE* military campaigns. Figure 2 includes the commonly repeated phrase “Hero Rifter” which emphasizes the essential role that these cheap and disposable ships play in turning the tides of battle. Though new players assigned the role of fast tackle might quickly be killed, the wordplay of “Hero Rifter” underlines the essential sacrificial nature of these ships. Figure 3 is an old TEST Alliance logo designed similarly to the Hammer and Sickle flag of the Soviet Union, symbolizing (in this case) the indispensable role that newbro pilots play in the continued success of the TEST. There are dozens of similar images and videos like these which construct Rifters as essential ship in the Alliance, promoting the positive culture towards the newbros who fly them with the goal of encouraging new players to be involved in PVP combat, despite the (very real) possibility of quick and play-ending death.



Figure 2: One of many images featuring the slogan “hero rifter”



Figure 3: TEST’s logo. This modification of the iconic hammer and sickle replaces the hammer with an outline of a Rifter.

TEST provides a fascinating case study as the Alliance offers new players a Faustian bargain. New players can be fast-tracked into a supportive social network that will answer the multiple questions that will inevitably arise while learning to navigate New Eden. This help is offered in exchange for be willing to fly a disposable ship and furthermore, be willing to die on the front lines of battle. New players are compelled into particular

roles that are then valorized by the larger, more established TEST community through the use of the affectionate term newbro, but also through visual imagery and propaganda used to downplay the reality that newbros are TEST's cannon fodder. This is only one way to approach the sandbox of *EVE*, but given the otherwise difficulty of learning to play *EVE* discussed throughout this paper, TEST provides a clear example of just how quickly players can be indoctrinated into a particular style of play.

Given TEST's current status as the largest Alliance in *EVE*, their influence on the larger player community cannot be underestimated. In part due to this this "positive attitude" towards new players, TEST Alliance has grown to be one of the largest and most powerful entities in *EVE*. However, the attrition rate of TEST Alliance members is quite high, and the Alliance's leaders have publically stated that the fostering and training of new players is its "most valuable resource". TEST has become a means by which a new player can bypass the long process of "learning the ropes" required before being able to participate in the PVP battles usually reserved for more experienced players. These new players eager to relocate to null-sec as soon as possible become the newbros in Hero Rifters that are welcomed into TEST, and will quickly gaining expertise by being thrown immediately into the front lines of PVP battles. These newbros will eventually become intermediate players who are interested in (and capable of) flying more powerful ships than the Rifter, leaving the fast tackle positions empty. Therefore, the way in which CCP have left the strength of Rifters relatively untouched encourages the continuation of this 'newbro' culture, as TEST requires an almost constant influx of new players for the front line of battle.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The goal of this paper has been to de-mystify the space-themed MMOG that is *EVE Online*. The incredibly limited amount of previous discussions of this game have largely focused on its status as an outlier within this genre of games, which could be used as a reason *not* to study this particular game. Here we have presented several case studies with the goal of illustrating that *EVE* players are *not* somehow "inherently different" than the players that populate the gameworlds of other MMOGs. Further, *EVE* offers an outstanding platform on which to analyze how the design and development of a game shapes how a game is played and how a community of players forms in and around games. While *EVE* has been active since 2003, it has only recently begun to attract the attention of academic researchers interested in the sociality of MMOGs. Steep learning curve aside, *EVE* represents an interesting venue for research, as it is a MMOG that has attracted a rich (if homogenous) community of loyal and passionate players. This paper only scratches the surface of the insights that can be found by studying *EVE*. We hope this paper will inspire other games researchers to consider adding this MMOG to their toolkit.

ENDNOTES

1 At its peak in October 2010, *World of Warcraft* had approximately 12 million subscribers. In the first quarter of 2013, this has declined to less than 10 million subscriptions and has been the subject of press coverage, see for example Stickney (2013) or Warr (2013).

2 Here we make reference to the colloquial phrase “xp grind” or “experience grind”. This phrase is commonly used to explain the action of repeating the same actions over and over in order to gain experience points in order to “level up” (read: make one’s avatar stronger and more powerful).

3 While outside the scope of this paper, please see recent work by Chess (2009; 2010), Jenson & de Castell (2010), and Vanderhoef (2013) who problematize the ideas of “male” and “female” playstyles.

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