Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: EVE Online Workshop Introduction

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we overview the extant research that has been conducted on or through EVE Online, and discuss the goals and intent of the 1st International EVE Online Workshop, which will be held at the 2013 Foundations of Digital Games conference.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K. 8.0 [**Personal Computing**]: General - Games.

General Terms

Documentation, Design, Economics, Experimentation, Human Factors, Theory, Legal Aspects.

Keywords

EVE Online

1. INTRODUCTION

2013 is a big year for *EVE Online*; not only will its developer, CCP Games be celebrating the 10th anniversary of the space themed massively multiplayer online game (MMOG), but also passing 500,000 paid subscriptions for the first time in a market overwhelmingly trending towards casualisation and freemium payment models. Though this figure may pale in comparison to *World of Warcraft*'s high water-mark of 12,000,000 players, there is no doubt something unique and interesting to the *EVE Online* phenomena. At its release in 2003, *EVE* was famed by commentators and players for its rich narrative background and immersive graphical detail, but stands distinct as result of its ruthless player culture, single shard server configuration and the developers 'sandbox' approach to game design.

EVE Online is set in the universe of New Eden, a hyper-capitalist, greed driven dystopia in which players assume the role of 'capsuleers'; functionally immortal space pilots, politically independent from the powerful non-player empires. Unlike other MMOGs, *EVE* permits 'non-consensual PVP' between players, which means players can be killed at any time. Compounding the impact of this on the player experience is the consequentiality of

death in *EVE*; ammunition spent and ships destroyed are removed from the game environment permanently. Further contributing to EVE's ruthless reputation is the comparative lack of restriction by formal codes of conduct or informal notions of fair play and decency; players are permitted to ruthlessly lie, cheat and steal from one another in the pursuit of game goals [see 7, 9, 15]. Despite this, powerful player-driven social groups unite under powerful leaders with thousands of players [see 17], forming meaningful relationships like those found in other persistent virtual worlds [see 13]. Driven by capitalist desire for the sovereignty over in-game space, some of these groups engage in bitter military campaigns against one another, campaigns that involve metagame strategies that would normally be considered unacceptable or non-game; political sabotage, DDOSing servers (distributed denial of service attacks), espionage, propaganda and market manipulation [see 5]. Perhaps greater than any other game, *EVE* is experienced more outside the client than within [16, 25].

Several other features make the game starkly different from 'traditional', largely fantasy, games in the MMOG genre. Despite a large female presence in other online games (commonly 20%-40%), *EVE* only has ~2% female players [see 1]. Though controllable, humanoid avatars were introduced in 2011, players remain unable to interact with other player's via their avatars as in all other MMOGs, prompting methodological challenges [25] and transforming the process of player identification [6]. Since 2009, *EVE* online has permitted real-money trading in the form of 'PLEX', an in-game item that can be purchased with 'real' currency which can be redeemed for 30 days of game time, weakening player norms against real-money trading [24]. This has also provided players, and the gaming media, with a compelling currency conversion rate to quantify the astonishing cost of high-end ships ($7,500), thefts ($40,000) and collective wealth of the larger coalitions (over $1,000,000). Further worth note is the game's presentation and mythos as 'hardcore' rather than 'casual', and the rhetoric of "*don't play me*" impressed upon new players [see 20, 21].

An element in which ground-breaking research is currently flourishing is in exploring the results of *EVE*'s single-server configuration. All players (with the exception of those in China) coexist on the same server cluster, called Tranquility, forcing the negotiation of difficult language and cultural barriers [see 14]. This is an element of the *EVE Online* experience not found in other MMOGs which are restricted to scattered, geographically based servers. Promising research is also underway [19] examining the different player experience and culture that emerges in the distinct, separate Chinese *EVE* community.

Reflective of CCP Game's ethos towards the role that *EVE* players have in shaping the state and content of the game universe is the

innovative 'Council for InterStellar Management'; the CSM. This elected body was created with the goal of enabling democratic representation of the player community [4, 18], however the extent to which it has done so is the source of some debate: recent campaigns have seen the increasing prominence of block voting, whilst the removal of elected candidates have also negated the votes of many participants. There remain open questions on the role players are able to play in the governance process, and indeed whether the shaping of community norms is a more powerful tool than formal representation [10, 11, 26]. Yet CCP have successfully provided a testing ground for these theories, innovation which remains rare in the massively multiplayer genre, or the gaming industry more broadly.

Prompting new academic interest, CCP have recently begun encouraging academic research on *EVE* [12], providing copies of their server data for innovative economic analyses [22, 23], and fully funding an academic position at Reykjavík University for 5 years. These opportunities, appropriately harnessed, present game studies with a spectacular opportunity for original and groundbreaking research.

Along with expanding in numbers, *EVE Online* is expanding into new domains. Its unique eSport [7] where matches often exceed 10,000 live viewers has recently expanded into real-money prizes. Avatars have been introduced, and will soon be able to interact in social spaces. Most intriguing however, is the unprecedented linking of *Dust 514* into the *EVE Online* universe, a first-person shooter set on planets within New Eden. The capacity for a PC based MMOG and a PS3 shooter to functionally, culturally and economically interact will break new ground in gaming history.

Compared to other MMOG titles, *EVE* is relatively understudied. Game studies is a new discipline, thus it is inevitable that the first studies should be drawn to those commanding the most players and financial success. However, as game studies, like *EVE Online*, enters its second decade, there is the potential for fruitful research reflecting on the differences *EVE Online* presents. *EVE* challenges what constitutes an MMO, what constitutes play and what 'good' games are meant to provide players. The loaded colloquialism we have borrowed from *EVE* players, *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business*, rings true in this scenario. As such, it is our privilege to organize this workshop to begin provoking more questions about what *EVE Online* can contribute to game studies.

This *EVE Online* focused workshop is intended to bring together the existing multidisciplinary community of *EVE* researchers with aims of producing an edited volume of *EVE* scholarship. With a work-in-progress emphasis, we are particularly excited about the number of dissertations that are underway, and the venue that this workshop provides them. Furthermore, we also hope that game studies researchers not currently investigating *EVE* find this as an opportunity to engage with the various nascent *EVE* projects and share their expertise and perspective on works-in-progress presented. Through such dialogue, we believe the potential contribution of *EVE Online* scholarship can be enhanced. This workshop is the first of two, with the second being held at the Digital Games Research Association conference in the USA later this year, both aligned towards producing a high quality volume of *EVE Online* scholarship.

We, the organizers, wish to thank both the authors for their contributions and the organizers of the 2013 Foundations of Digital Games conference, without whom this workshop would not be possible. It is an honor to be able to hold this conference at FDG 2013, and we hope the contribution of this workshop reflects the high quality of FDG.

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