

# TREACHEROUS PLAY



Marcus Carter

## Treacherous Play

## **Playful Thinking**

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**Marcus Carter**

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## On Thinking Playfully

Many people (we series editors included) find video games exhilarating, but it can be just as interesting to ponder why that is so. What do video games do? What can they be used for? How do they work? How do they relate to the rest of the world? Why is play both so important and so powerful?

Playful Thinking is a series of short, readable, and argumentative books that share some playfulness and excitement with the games that they are about. Each book in the series is small enough to fit in a backpack or coat pocket, and combines depth with readability for any reader interested in playing more thoughtfully or thinking more playfully. This includes, but is by no means limited to, academics, game makers, and curious players.

So, we are casting our net wide. Each book in our series provides a blend of new insights and interesting arguments with overviews of knowledge from game studies and other areas. You will see this reflected not just in the range of titles in our series, but in the range of authors creating them. Our basic assumption is simple: video games are such a flourishing medium that any new perspective on them is likely to show us something unseen or forgotten, including those from such



unconventional voices as artists, philosophers, or specialists in other industries or fields of study. These books are bridge builders, cross-pollinating both areas with new knowledge and new ways of thinking.

At its heart, this is what Playful Thinking is all about: new ways of thinking about games and new ways of using games to think about the rest of the world.

Jesper Juul

Geoffrey Long

William Uricchio

Mia Consalvo

# 1 An Introduction to Playing Treacherously

Games that are deliberately designed to enable or invite betrayal are extremely rare.

If you steal from your guild in *World of Warcraft*, the game's moderators will return the stolen goods and suspend your account. Most first-person shooter (FPS) games code away the killing of teammates by disabling "friendly fire" and structuring the competition in such a way that betraying your team would offer no in-game reward. In most tabletop games, where these types of coded rules aren't possible, trust is implicit.<sup>1</sup> The rules of *Monopoly* don't need to say that you must not lie or steal from other players, because deception and betrayal are just *assumed* to be an illegitimate way of playing the game. Playing treacherously is typically treated as an "off-limits" type of play that will ruin the experience of other players and is actively designed against in most multiplayer games.

Indeed, the games scholar Staffan Björk categorizes some games with deception and betrayal as examples of "feel-bad games" for the unusually negative emotions they provoke in players.<sup>2</sup> Björk's example is *So Long Sucker*, a simple bargaining game designed in the 1950s by the game theorists Mel Hausner, John Forbes Nash (Nobel Prize-winning economist of *A Beautiful Mind* fame), Lloyd Shapely, and Martin Shubik.

Negotiation and agreements are key to winning *So Long Sucker*, but just as in TV's *Survivor*, betrayal is also an implicit necessity for having a chance of winning. Such was the intense emotional experience of playing that Nash nicknamed the game "fuck your buddy,"<sup>3</sup> and Shubik later recalled "married couples going home in separate cabs" after playing.<sup>4</sup> I have included the rules for *So Long Sucker* in the appendix at the end of the book, if you want to test this reputation for yourself.

But why? Of all the things that seem totally appropriate to do in games, why is treacherous play so polarizing? Why is the emotional experience so exceptional?

In this book, I explore an underexplored type of play that sits on the border of what is commonly understood to be acceptable or appropriate to do in a game. It is a type of play that is not for everyone. Through case studies of games that explicitly permit betrayal, I illuminate and complicate some assumptions that scholars, designers, and players often make about the limits of competition in multiplayer games; the appeal of negative experiences; how social interactions can be a part of play; and how we draw the lines between who you are in a game, and who you are in real life. To borrow an argument from Jaakko Stenros, transgressive play *is still play*, and if we only look at "half the picture, we cannot grasp the whole phenomenon and its nuances."<sup>5</sup>

Here I focus specifically on the few examples of where treacherous play is *successful*. By this, I mean where it occurs within the rules of the game, and where the presence of treachery has undeniably contributed to a game's appeal and success. This includes play like yelling "Friendly! Don't shoot!" when you encounter another player in *DayZ*, but burying an ax in their head when they turn around; promising another player in *Survivor* that you will take them to the final three,

but then writing their name down at the next tribal council; and being a productive member of an *EVE Online* corporation while selling military secrets to its enemies. Some of the cases in this book are provocative, but they help uncover aspects of play that often get hidden, ignored, or designed away.

By looking at this other half of the picture, we can start to imagine more about what the possibilities are for this emerging medium.

### Treacherous Assumptions

There are three assumptions I often see players and scholars making about treacherous play: gut reactions to the idea of betraying for fun. The purpose of this book is not to dispel these assumptions but to use them to develop a deeper understanding about treacherous play and uncover what it can contribute to how we think about games and play more broadly.

#### **Assumption 1: Treacherous Play Is Unethical**

The first assumption that I find people make about treacherous play is that using deception and betrayal for in-game advantage in a multiplayer game is—for some reason—unethical. To discuss this idea, we must first consider how competition in a game can be ethical at all.

C. Thi Nguyen, a philosopher, and José Zagal, a games scholar, have discussed the ethics of competition in multiplayer games, and what it means for a competitive game to be moral. Their starting point is to acknowledge that direct competition in games does involve a form of violence against an opponent, albeit in a highly abstracted form. In a strict Kantian sense, this means that all forms of competition are morally wrong,<sup>6</sup> but as Nguyen and Zagal argue, “some forms

of competition seem clearly ethical.”<sup>7</sup> They volunteer the term “mere violence” to describe and distinguish the “forms of violence that are not significant,” where such forms are limited in significance to preventing an opponent’s in-game plans, by the means permitted by the rules.

The standard view in the philosophy of sport is that the two key principles of consent and agreement make competition ethical,<sup>8</sup> but Nguyen and Zagal usefully extend this rubric through Bernard Suit’s principle of the *lusory goal*: the in-game goal we establish *that is contingent on* a series of unnecessary obstacles.<sup>9</sup> More than just consent, the struggle against these obstacles is what we desire from competitive games. If my only goal was to beat you at poker, I might use a stacked deck to ensure that I win, circumventing those unnecessary obstacles. Here, though, I would no longer just be committing mere violence against your goal of winning but committing violence against your lusory goal and the unnecessary obstacles it is contingent on. For Nguyen and Zagal, the ethics of the transformation of the violence of competition in multiplayer games is contingent on “the way the game’s design aligns my mere violence with your desire for struggle.”<sup>10</sup>

Consider *Fortnite*, a battle royale first-person shooter game where up to one hundred players compete to survive on a virtual island. Play is characterized by a few one-on-one battles as players are forced into a smaller and smaller zone with the lusory goal (and the way to win *Fortnite*) of being the last player standing, having overcome the obstacles that the other ninety-nine players represent. To kill me in *Fortnite* is to deny me the opportunity to win (an act of “mere violence”), but attempting to kill me is necessary for my lusory goal. To play *Fortnite* on a private server with no opponents is not to play *Fortnite* at all.

This is a useful lens to start interrogating treacherous play, because it helps us understand how betrayal is unethical in most games. Players who steal from a rival guild in *World of Warcraft* are not aligning their violence with their opponents' desire for struggle, since trusting correctly is not an unnecessary obstacle *World of Warcraft*. This is not the case in the games we explore in this book, where betrayal crucially falls within the rules of the game. Trust, and not misplacing trust, is perhaps the primary unnecessary obstacle that the lusory goal of *Survivor* is contingent on. The informal number one rule of *EVE* is "DON'T TRUST ANYONE," and the developers frequently reference the presence of treacherous play in game trailers and advertisements. The way each game works, explicitly and implicitly, to establish betrayal as an expected obstacle is crucial to understanding its appeal and experience.

Yet even in games where treacherous play falls within the rules, betrayed players often have disproportionately negative reactions. *DayZ* players who are killed in a gunfight rarely react as angrily as when they are betrayed by a trusted ally, even though the "mere violence" toward their game goals is the same. What is it that distinguishes losing by betrayal from losing by another part of the contest of the game? Iris Bohnet and Richard Zeckhauser are behavioral economists at Harvard University who identified the phenomenon of *betrayal aversion*. Their research has found that people are more reluctant to trust another person—which involves taking a social risk—than to take an equivalent form of natural risk, such as playing a game of chance. Their work suggests that this is because betrayal incurs an additional loss, a negative emotional experience, because people care about *how* outcomes come to be, not just *what* the outcome is. This observation can be illuminating, and in subsequent chapters I explore the application

of this theory to better understand some of the experiences that players have with treacherous play.

But does the highly negative experience associated with betrayal mean that it cannot ever be simply “mere violence” to betray someone? Answering this question requires us to explore how highly negative experiences can be part of play. As Jesper Juul notes, failure in games is something of a paradox.<sup>11</sup> We generally try to avoid failure, but we seek it out in games, and games that are too easy are often not very appealing. Particularly through the examples in chapter 3 of the high consequence of death in *DayZ*, I draw on Michael J. Apter’s *reversal theory* and Dolf Zillmann’s *excitation transfer effect* to better understand how negative emotions like anger, horror, and fear can be enjoyed, and why betrayal might, paradoxically, be something we seek out in play.<sup>12</sup>

### **Assumption 2: Treacherous Play Is Antisocial**

The second assumption made about treacherous play is that it is antisocial. What I mean here is that people often assume that the presence of deception and betrayal is antithetical to positive social relationships in a game, or that treacherous play is just another form of the antisocial grieving or trolling that pervades online game cultures.<sup>13</sup>

This is important because a core appeal of multiplayer games is the social experience. We play with our friends and make new friends online through our play. The broad interdisciplinary research into the success of *World of Warcraft*—a MMOG (massively multiplayer online game) that at one time had over twelve million monthly subscribers—found that the social relationships and experiences players built with strangers and real friends were essential to the game’s success.<sup>14</sup> To players of online games like *World of Warcraft*, their relationships with

the people they play with are equivalent to real-world friendships, and just as valuable. Yet *EVE Online*, also a subscription-based MMOG, has a rich social community even though trust and social relationships are a commodity in the game. In chapter 2, I explore this seeming contradiction further.

Earlier research has often assumed that treacherous play is a form of griefing; scamming and stealing from other players are often conflated with griefing or trolling or simply identified as another type of “being an ass.”<sup>15</sup> Griefing is a widespread phenomenon in games where people do things specifically to annoy other players, and in most cases such behavior violates the terms of service of online games. The goal of a griefer is to get a negative reaction, and often to share this reaction with others. Treacherous play would seem to fit this description, since it is often associated with extremely negative reactions, but is this still the case where treachery falls within the rules of the game, is expected, and is even encouraged? *EVE* scammers, *DayZ* players, and *Survivor* competitors don’t betray to annoy their competitors. They betray to get ahead, to survive in the game, and, in *Survivor*, to win the million-dollar prize. In chapter 3, I draw on my research into *DayZ* play to unpack some of the differences—and similarities—between grief play and treacherous play to further explore the ways social interactions are, and can be, part of play.

Jaakko Stenros points out that academic research frames griefing in many different ways, typically as a result of the disciplinary background of the scholars.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, griefing is pathologized and diagnosed like cyberbullying. In others, griefers are painted as problem users, undesirable side effects of online games to be minimized by better design. Yet approaching play as something that should always be positive obfuscates the similarities and limits our understanding



of play as a broader phenomenon with both positive and negative effects. Taking treacherous play seriously as play does not disregard its potential negative impacts or its similarity to the endemic toxicity of game culture but acknowledges and seeks to explore the fact that in *some* games, for *some* people, treachery has an appeal.

### **Assumption 3: Treacherous Players Are Bad People**

The third assumption I often encounter in discussions about treacherous play involves expectations about the treacherous players and what they must be like. To play treacherously, this assumption suggests, is to reflect who you are in real life: a dishonest *Diplomacy* player is dishonest in real life.<sup>17</sup> And look, I'll admit, if I found out that my accountant spent their leisure time running a fraudulent Ponzi-style bank in *EVE*, even I would probably get a little nervous.

This is an interesting assumption to explore, because what does your play really say about who you are? When we play games, we engage in an enormous range of immoral, unpleasant, and otherwise illegal practices that we are rarely judged for. Playing *Red Dead Redemption*, I spent hours hunting down rare and endangered species to unlock awards and experience. Yet anyone who plays games would not assume anything about my feelings toward animals based on this behavior. I have captured and fought animals, cockfight style, in *Pokémon* games; I've executed thousands of captured prisoners in nearly every *Total War* battle I've ever won; and I've committed countless instances of vehicular manslaughter in *Grand Theft Auto*. Play can be transgressive. Yet people rarely make claims about who we are based on how we play.

Even if (as I discuss in chaps. 2 and 3) we can distinguish treacherous play from play like grieving, even where such play

is within the rules and well established, being dishonest is still derided. *Survivor* players often come up against this attitude at “Final Tribal Council,” the final event where a jury of eliminated players vote for which remaining player should win the season. Trapped on a remote island, only knowing their opponents based on how they have played the game, jurors attempt to devalue players based on their acts of deception and betrayal being indicative of who they are in real life, and therefore not being deserving of the prize. This is why *Survivor* makes a great case discussion, as the high-stakes debates expose the ways we assume someone’s play style reflects their character.

Central to this discussion is that betrayal in treacherous play involves an undefined player choice. Many games feature deception; deceiving your opponent is one of the main “unnecessary obstacles” in games like poker, and explicitly lying to opponents about your intentions and then betraying them is core to games like *Werewolf* and the recent wildly successful impostor game *Among Us*.<sup>18</sup> The crucial difference is that players of poker and *Werewolf* are following the formal role that the game has placed them in as opponents. What is unusual about treacherous games is that they give the player the responsibility of choosing whether or not to betray, and whom to betray. You are not assigned the role of impostor, and it is possible to play *DayZ*, *EVE Online*, and *Survivor* without the use of deception and betrayal (otherwise why would you ever trust me?).

Consequently, treacherous players have a greater responsibility over their in-game actions, leading to the highly negative emotional experience of betrayal. But what does this tell us about a player’s real-life morality? Scholars like Miguel Sicart argue that playing a game is an act of moral interpretation: of

being a human being, but also of being a player with particular goals, within a specific game system and game community. Giving players the responsibility to choose what is right or wrong, as treacherous play does, forces players to engage with the morality of the game and their actions. For this reason, Sicart considers *EVE Online* an example of a game closest to “ethical soundness,” because of the way it affords players ethical choice.<sup>19</sup> This does not mean only immoral people choose immoral options in games, but acknowledges that all play involves a process of negotiating the morality of actions within the moment-to-moment moral subjectivity of play. For this reason, I sought out these treacherous players to better understand who these people are and why they choose to play this way, offering insight into what the choices we make in games mean about who we are.

### Defining Treacherous Play

So far, I have identified the three assumptions that pervade discussions of treacherous play and go some way in explaining why it is so unusual, and what makes it such an interesting case study. These are the following:

1. Treacherous play is unethical.
2. Treacherous play is antisocial, like grieving or trolling.
3. Treacherous players are bad people.

I have touched on what these assumptions seem to be claiming about treacherous play, and throughout the book, I use them to help interrogate the phenomenon of treacherous play in depth and uncover what it can contribute to how we think about games and play more broadly. In this way, *Treacherous Play* pushes the boundaries of how we might typically think

about playing games with other people, and what can be enjoyable in a game.

At this point, it is useful to establish a clear definition of what we're talking about in this book, and what we're not:

Treacherous play is the *lawful* use of *deception* to *betray* another person in a *multiplayer game* by *choice*, where it provides *in-game advantage*.

To unpack, in the cases I explore, treacherous play is not a form of cheating, because it is *lawful*, that is, it falls within the rules of the games I discuss. While *deception* features in a variety of games, treacherous play also requires that the player be given the *choice* to betray, or not to betray, which has a material impact on its experience. As discussed earlier, I also focus only on examples where such play provides the betrayer *in-game advantage*, an important part of how I distinguish it from grieving or trolling, and I further limit the scope by discussing only *multiplayer games*, since the psychological experience of betraying, or being betrayed by, another real person is critical to the emotional experience of treacherous play.

In chapter 2, I examine the nature of treacherous play in the sci-fi MMOG *EVE Online* and how it impacts the social experience of the game. I focus on ethnographic research I did on *EVE* “scammers” and “spies”—players whose primary occupation in the sandbox game is to use deception to betray other *EVE* players for in-game reward—to provide a rich account of the appeal of playing treacherously and how treacherous play makes *EVE* successful. This is not just limited to what it is, but how it feels, the appeal, and how these players justify their actions and form fascinating codes of conducts that offer us insight into understanding treachery as a form of social, intellectual, and highly competitive play.

In chapter 3, I discuss *DayZ*, a zombie-themed first-person shooter without codified teams where players can form ad hoc collaborations using proximity-based voice chat—my former colleague Greg Wadley described the game as a “massively multiplayer prisoner’s dilemma.”<sup>20</sup> Drawing on interviews with *DayZ* players, along with 1,700 responses to a player motivations survey, I discuss the relationships between griefing and treacherous play in *DayZ* and unpack the ways in which negative experiences can be positive in games, and a core part of their appeal. In doing so, I further explore the ethics of betrayal in the context of a complex and persistent social sandbox game.

Finally, in chapter 4, I discuss the US television series *Survivor*—perhaps the best-known example of treacherous play. Deception and betrayal are fundamental to the play of the game, but in Final Tribal Council (where eliminated players choose the winner), players’ treacherousness is often used against them. The unusual mechanism of selecting the winner by a vote of losing players exposes the ways that players value (or devalue) treacherousness in *Survivor*. This chapter thus contributes an opportunity to explore the perception that playing treacherously indicates something about you in real life, and how challenging it is to draw clear boundaries between how we play and who we are.

All three of these games are what I consider to be examples of *successful* treacherous play, where the presence of treacherous play contributes to the appeal and commercial success of the game. In chapter 5, I crystallize the lessons learned about the design of these games to identify this book’s contribution for game designers, a discussion about how to design for treacherous play.

Finally, in chapter 6, I return to the three assumptions in discussions about treacherous play and the question of why treachery is so rare in games. This book doesn't argue that more games should feature treachery, or try to rehabilitate it, but suggests that examining such unusual and borderline types of play offers insight into the ways and reasons why we moderate our play, and the expansiveness of what play can be. Good *and* bad.



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