

EVE ONLINE IS NOT FOR EVERYONE: EXCEPTIONALISM IN ONLINE GAMING CULTURES

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Abstract: *EVE Online is a space-themed massively multiplayer online game that has developed a reputation for being difficult and unwelcoming to new players. In this article, I explore how an emphasis on exceptionalism is present throughout discussions about EVE by its developer, the enthusiast gaming press, and survey responses of current players (N = 647). Taken together, information from these sources reinforces a public perception that EVE is a game that is of interest only to a very specific kind of player. In turn, these findings add further evidence to the long-argued position of feminist game scholars: Not all gaming communities are open to all players. Rather, who plays, what they play, when they play, and/or how often they play is shaped by the larger social context in which play occurs.*

Keywords: *EVE Online, MMOGs, players, exceptionalism.*



INTRODUCTION

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) represent a genre of digital games in which thousands of players participate simultaneously in a shared, persistent online world. Research to date has remained overwhelmingly focused on the activities, decision making, in-game behaviors, and interactions among players while they participate in the gameworld of a MMOG. Still underexplored are how players come to play particular games, and even less is known about why they leave. Although at any time hundreds of MMOGs are available to pick from, players tend to focus their attention on only one or two games, most typically following the pattern of quitting one game before moving on to a new title (Pearce & Artemsia, 2009). Due to the affordances and structures of most MMOGs, this makes sense: This genre of gaming tends to require a significant time investment by its players. Because of this time investment, participation in these gameworlds is not always continuous or consistent. Players also might stop and start playing the same MMOG multiple times, depending on external factors that constrain their available leisure time (Bergstrom, 2019b; Debeauvais, Nardi, Schiano, Ducheneaut, & Yee, 2011). In other circumstances, players may not want to stop playing but are forced to relocate to a different gameworld because the game is being shuttered by its developer, as was the case for the *Faunasphere* (Consalvo & Begy, 2015) and *Uru* (Pearce & Artemsia, 2009) communities.

In this article, I add to the growing body of research being conducted to better understand why players leave MMOGs. I also add support to arguments made by feminist game scholars that the choice of whether or not to play a game is never truly unfettered. Specifically, I contribute evidence that the larger discourse surrounding a game, combined with how existing community members frame the game to outsiders, can serve as a barrier for some potential players becoming long-term participants in a particular gameworld. Using the space-themed MMOG *EVE Online* (*EVE*) as a case study, I demonstrate how an emphasis on exceptionalism is present in how this game is marketed, the type of coverage offered by the enthusiast gaming press, and how its existing player base describes the game to outsiders. Taken together, information from these sources reinforces a public perception that *EVE* is a game that is of interest only to a very particular kind of player. This in turn adds to the folklore that *EVE* is exceptionally difficult and/or unforgiving in its gameplay, which is indeed an attractive quality to some players (e.g., Bergstrom, Carter, Woodford, & Paul, 2013; Carter, 2015b) but may result also in potential players—who might otherwise enjoy the game—opting out before ever trying it for themselves.

BARRIERS TO DIGITAL GAMEPLAY

In order for an activity to be considered play, it must be entered into voluntarily. Yet this does not necessarily mean that all games are open to all potential players. In the case of a MMOG, certain conditions must be met before a potential player can enter the gameworld. These conditions typically include access to a computer capable of running the game's software, access to high-speed Internet, and a credit card or other means to pay the game's monthly subscription fee. Some games are geographically limited, meaning that computers located in certain regions of the world are unable to connect to a game's server. These examples are some, but not all of the obstacles that must be overcome before a player can connect to a MMOG. Less easy to pinpoint are the more subtle social forces that may steer potential players toward some games

and not others, or away from games entirely. To address the gap whereby the barriers to gameplay remain underexplored, I draw on the history of feminist game scholarship that has long illustrated that, although games are frequently marketed in a way that assumes they are of more interest to young boys (Burrill, 2008; Chess, 2017; Cote, 2018), in reality girls often are socialized away from gaming from a young age (de Castell & Bryson, 1998; Harvey, 2015). Interventionist feminist research has shown that when the entry conditions are changed (e.g., the creation of groups where girls can learn to play games in a girls-only environment or in women-led community groups focusing on mentoring other women through designing their own game), girls and women become active players and/or create their own games (Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Fisher, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015; Harvey, 2014; Harvey & Shepherd, 2017; Jenson & de Castell, 2011; Kafai, 2008). Beyond intentional feminist interventions, games directly marketed toward girls and women tend to be collaborative as opposed to competitive (Cunningham, 2018; Flanagan, 2005; Juul, 2010) or productive in nature (e.g., cognitive improvement games such as BrainAge) rather than play for play's sake (Chess, 2009, 2010, 2017).

In this article, I continue my previous research that disrupts biological deterministic arguments surrounding who plays what games and for what reasons (Bergstrom, 2019a, 2019c). Throughout my work, I have argued that gendered assumptions about who plays digital games, what games they play, and for what reasons they play are complicated when feminist games scholarship is put into conversation with leisure scholarship. By turning to literature from leisure studies that investigate how the combination of intrapersonal (e.g., a personal belief about whether or not something is an appropriate leisure activity to undertake), interpersonal (e.g., family commitments that reduce one's leisure time), or structural (e.g., a lack of disposable income) barriers can work to reduce an individual's access to particular activities (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991), I have argued that feminist game scholarship can better articulate the barriers that can prevent access to gameplay (Bergstrom, 2019c). Games, broadly conceived, suffer from a common-sense understanding that ignores the larger social context in which they are undertaken. Traditionally, the assumption has been that such activities are freely chosen (Stebbins, 2017, p. 11). However, unobstructed access to leisure activities is more myth than reality: Leisure scholars have long argued that "leisure activities are socially structured and shaped by the inequalities of society" (Juniu & Henderson, 2001, p. 8). Moreover, such inequalities are correspondingly present among digital gaming cultures, as evidenced by the work of Kishonna Gray (2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2018), who has painstakingly documented the racism and misogyny faced by black women who participate in online gaming communities. Rather than barriers being limited to a few specific games, feminist researchers have documented how games-related forums and websites also are less than welcoming to participants who fall outside the gamer stereotype. To be clear, the stereotype is not necessarily reflective of the reality of the diverse demographics that can be found playing digital games; rather, the stereotype that games are the domain of socially awkward teenage boys remains exceptionally sticky (Bergstrom, Fisher, & Jenson, 2016; Kowert, Griffiths, & Oldmeadow, 2012). Players who do not self-identify as being straight and/or white and/or male are generally made to feel unwelcome or less-deserving to identify as part of a specific gaming community (Beyer, 2012; Braithwaite, 2014; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Kubrik, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Vanderhoef, 2013).

These studies of barriers to leisure and/or gaming communities serve as my framework to examine how a developer and/or existing player community can signal to potential players

whether or not a particular game is for them. EVE's player population is exceptionally homogeneous, almost exclusively men. In my previous research about this MMOG, I discussed how players use the male-dominated EVE player community (Leray, 2013) as evidence that women are somehow inherently disinterested in space-themed games, such as EVE (Bergstrom, 2016). In this article, I continue to build on this work to illustrate how the ways a specific game is positioned in the larger MMOG landscape can act as a form of gatekeeping, which in turn works to maintain the homogenous demographic of its player community. To highlight evidence of this gatekeeping, I will begin by discussing some examples of how EVE is framed by its developer (CCP Games) and the enthusiast gaming press. Subsequently, I examine responses from a survey in which current players of EVE were asked to describe the game to someone who had never played it before. EVE is a sandbox-style game, meaning players are reasonably free to forge their own path and participate in activities that best suit their preferred play style and interests. Yet, these examples of how EVE is framed by its developer, the enthusiast press, and the existing player community will illustrate how a particular version of EVE has become the norm. Such framing inadvertently hails¹ some players while pre-emptively excluding other potential players, which in turn works to complicate the idea that playing or not playing EVE is an activity that somehow is inherently more attractive to certain demographics over others.

EVE ONLINE, BRIEFLY

EVE, a space-themed MMOG released in 2003 by CCP Games, has wavered in popularity over the course of its lifespan. Peak subscriber numbers are estimated to be around 500,000, but this number has since decreased (Royce, 2016). Originally, a subscription was required to play, but the game has since moved to a free-to-play model. EVE breaks from conventions typically present in other popular MMOGs (e.g., World of Warcraft, EverQuest) in that it is not a fantasy-themed game, player-to-player interaction does not happen via humanoid avatars, and CCP Games rarely intervenes to regulate play (Bergstrom & Carter, 2016). Instead, EVE players are free to undertake what CCP Games has described as forging their own path in the sandbox, that is, in the gameworld known as New Eden. EVE is played on a single-shard server, which means that players from almost everywhere in the world access the same game server. Exceptions to this single-shard community are the players with Chinese Internet Protocol addresses who must play on a separate server due to government regulations.²

Research about EVE was scant in the years immediately following the game's release, but it has increased in popularity among researchers in recent years. Early investigations about the game include a collaboration by Wu-Chang Feng, David Brandt, and Debanjan Saha (2007), who examined the rate at which new players joined and existing players quit EVE. By tracking patterns of how often players connected to the game server, Feng et al. found that 70% of new players quit about a year after creating an account (p. 22). Other research about EVE published around this time used prominent in-game events as part of larger investigations about player interaction in virtual worlds. In large part due to EVE's reputation as a lawless virtual world, in-game events sensational enough to warrant coverage in the gaming and/or popular press have served as a case study in articles that focused on morality (Craft, 2007), fraud (White, 2008), and virtual world governance (Blodgett, 2009; de Zwart, 2009; de Zwart & Humphreys, 2014).

In 2013, a noticeable shift in the academic games literature about EVE occurred. Rather than looking from the outside in, ethnographic investigations, such as Harald Warmelink's (2014) landmark book *Online Gaming and Playful Organizations*, began to offer new interpretations of this gameworld. Despite Darryl Woodford (2013) cataloging the difficulties of conducting ethnographic work in a nonavatar environment such as EVE, articles and conference papers drawing on interviews with current players and/or participant observation of the EVE gameworld began to appear at this time. In some cases, such as publications stemming from Marcus Carter's (2015c) dissertation research, this literature remained focused on the more ruthless elements of EVE play. Carter collected his data via in-game observation and by interviewing active players of the game (Carter, 2015b; Carter & Gibbs, 2013; Carter, Gibbs, & Harrop, 2012), rather than building an argument based on coverage of a notorious event in the popular press. Oskar Milik (2017) and Nick Webber and Milik (2018) added to this conversation by analyzing how the speeches made by leaders of in-game corporations (EVE's name for guilds or other similar player organizations) were used to maintain order in a chaotic online world but also reinforced a culture of ruthlessness among the corporation's membership. Catherine Goodfellow (2015) documented the xenophobia against Russian (or those perceive to be Russian) players. Goodfellow's ability to conduct fieldwork in both Russian and English allowed for her cross-cultural comparison of this player community, adding a thick description of EVE to the game-specific literature while further serving as an important addition to the broader game studies literature that overwhelmingly focuses on English-speaking game communities. This new approach to EVE was most readily apparent in *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business* (Carter, Bergstrom, & Woodford, 2016), an edited collection about the game that featured empirical research as well as essays written by prominent and long-term players, adding nuance and complexity to the studies of this gameworld.

Earlier academic work on this game seemed to rely heavily on third-party descriptions of controversial in-game events. This second wave of research, drawing on empirical research, complicates the perception that EVE play consisted entirely of lying, cheating, scamming, and assassinating other players. And yet, as my investigation will demonstrate, this continues to be one of the primary (and sometimes the sole) depictions of EVE by the enthusiast press and one of the major themes current players will draw upon when describing this game to someone who has not previously played it. Before moving on to this discussion of EVE in the enthusiast press, I now provide additional context for the game by providing a brief description of how EVE is marketed by its developer, CCP Games.

FRAMING EVE ONLINE

As part of a larger dissertation about EVE, I conducted two analyses of major sources of information that a potential player might turn to in learning more about this MMOG: the official EVE website and reporting on EVE by the enthusiast gaming press. I briefly summarize here the findings of both studies with the caveat that, due to the nature of the Internet that allows for continually updated content, these studies are now historical examples. I posit however that these examples are still useful because they capture how EVE was talked about online in the time leading up to when I conducted the survey detailed later in this article.

EVE Online's Official Website

A visitor to the official EVE website in September 2018 was greeted with a realistic rendering of space and spaceships, reflective of the game's animation style. Written in bold, white text at the center of the screen is the message

RECORD-BREAKING SPACE MMO³
JOIN GAMING'S GREATEST BATTLES

Near the bottom of the page is a quote attributed to *The OP*⁴ that reads, "Best Open-World MMORPG⁵: EVE Online." In June 2019, this message was updated to say

THE #1 SPACE MMO
NEW EXPANSION OUT NOW

The quote attributed to *The OP* was later changed to one by *Game Revolution*⁶ that states, "EVE Online is the biggest game you could possibly hope to play." In 2018 and now into 2019, the landing page indicates this is a website for a space-themed MMOG that has received praise. But this was not always the case.

In May 2014, a visitor to the EVE landing page would have been greeted by a very different message (Figure 1). Clicking the text "one universe" loaded a star map of New Eden, the virtual universe of EVE. This map was not annotated in any meaningful way nor did it include an explanation of how gameplay on a single server adds to a unique gaming experience. In March 2015, the link to the star map was replaced with a new link that said "the universe." Clicking on this link led to a page that detailed the backstory or lore of the game. In a larger exploration of

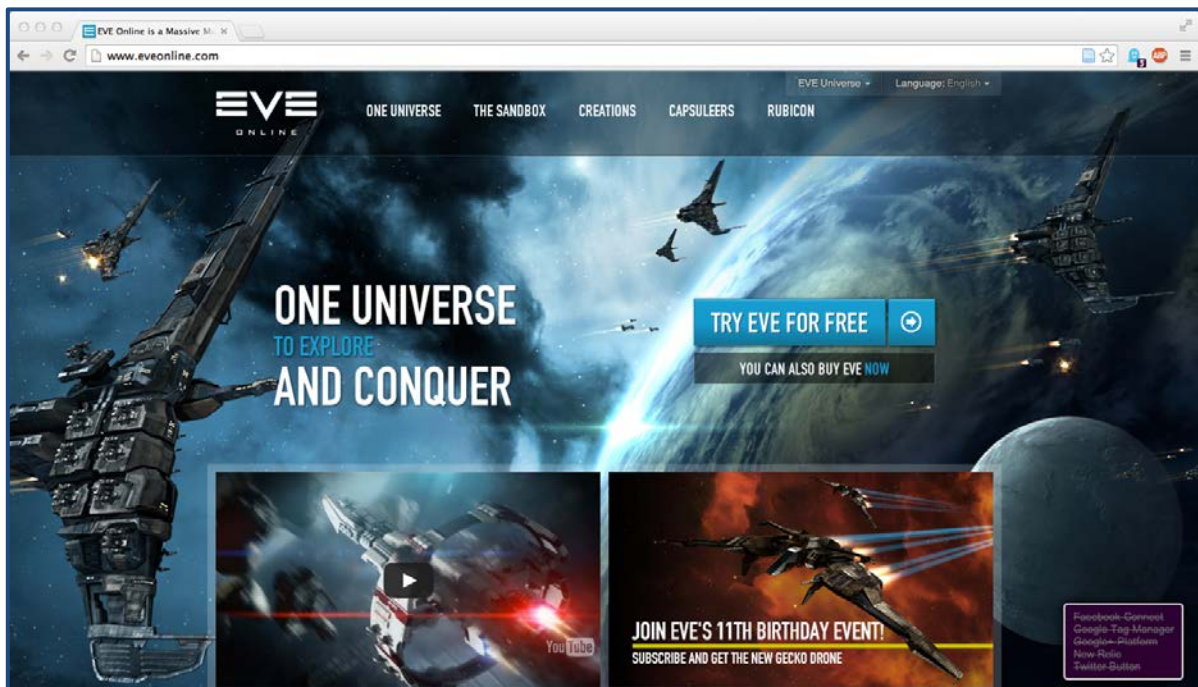


Figure 1. Screenshot taken by author on May 16, 2014. This was the landing page of the official EVE Online website.

EVE's marketing conducted as part of my dissertation research (Bergstrom, 2015), I argued that, when compared with official websites of other popular MMOGs (e.g., World of Warcraft), the official EVE website was and is presented in a way that assumes viewer familiarity with the game and its genre. To briefly summarize, my findings were that, although the World of Warcraft website included a comprehensive introduction to both the game and the MMOG genre generally, such information was missing from the EVE website. The 2014 World of Warcraft website included a link to a game guide on the main landing page. Clicking this link led to a comprehensive introduction to the game that began with an answer to "What is World of Warcraft?" The material not only explained the specifics of the game but also served as a general introduction to the typical features of the MMOG genre (Figure 2). I argue that having information presented in an accessible manner, especially when displayed alongside the EVE site, illustrates that the World of Warcraft website is far more accessible to potential new players.

The World of Warcraft website has been designed to easily acclimatize a player unfamiliar with this particular game and/or with MMOGs. In contrast, the official EVE website assumes a degree of familiarity with both the game and genre. Instead of a game guide, the May 2014 version of the EVE website featured a prominent offer of a free trial. This would indeed offer new players a first-hand introduction to the game, but previous research has found that the EVE new-player tutorial was and remains incomplete (Paul, 2011, 2016). Only those who are able to find assistance (usually in the form of guidance from existing players) to help overcome the steep learning curve are likely to become long-term players of this game. Christopher Paul argued that this approach to learning the game enculturates and solidifies a tight-knit community of players. Extensions to this research contends the imagined EVE player is assumed similar in subcultural

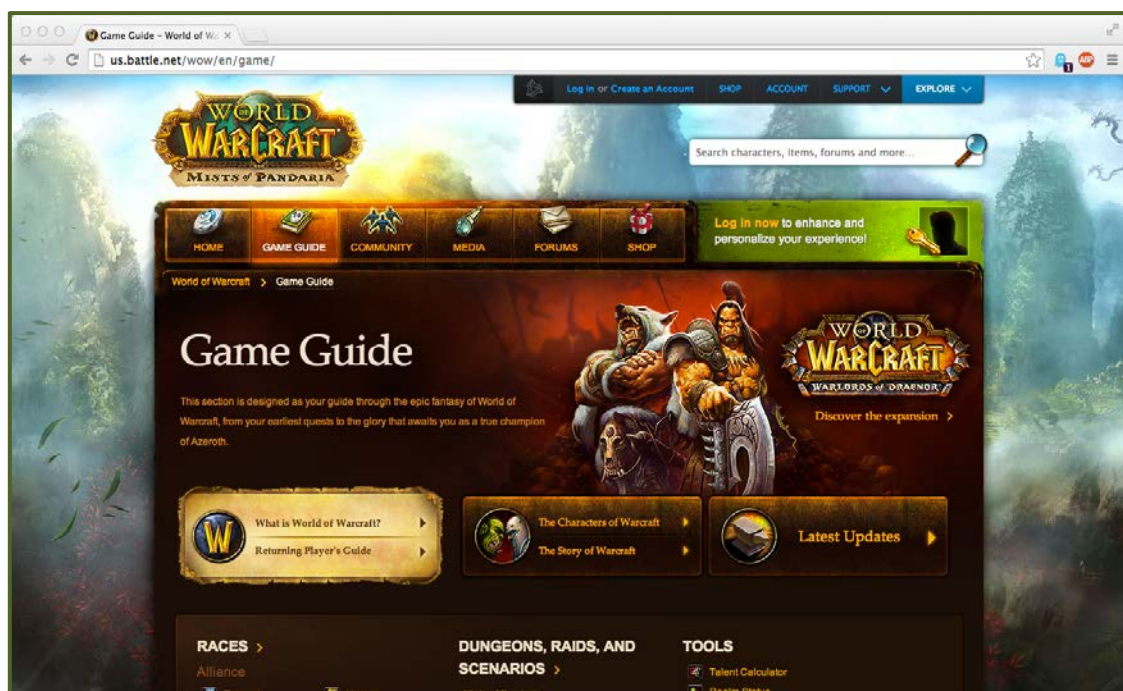


Figure 2. Screenshot taken by author on June 13, 2014, showing the Game Guide accessed via a link from the main World of Warcraft landing page. This page contained basic information about the game and also an introduction to MMOGs more generally.

knowledge and humor to that of existing players, as evidenced in an examination of player-created newbie guides (Bergstrom, 2013), player-made propaganda (Carter, 2015a), and fieldwork conducted at fan conventions (Chia, 2018). My research adds further empirical evidence that the existing player base may not always be particularly apt at offering assistance to a diversity of new players. I will return to the existing player community in a subsequent section of this article, after I detail how the enthusiast gaming press reported on EVE during this study.

EVE Online in the Enthusiast Press

Unlike mainstream journalism, which has a history of being less than friendly in their coverage of gaming (Bergstrom et al., 2016; Dutton, Consalvo, & Harper, 2011), an enthusiast press “produces consumer-oriented publications that focus on publicizing specific categories of goods, often high-end technological products (such as video games, computers, or cars)” (Carlson, 2009, para. 4.1). For example, *World of Warcraft* was rarely covered by mainstream publications—except for large clusters of sensationalized coverage in the wake of two mass shootings (Bergstrom et al., 2016). The gaming enthusiast press is much more likely to offer both consistent and/or positive coverage of games. Knowing this, I posited in previous research (Bergstrom, 2015; Bergstrom et al., 2013) that potential players might be more likely to learn about EVE through these venues. Therefore, over a 1-year period, I captured all mentions of EVE in three online publications that would be considered part of the gaming enthusiast press, each representing a slightly different focal point to ensure a variety of coverage about the game. These online publications were as follows: a general gaming website that provides coverage of a wide variety of genres (*Kotaku*), a niche website that only covers MMOGs (*Ten Ton Hammer*), and the nested MMOG-specific site belonging to a more general games or technology network (*Massively*, part of the *Joystiq* network).⁷ Using the NCapture extension of Nvivo for Windows, I archived all articles tagged with the keyword *EVE Online* appearing on each of the three sites between May 2013 and May 2014, resulting in a dataset of 267 articles. Thematic coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used to generate a list of each article’s primary topic. The most frequently appearing topics, representing 75.6% of the articles captured for this dataset, are presented here.

1. Replication of CCP Games’ Press Releases ($n = 93$; 34.8%). These articles presented content that replicated information shared via press releases on the official EVE website and/or blog posts made by CCP Games’ employees, known colloquially as *dev blogs*.
2. Articles not actually about EVE Online ($n = 37$; 13.8%). These articles mentioned EVE Online as a keyword tag in the header of the article but did not actually mention EVE anywhere in the body of the article. EVE was likely included as a keyword to assist with search engine optimization.
3. Articles that were actually about other games produced by CCP Games ($n = 28$; 10.5%). These articles used EVE Online as a keyword tag but the primary subject was another game previously, currently, or projected to be developed by CCP Games. These games were EVE Valkyrie ($n = 16$), Dust 514 ($n = 9$), *World of Darkness* ($n = 2$), and Project Legion ($n = 1$).

4. Articles focused on the player versus player (PVP) elements of EVE Online ($n = 26$; 9.7%). These articles actually covered EVE-related content, but focused solely on one element of gameplay (i.e., large-scale PVP battles).
5. Articles focused on player conventions and meetups ($n = 18$; 6.7%). CCP Games hosts two annual EVE-themed player conventions, Fanfest in Reykjavik, Iceland, and EVE Vegas in Las Vegas, USA. The articles in this category ranged from informational announcements that the events were occurring to more editorial-style pieces that relayed the authors' experiences at one or both events.

This coverage of EVE—discussed in detail in Bergstrom (2015)—is relevant to my current investigation in that it paints a picture of EVE that is limited at best. Missing from the year's worth of coverage were any discussions of the less visible parts of the game that might be of interest to potential players, specifically the game's robust player versus environment (PVE) mode, the mining and manufacturing activities to amass in-game wealth, and the rich role-play communities found within New Eden (Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015) or the decidedly less ruthless play observed on the Chinese EVE server (Page, 2018). By relying heavily on the press releases or dev blogs released via official CCP Games' channels, much of the actual enthusiast press coverage of this game focused on announcing new expansions or forthcoming in-game changes. These topics would likely be of little interest to nonplayers and may be inaccessible to those unfamiliar with the game's mechanics and/or structure.

In addition to coding the articles by topic, I also made note of particular characterizations of EVE by the enthusiast press, including specific descriptions of the game being hard, boring, or different from other games. In some cases, the headline helped reinforce the ruthlessness of EVE, such as Jason Schreier's (2014) "A look at the insane history of EVE Online" that appeared on *Kotaku* and detailed Andrew Groen's (a freelance reporter who had written previously about EVE) Kickstarter campaign to fund his research and subsequent book about the oral history of the game. The text of Schreier's article mentioned giant space battles, virtual warfare, and politicking but made no mention of any of the PVE activities that one can undertake in EVE (e.g., mining, manufacturing). Similarly, the headline for another article on *Kotaku*—covering the release of the Darkhorse Comics and CCP Games' collaborative project based on actual events that have happened within the EVE universe—invoked a similar sentiment about people who play this game: "A comic that perfectly captures the evil genius of EVE Online players" (Narcisse, 2014).

The coverage on *Kotaku* between May 2013 and May 2014 tended to focus on the more sensational aspects of EVE, which I have argued previously is the most easily understood and accessible for non- or novice players (Bergstrom et al., 2013). EVE players doing horrible things to each other makes for exciting headlines, and such coverage requires little knowledge of the in-game affordances or rule structures other than a loose grasp of the idea that EVE is a lawless space. By consistently presenting EVE in such a manner, *Kotaku* maintained the idea that EVE is a game for players who are interested in ruthless play and thus encourages such players to investigate this game further. Potential players who would prefer a more collaborative gameplay experience will likely self-select out of EVE long before they would consider downloading the free trial and playing through the EVE tutorial. Despite EVE being marketed as a sandbox game offering an immersive and self-directed play experience, the coverage on *Kotaku* did not present it as such.

In contrast to what I observed at *Kotaku*, *Ten Ton Hammer* and *Massively* provided coverage of EVE that tended to replicate the official press releases and words written by CCP Games' employees. By relying on the jargon familiar to current EVE players, this sort of coverage also worked to create the impression that EVE is a game likely of interest to some people more than others. Much like the official EVE website described above, such coverage offered little foothold for new players to learn about the variety of play available within this MMOG's gameworld. Based on this analysis of reporting about EVE over that 1-year period, it seems that coverage in the enthusiast press has very little middle ground and instead clustered around two extremes: (a) shallow sensationalist coverage of ruthless play that does little to contextualize the diversity of experiences that a sandbox game purports to offer, and (b) highly technical and jargon-filled coverage seemingly written with the imagined audience of a current EVE player in mind, often replicated directly from EVE or CCP Games' own websites.

Through this review of enthusiast press coverage about EVE, I established that public-facing descriptions of EVE, from both the perspective of the game's developer and the gaming enthusiast press, help to frame EVE as a very particular type of game of interest only to a particular type of player. These conclusions provide a foundation for my current study where current EVE players were queried about the game to uncover any evidence for my argument that not all potential players would be equally welcomed into New Eden.

EVE ONLINE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CURRENT PLAYERS

The responses from current players discussed in this section were collected in an online survey seeking to understand who does or does not play EVE and their reason(s) why. The survey, which ran from November 2013 to February 2014, queried current players, former players, and nonplayers, including those who had not previously encountered EVE. Although 2,061 were received, incomplete surveys and surveys completed by participants who indicated they were under the age of 18 were discarded. Thus 981 completed surveys remained and these responses were included in the overall analysis. Participants were recruited from a variety of venues including recruitment posts made to a variety of online gaming forums, mailing lists, social media, and word of mouth. The survey was framed as a more general survey about MMOG experiences and was open to English speakers over the age of 18. A full description of the methods for this study is provided in Bergstrom (2015).

Here I narrow my focus to the responses of 647 participants who indicated they were current EVE players at the time the survey was conducted. I note that this is not a representative sample. Although recruitment posts were distributed across a variety of venues, participants ultimately self-selected.

Participants who indicated they were a current EVE player were funneled into a branch of the survey that asked a series of questions about whether they have introduced their friends to the game and, if so, how they introduced the game to these potential players, as well as asking them to describe the game to someone who had never played it. I note that, due to the snapshot nature of survey-based research, I was unable to clarify respondents' comments or probe for further details. What follows is my interpretation and analysis of their responses as generated through thematic coding of data from open-ended survey questions.

Participants who indicated they currently play EVE were asked “How would you describe EVE to someone who has never played it before?” Six hundred (92.7%) of the current players responding to the survey provided an answer to this question. The length of responses varied widely. Some chose to answer with a single word, such as “*Complicated*,” “*Brutal*,” or “*Real*.” At the other end of the spectrum, I received multiparagraph responses; the longest answer was 658 words. Overall, the average length for respondents’ answers to this question was 25.7 words.

The most common way to describe EVE focused on it being a space-themed game: 306 respondents provided an answer that indicated EVE is about space and/or spaceships. This is perhaps unsurprising in that images of stars, planets, and spaceships figure prominently in CCP Games’ advertising campaigns, and the in-game play focuses heavily on traveling through star systems via spaceships. Rather than using terminology such as *science fiction* ($n = 26$), respondents were far more likely to use the term *sandbox* ($n = 255$) to describe EVE. The heavy use of the term *sandbox* in player descriptions of EVE likely stems from CCP Games’ own reliance on the term to advertise its game.⁸ However, I found that the majority of current players who used *sandbox* in their answer did so with very few (or in many cases, no) qualifiers to explain what the term means. I argue that this is further evidence that the current users’ expectations that the imagined novice EVE player has already encountered the game—or the concept of a *sandbox* environment—somewhere else. These answers also assume that this imagined novice player has been introduced previously to the slang, memes, and highly specialized jargon pervading this community. Very few answers to this survey question provided a description that would offer a clear foothold to a player who previously had not encountered this game and its surrounding community. One way this is readily apparent is in the heavy reliance on EVE-specific jargon. I argue that this acts as a form of gatekeeping in that many of the responses I received from current players contained references to very specific elements of EVE that would seem meaningless to someone unfamiliar with this particular MMOG.

The use of memes and catchphrases in the survey responses provides another example of wording that speaks to an insider audience. The design and structure of the official EVE website, in 2014 and still at the time of writing this article, targets an imagined user who is already familiar with the game. A similar theme emerged from the responses to my query for current players about how they would describe EVE to someone who has never played it before. Just as the official website provided very little in terms of a foothold for a visitor who had never heard of EVE (e.g., no EVE 101 or Frequently Asked Questions), many of the current players’ survey responses did not make an effort to make EVE any less opaque to those not already familiar with this MMOG and its surrounding community. Nowhere is this more evident than from the respondents who answered the question with one word. I now move on to an investigation of the frequency of which current players relied on specialist or insider knowledge, even when explicitly asked to describe it to someone not previously familiar with this game.

Emphasizing Jargon

Responses provided by the current players seemed to be undergirded with an assumption that an imagined recipient of this information may not have played EVE before, but they have heard of it. Similar to the official CCP Games’ websites and much of the coverage in the enthusiast press, I take this as evidence of an imagined audience who is already familiar with EVE. The assumed nature of the imagined audience would also explain why so many responses from current players drew heavily on memes, jargon, and/or catchphrases that are popular in this community and

frequently used by players. Consider how meaningless the five following descriptions, directly quoted from participants' answers, might seem to someone without any prior introduction to this game: "*Spreadsheets in space that let you scam*" (Resp. 230),⁹ "*Spreadsheets online. Death has consequence, don't die. Day traders, rejoice*" (Resp. 504), "*Space ships, lasers, pew pew, 'splosions*" (Resp. 658), "*It's not about making a sandcastle, it's about destroying another's*" (Resp. 247), and "*Spaceship sandbox about building metaphorical castles while knocking other people's castles over and throwing sand in their face*" (Resp. 812).

To be clear, these are not excerpts. These are the full responses provided by five current players describing EVE to someone who has never played it before. These represent just a few examples of answers that relied heavily on jargon that, on the surface, seem like short, pithy responses. On first glance, this might appear that the participants are not taking the question seriously. However, these responses actually contain a large amount of information about the game. The first example makes reference to "*spreadsheets in space*," a nickname given to EVE (i.e., Excel Online) due to its math-heavy gameplay. This response also makes reference to the lawlessness of EVE, specifically that CCP Games will not intervene when players cheat or scam each other. The second example also makes reference to the math involved in playing EVE, but this time instead of making reference to the hands-off nature of the developer, the respondent draws attention to the fact that EVE features "permanent death," more colloquially known as "permadeath." This term refers to how, when an avatar dies in EVE, that specific avatar is permanently removed from the game and can no longer be used for play. To continue, a player must activate a clone being stored elsewhere in the gameworld. The most jargon-heavy comment is from Respondent 658: Here the participant makes reference to the space-themed nature of the game, combat ("*lasers, pew pew*"; a type of weapon in the game and a slang term that represents the sound lasers make when they are fired), and the permanence of death ("*splosions*"; exploding ships). The use of *pew pew* is, of course, not unique to EVE but still requires familiarity with broader Internet slang to decode what this description might mean.

Answers from Respondents 247 and 812 can be read as a more pleasant way to describe *griefing*, that is, creating one's own fun at the expense of another player's experience and/or the ability to move about the gameworld (Bartle, 1996). The references made in these examples also indirectly reference the philosophy of certain pockets of the EVE community that view nonconsensual PVP interaction an essential part of EVE's gameplay (Bergstrom, 2016). Indeed, the emphasis on destruction of in-game items is often positioned as a core component of what makes EVE *EVE* (Taylor et al., 2015). Marcus Carter (2015c) also investigated the pervasiveness of another variation of this sort of play style, that is, the scamming and antisocial behavior exhibited in EVE, what he refers to as "treacherous play." Carter's explorations of antisocial play subsequently have been extended by Ian Gregory Brooks (2018) in his investigation into whether or not such betrayal is actually unethical. Similar themes were relayed by Aleena Chia (2018) and Mark Johnson and Robert Mejia (2018), who explored the explicitly neoliberal undertones of this gameworld in the time since the research in this article was conducted.

Using EVE-Specific Memes to Describe the Game

The heavy use of jargon throughout current player responses sometimes took the form of making direct reference to EVE-specific memes. Richard Dawkins (1976) originally used the term *meme* to describe the way an idea or piece of information can travel through society while mutating—

much like a gene. This attempt to apply biological evolutionary theory to the evolving aspects of a culture has since been taken up by scholars interested in the study of digital culture. Internet memes can take the form of images, videos, short pieces of text, or a website that are shared via computer-mediated communication and, like Dawkins' memes, begin to be modified as they are shared (Shifman, 2013). Previous research on Internet memes has shown that they have become a key part of online political dialogue and discussions (Milner, 2012) and are a way to demonstrate one's cultural literacy and reaffirm one's belongingness to a particular online community (Phillips, 2012). Two EVE-specific memes in particular—Excel Online and Internet Spaceships—have become intimately tied with the game. Unlike Shifman's (2013) finding that memes change as they are shared, these two specific phrases have undergone very little variation over time in this community. These memes, however, appear to be mobilized by participants in a way that supports Phillips' (2012) argument that such invocation by current players reaffirms belongingness to EVE's community. To those "in the know," each phrase also serves as a general reminder that, despite the high stakes play in a gameworld where one misstep can lead to permadeath, it is indeed a feature that for many players is part of the fun. Ultimately the game is about buying, trading, and destroying immaterial goods, and for many players the game is just about Internet spaceships and is not all that serious after all.

Above I made reference to the EVE-related meme of Excel Online appearing in the responses of a current player describing EVE. This was not an isolated incident: 55 responses made specific reference to spreadsheets and/or Excel Online. Other examples in the data include "*Excel, in space, that makes your heart thump*" (Resp. 556), "*Awesome multiplayer sandbox space strategy trade action excel sheets*" (Resp. 1330), and "*Spreadsheets with pretty pictures*" (Resp. 1377).

I note that current players who invoked spreadsheet and/or Excel references included in their descriptions elements that seem positive, for example, that EVE is an action-filled game ("*...makes your heart thump*") or that the game is visually appealing ("*pretty*" or "*attractive*") appeared multiple times in this dataset. As was the case with the descriptions in the previous section, Respondent 556's comment demonstrates the risk of the comment being read by someone not familiar with EVE as seemingly random words strung together. Another participant attempted to summarize the game as follows, "*EVE Online is all about space, spreadsheets, and shooting things*" (Respondent 1355). This respondent does not provide a value judgement in describing the game, but the answer contains three major elements of EVE (i.e., that it is set in space, involves math, and has a combat component). In most other cases in this dataset, the terms spreadsheets and Excel were used without making explicit reference to why a player might need them for gameplay. In my coding, I made note of responses that specifically described EVE as being a math-heavy game, but this was mentioned in only two responses. Once again, I stress that I interpret such responses as demonstrating that the more frequently used terms are loaded with meaning for someone with some degree of familiarity with EVE, but exactly what spreadsheets or Excel means in this context would likely be lost on outsiders.

The clearest evidence that current players assume their audience have had a prior introduction to EVE is provided by the extensive use of the phrase *Internet spaceships*, a term referring both to the fact that EVE players fly ships through space and, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, to serving as reminder to themselves that it is "only a game" and that hostile actions taken in EVE against other players are not ones to be taken seriously. This phrase appears 61 times in the responses of current players. Internet spaceships is loaded with (sub)cultural value for someone who has prior exposure to the game, and yet the meaning of this phrase (or even that it is an EVE-specific meme) may be

lost on a nonplayer. To someone invested in this community, Internet spaceships is a ubiquitous phrase, so much so that it is the name of the first edited volume about EVE (*Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*; Carter et al., 2016). Another use of the phrase is *A Tale of Internet Spaceships* (Mårtensson, Raivander, & Thedin, 2014), the title of a documentary about EVE players and their relationship with the MMOG's developers. This phrase also has become part of the company philosophy of CCP Games. For example, this wording was used in the keynote address by CCP Games' CEO Hilmar Pétursson after announcing the cancellation of the developer's other MMOG, *World of Darkness*: "If Internet spaceships were ever serious business at CCP, that is now the case, and will continue to be so," as quoted in Kuchera (2014, para. 11). The phrase is instantly recognizable to most players who have spent some time in and around the EVE community, but would likely be lost on someone who had never encountered the game before. It is compelling that so many participants decided to include it in their response to a query asking them to describe EVE to someone who had not previously played the game. The presumption seemed to be that an imagined audience may not have played EVE, but they knew enough about the game to be aware of the importance this phrase holds for the community.

In some instances in this survey data, Internet spaceships was coupled also with EVE's other notoriety, that learning to play EVE requires an extensive and difficult learning curve:

INTERNET. SPACESHIPS.

Probably the hardest, most unforgiving game you'll ever play. The learning curve is like teaching a five-year-old nuclear physics. (Resp. 228)

Comments such as these use hyperbole, but also seem to have an underlying element of self-congratulation for surviving the process of learning how to play EVE. Others presented learning to play EVE as some sort of higher calling or noble cause, and that by successfully defeating the learning curve, one would somehow better understand human relationships. Take for example, this response provided by a survey participant:

I wouldn't recommend this game unless you are willing to learn and seriously commit yourself with time, money and mental state. It is a game that calls for you to be open-minded, and how to treat the world. I say that because the world is you, the players. And you have to consider everything, and I mean everything, that a human can and will do to another human. (Resp.147)

Both these quotes, the entirety of two current players' responses, referenced the extreme amount of commitment required to learn this game, with an undertone of exceptionalism that EVE players are somehow different than players of other MMOGs. Below I highlight further examples where EVE was presented as not intended for and/or not of interest to most people.

EVE is a game of meticulous craftsmanship and is not enjoyed by the common person because most of EVE is very cut and dry. This game gets its value from its "meta-gaming" aspects where more than the game is considered. i.e. sifting email and account of traitors, diplomatic relations, and how to lead people into staying with you and doing things a certain way. (Resp. 404)

EVE is an MMO set in space. It has a very steep learning curve, and it is not meant for most gamers in the sense that it has a very different play style than typical video games. (Resp. 526)

Complex, brutal, extremely rewarding, but not for everyone. (Resp. 612)

A massive online game where you can potentially interact with anyone else currently playing. Definitely not for everyone though, because it takes a lot of work to get to a point where you actually understand what's going on. Ability to multitask is almost a necessity. (Resp. 958)

In my interactions with players to date, beyond those surveyed here, the widely held belief is that EVE is not universally accessible. For some current players, EVE's difficulty (and by extension, their mastering its learning curve) is touted as a point of pride. I also have been told in prior conversations with players that EVE is the game that you graduate to when you become so skilled at other games (e.g., World of Warcraft) that they no longer provide any challenge. These sorts of conversations add to the sense of exclusivity and accomplishment of being a long-term EVE player. Here I stress that difficulty or complexity is not the issue—games like Dwarf Fortress have an equally high, if not higher, barrier to entry.

What is important to remember when considering the responses of these current users is that the characterizations of the game were prompted by a request for the players to describe the game to someone who had never played it before. Based on these survey responses, it may appear that these respondents had already decided that this imagined novice would not be interested in the game, rather than giving potential players the opportunity to decide for themselves if EVE is indeed for them. Future research is necessary to see if similar response patterns hold in other settings, such as an interview or a lab-based study where a current EVE player is tasked with ushering in a novice to this gameworld.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: SHOULD EVE ONLINE EVER BE FOR EVERYONE?

The pervasiveness of exceptionalism in current player responses begins to provide an explanation for the skewed demographics present in this gameworld. If EVE players assume this game is of interest only to a certain personality type, it follows that players might assume EVE is only attractive to particular demographics: young males who are assumed to be playing hardcore games, broadly conceived. In this article's Introduction, I provided a brief overview of the feminist game studies literature that critiques the assumption that the audiences most interested in playing games—any games—are straight, male, and white. In an article by Joseph Leray (2013) about the lack of women playing EVE, CCP Games' employees explained it was their belief that EVE is not attractive to women because of gender-based stereotypes about play preferences and/or a dislike of science fiction. CCP Games' statements, combined with the sense of exceptionalism that either explicitly or implicitly runs through the responses from current players that EVE is not for everyone raises further questions about who current players imagine as the ideal potential recruit to this game. Based on my findings from this survey and existing research about homophily in online spaces, where people with similar interests and/or demographics clump together (boyd, 2012; Yardi & boyd, 2010), future research is necessary to investigate whether the focus of EVE players on recruiting players who mirror themselves actually leads to the continued homogeneity of this MMOG community.

The goal of this specific article and my research more generally has never been to offer up a method or set of best practices that would make EVE more welcoming to a greater diversity of audiences. By attempting to make clear the multiple barriers and constraints a potential player must overcome before becoming a participant in a particular gameworld, I have argued that gameplay never occurs in a vacuum and a variety of internal and external factors continually

influence who plays, what they play, how often they play, and when they play. This serves as a reminder that extremely large datasets collected from MMOGs are not actually representative of a larger population. For a deeper discussion of this implication, I would like to draw the reader's attention to Eszter Hargittai's (2015) important argument that datasets drawn from a single MMOG player population, from a particular social networking site, or from a single site of any kind, is limited in its generalizability, no matter how big the dataset. Rather than advocating for increased diversity among EVE players, my goal has been to provide further evidence to the long-argued position of feminist game scholars: Not all gaming communities are open to all players. The realities of who plays, what they play, when they play, and how often they play it is shaped by the larger social context in which play occurs.

MMOGs offer the opportunity to meet new people from all over the world, increasing a player's exposure to new cultures and potentially leading to increased empathy among players. These games also provide space to collaborate with friends and strangers by means of coordinating and completing complex tasks in both small and large groups. MMOGs (and other digital games) also offer up an environment where failure to complete a particular task is not necessarily a disaster. Rather than actual lives or currency being on the line, the stakes are much lower in a virtual world. Game scholars have long argued that MMOGs can serve as a space where both bonding and bridging social capital can be cultivated; playing together can strengthen existing ties and also lead to new connections. In sum, there are many benefits to playing a game like EVE beyond enjoying one's leisure time.

In conclusion, I must emphasize that the argument of feminist game scholarship has never been that every game should be all things to all people. EVE is never going to be a game that appeals to all players; very few games ever occupy a universally beloved position. Rather, my aim in this article has been to foreground the ways that play is shaped and constrained by outside forces. Using EVE Online as an exemplar, I provide evidence that an overemphasis on exceptionalism by its developer, the enthusiast press, and the existing player community may have locked out potential players who fall outside the assumed demographic of EVE. As a result, potential and novice players are not given the opportunity to participate on their own terms and make their own decision about whether or not they would like to stay.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, APPLICATION, OR POLICY

MMOGs offer a compelling site for certain types of research in that they offer up large populations through which to study computer-mediated communication. However, they cannot be viewed as a proxy for society writ large as they do not act as an actual mirror of offline populations. By examining how the ways journalists, the game's developer, and current players describe EVE, I have provided evidence to explain why this particular game has a reputation for exceptionalism and how gatekeeping occurs on multiple levels. When this research is put into conversation with other work about former and non-players, it demonstrates that how a game is publically discussed is just as important as the gameplay mechanics when seeking to understand who will play it (and who is much less likely to do so). By starting with a game that has a reputation of being at the very edge of its genre, this article highlights both the need for future research about barriers to MMOGs, but also provides a point of comparison for how games with a more welcoming reputation (e.g., World of Warcraft) are discussed by journalists, developers, and players.

Game designers will be able to apply this research to their own gameworlds to cultivate a sense of accessibility or exclusivity, depending on their desired outcome. Public discussions about their game (by players and/or journalists) can be harnessed to create deep engagement with a narrow population, or to foster a reputation for welcoming and inclusiveness. Company promotional materials can either supplement or disavow the reputation of their game—but only if they are aware of this reputation.

ENDNOTES

1. For the information of readers from other fields who may not be familiar with the use of *hail* in this manner, I draw on Louis Althusser's (1971) concept of interpellation. Hailing in this case is used like a call, specifically where ideology calls to an individual to conform to a certain subject position and its associated assumptions, beliefs, and worldviews.
2. For a detailed discussion about the Chinese server and its very different play style than the server utilized by the rest of the world, see Richard J. Page's (2018) contribution to the *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*'s special issue about EVE.
3. MMO is typically understood as an alternative way to shorten Massively Multiplayer Online Game.
4. During the time of writing this article, the quote attributed to *The OP* appeared on the page where premium EVE accounts could be purchased (<https://secure.eveonline.com/buy/>). However, that placement did not provide link to a specific website or review; my subsequent attempts to find the review were unsuccessful.
5. A MMORPG, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, is a type of MMO. The use of MMORPG has fallen out of fashion in recent years, with MMOG being used to refer to Massively Multiplayer Online Games, whether or not they contain a role-play element.
6. *Game Revolution* (<https://www.gamerevolution.com>) is a website devoted to gaming related news and reviews of recent games.
7. After data collection was completed, *Joystiq* and its nested sites (including *Massively*) were shuttered as part of downsizing by AOL, its parent company (Wawro, 2015). Since that time, the site has returned as *Massively Overpowered*, a Patreon-funded website.
8. This heavy reliance on the term sandbox to describe EVE is present in commercials or trailers produced by CCP Games to advertise this MMOG. An example of the heavy use of sandbox can be seen in *The Butterfly Effect* (CCP Games, 2009) a trailer that uses chaos theory to explain how the actions of a single EVE player can have far reaching consequences in a single-shard gameworld.
9. The respondent numbers here were assigned in chronological order as unique anonymized identifiers by the survey software used (LimeSurvey). Although every participant who completed at least one question was assigned a unique identifier, only the 981 completed surveys formed the overall dataset. For this paper, just the 647 respondents who identified as current players were analyzed. All comments are presented exactly as the respondent wrote.

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Human Technology
ISSN 1795-6889
www.humantechnology.jyu.fi