

2 *EVE Online*: Don't Trust Anyone!

** You have entered Corporation Recruitment **

[AxCronstedt]: are any corporations looking for industrial players? I've got 8 mil skill points

[AxCronstedt]: I want to get access to nullsec mining

[NyanCo]: TEST is always looking for people to help supply the war effort. I'll private message you

EVE Online is a science-fiction-themed massively multiplayer online game (MMOG), first released in 2003. Regular free expansions have kept the game's graphics and gameplay up to date, and *EVE* is one of the few remaining Western subscription-based MMOGs (players pay around fifteen dollars a month).¹ As of 2020, the game maintains a passionate and committed player base of around 300,000 players. While this pales in comparison to many other games in the genre, *EVE* has proved fascinating for academic study for a number of reasons: its emergent "sandbox" style of player-generated gameplay, its unapologetic difficulty and steep learning curve,² its uncharacteristically low percentage of female players (estimated to be as low as 3 percent, against the MMOG average of around 40 percent),³ and the relatively unrestrained

interactions between players from around the world. Unlike other MMOGs that put players into separate replications of the virtual world, all *EVE* players play in the same game world, allowing for out-of-game constraints, prejudices, language barriers, and stereotypes to be brought into the game's politics.⁴ For our purposes, though, the most fascinating and unusual feature of *EVE* is the absence of formal rules against deception and betrayal, leading to a culture of mistrust that pervades the entire game.

The Virtual Universe of *EVE Online*

** You have entered a private chat **

[NyanCo]: hey so why do you want to

[AxCronstedt]: I've been mining for a few years and I know I can make more money in nullsec, and I also want to have some new friends to play with since the guys I started with have dropped out

[NyanCo]: yeh cool we do that all. big part of the corp is about just hanging out with other pilots. We'll play non-eve games together and we do something every night in this time zone. Very chill and we need more industrial-bros to help the war!!

The *EVE* universe is largely divided into two areas of space: *high-sec* and *null-sec*. In high-sec, where players begin, the game's nonplayer character police, called CONCORD, come to your defense if you are attacked unprovoked, meaning that players are mostly left alone to engage in the player-versus-environment (PvE) play of industry, mining, and fighting nonplayer enemies to complete quests.⁵ In null-sec, no such protection exists, and this is where groups of players can claim

sovereignty over solar systems to build space stations and infrastructure for allies. Despite the greater risks, the rewards from play in this lawless Wild West of the game are much greater, and control over in-game territory is aggressively contested.

The alliances that control this territory are made up of multiple corporations—the *EVE* version of a game guild or clan—that range from a dozen players to thousands, with the largest alliances aligning more than thirty thousand players. The wars between these groups are fierce and awesome in scope, fought continuously by players around the world, with pivotal battles seeing thousands of players online at once. For these players, the opportunity to contribute to these great wars and the game’s unfolding narrative is core to the appeal of playing the game. In this context, the strong social relationships that form within these corporations have become integral to the game’s ongoing success.

[AxCronstedt]: awesome! So what happens now?

[NyanCo]: the next step is submitting a formal application at [www.\[Alliance Website\].net](http://www.[Alliance Website].net). you’ll need to submit your full api key so that we can check you’re not a spai. ill message you when its been approved

[AxCronstedt]: I’ll do that right now! Spk soon o7⁶

Such is the scale of organizing these enormous alliances that they have official “HR officers,” players who volunteer their time to assess applications and recruit new members. For coordination, a complex IT infrastructure supports forums, chat rooms, and websites dedicated to supporting communications and the broader organization of the alliance, as well as specific websites for processing and managing alliance membership. Enabling these third-party sites, the developer provides “API keys” that players can create to give external

programs access to verified information from within the game client, meaning that players can authenticate their identity on alliance forums, and HR officers can assess an applicant's eligibility to join. A "full" API key can give access to all of a player's financial information, crucial for preventing enemy spies from joining a corporation.

[NyanCo]: hey! Your application has been approved. You just need to transfer the 100,000,000 ISK bond and you can fly out to nullsec to join us

[AxCronstedt]: awesome! What is the bond for though?

[NyanCo]: its just in case you start shooting someone in the Alliance so we can pay them back if you destroy their ship, since you don't have a recommendation from an existing member

[AxCronstedt]: ok no worries. o7

[NyanCo]: hopefully you can join us on the fleet tomorrow!!!

What is astonishing about these mammoth organizations—probably best understood as a form of Benedict Anderson's *imagined communities* because, like nation-states, they are so large that players will never know most of their fellow members—is that *EVE* has no formal or informal rules against deception and betrayal. While technical exploits (such as hacking a player's account or the game client) are disallowed, trickery rooted in social deception is explicitly condoned. The "scams and exploits" page on the official *EVE Online* website states:

As can happen in the real world, someone in *EVE* may try to cheat you out of your hard-earned possessions. . . . A scam is what happens when someone takes advantage of your misplaced trust, temporary confusion or ignorance of game rules, and robs you via legal

in-game means. When this occurs, there is nothing the support team can do for you.⁷

EVE therefore offers an opportunity to explore the second assumption: that treacherous play is antisocial. How is it that *EVE* players have developed these enormous and intimate social groups, when they cannot trust anyone around them? How do widespread deception and betrayal affect the social experience of the game? And why, when the *EVE* sandbox has so much else to offer, would a player choose to steal from others? I explore these questions by looking at the experience of treacherous play for the betrayers, the betrayed, and the bystanders to the act.

Scamming in *EVE Online*

A huge variety of scams exist in *EVE Online*, many of them drawing on the real world for inspiration. Some are quite basic, such as selling intangibles like location bookmarks (where you might find something of greater value) or using simple tricks that exploit the game's user interface. A favorite of one player I spoke with was to advertise a contract for "1 x CHARON SHIP, QUICK SALE, 1.3 BILLION ISK" (a decent price for the powerful ship) but only enter the price as 130 million (a steal). The victims, thinking they are taking advantage of a typing error, quickly accept the contract before anyone else does, which, to their misfortune, only contains one unit of the in-game commodity "Carbon," worth only 300 ISK.⁸ Unfortunately for the new owner of this piece of coal, when scams like these occur, "there is nothing the support team can do for you."

More complex scams require the development of social relationships over longer periods of time. Smaller and typically industrial *EVE* corporations have shared accounts and

inventories so that players can coordinate their play for in-game advantage. Harald Warmelink describes one such organization—"Major," which focused on resource production and sales—which he studied for his book *Online Gaming and Playful Organization*.⁹ Warmelink describes a weeklong application process and a two-hour interview to join the group, which comprised around forty members who pooled their assets and labor to earn as much money as possible from industrial production and market sales, freighting their products around the game world to maximize profit, using Google Docs spreadsheets to coordinate their efforts. Many scammers focus on stealing from these types of corporations, building trust and relationships with leaders over weeks and months to gain as much access as possible before stealing everything they can. These types of scams are intimate and highly personal, involving many hours of playing together, chatting about the game and real life in text and voice chat channels to build trust.

For Ian Brooks, who approaches the ethics of betrayal in *EVE Online* from an Aristotelian point of view, this is key to what makes scamming in *EVE* unethical. It is clearly possible to develop very real friendships in *EVE*.¹⁰ Since successful scams like these are predicated on the victim coming to see the scammer as a (real) friend, to then betray this friendship is an unethical thing to do. According to Brooks, this is because—in an Aristotelian account—friendship is holistic, cannot be bounded into the "player-subject," as Miguel Sicart might argue, and therefore cannot be part of the play of the game.¹¹ I discuss this point further in chapter 4, in relation to *Survivor*, where a similar argument is made by players at Final Tribal Council.

There are many other, less personal scams in *EVE*. The largest scams occur in the play of *EVE*'s banks, player organizations

based on trust that pay dividends on player investments. Typically banks are oriented around raising capital for manufacturing the game's largest and most powerful ships, complex industrial manufacturing with requirements that exceed the financial capabilities of a single player. The potential for a return on their investment involving little effort can be extremely tempting for players, but considerable work has to be done to build trust. Banks often last for years, growing slowly, showing a strong record of investment returns, and involving groups of prominent players who have established themselves in game forums as knowledgeable, competent, and trustworthy. Advertisements for investments often describe the systems for auditing and transparency that are in place to secure investments and to make sure a single player cannot steal from the group.

Invariably, these are all scams, long cons that net hundreds of billions of ISK from players. In 2010 the investment firm Titans 4 U, run by the player "Bad Bobby," raised money to purchase and copy the "blueprints" necessary for building the game's most expensive and powerful ships. Profits from sales were distributed among investors, and the original Titan blueprints kept secure in a "holding corporation" where the combined votes of the company directors were needed for access. Under the guise of adding more directors, Bad Bobby initiated a vote to add more shares, momentarily giving him total control and allowing him to steal assets equivalent to 850 billion ISK. This was the largest scam in *EVE's* history until 2011's Phaser Inc., an investment bank that offered 5 percent weekly returns. Running the bank for eight months and consistently paying out to players, the "savvy investors" were in fact running a Ponzi scheme. Any returns players tried to withdraw were simply paid out using the investments of new depositors,

allowing the bankers to steal one trillion ISK, worth around \$38,000 at the time.¹² This all happened despite *EVE's* number one rule, "DON'T TRUST ANYONE."

Since *EVE Online's* launch, the game's publisher, CCP Games, has held the position that "the freedom to scam and commit piracy, espionage, and extortion are all fundamental to the *EVE Online* experience."¹³ In 2019 I spoke with Hilmar Veigar Pétursson (the CEO of CCP Games since 2004) about the inclusion of scamming in *EVE*, which he sees as a result of giving players "very flexible systems where all the factors of human nature would emerge into similar behaviors as we see in reality." While scamming was not specifically designed for, "it wasn't a surprise to us when it started to emerge because we had built those facilities for such things to happen."¹⁴

This flexible approach is key to understanding how and why scamming is a key part of *EVE Online*; it is a game that prides itself on the freedom and flexibility it offers players in how they choose to play and how they might organize their social activities. Hilmar describes *EVE* as a "social experiment of a few hundred thousand people coming together to play this great adventure, just like they were to do if it were happening for real," and the result is a game that offers "all the spectrum of human emotions." To intervene and ban scamming would be "saying that we are different than reality because we, the company, is policing relationships." Scamming is not an isolated part of *EVE* but part of the fabric of what makes the game unique. Nevertheless, the scammers whom I interviewed all knew that their chosen style of play was perceived negatively outside the *EVE* community.

[NyanCo]: oh hey I know most of your assets are parked in JITA at the moment, there is a freighter

making the jump to our main station in 6VDT in 15 minutes if you want to get it all moved

[NyanCo]: we waive the fee for newbros

[NyanCo]: way safer than flying it out yourself and you can pay the Alliance for insurance (50m ISK)

[AxCronstedt]: I was just going to sell it in JITA and buy new stuff in 6VDT?

[NyanCo]: nah shit is way more expensive in 6VDT because we don't have enough industrial players like you, its why I recruited u

[NyanCo]: should I tell him you're not interested?

[AxCronstedt]: no no no I'll do it that's awesome thanks you guys are the best, so excited to join the fleet tonight!

[NyanCo]: ok just contract everything to the character Naxiom Telfast and he'll contract it back to you when its at 6VDT

Typically, when I do qualitative research into understanding player experience in games, I draft some contextual questions to get the discussion going. These questions are particularly important when researching something you don't necessarily understand the boundaries of from the outset. One of the early participants' replies to one of these questions perfectly captured what it was that scammers were engaging in.

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

Participant: PvP, ratting [a type of PvE], industrial and people. I have multiple accounts.

To this player, who habitually infiltrates enemy alliances to weaken them through financial thefts or fostering social

instability, treacherous play is a style of play referred to as “people,” just like “raiding” in *World of Warcraft*, or “role play” in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Another described themselves as using their “~words~ to make ISK instead of shooting red crosses” (a colloquialism for PvE). What was clear, across a wide range of different types of scammers who engaged in scamming for many different reasons, was that scamming is a form of interpersonal competition: my ability to deceive you versus your ability to detect my deception.

[AxCronstedt]: hey what time is the fleet I still don't have access to the forums

[NyanCo]: its in 45 minutes. Can you be here in time?

[NyanCo]: let me check your account

[AxCronstedt]: thanks!

[NyanCo]: yeah you're all good.

[NyanCo]: do you have anything to fly yet?

[AxCronstedt]: yeh I contracted all my ships to Naxiom

[NyanCo]: I don't think he's online yet tho. send me like 160mil ISK and I will fit out a ship for you so you can join the fleet straight away

[AxCronstedt]: sweet thanks man!!!! So excited!

Unfortunately for AxCronstedt, NyanCo was one of the more successful scammers I interviewed.¹⁵ This transcript is a highly simplified version of a “recruitment scam” that NyanCo ran. The player used a fake recruitment website—the official site had a .com address, the fake one a .net—to lull victims into a sense of false security: a form of deception by bureaucracy. The veneer of authenticity brought on by the rigorous third-party website lulled his many victims into misplacing trust. This scam involved hours of chatting over days or even

weeks, convincing scammed players to join the alliance, building their enthusiasm while at the same time scamming them for all their worldly possessions. By collecting the full API key (for the process of “HR recruitment”), NyanCo could confirm what assets were worth stealing.¹⁶

[AxCronstedt]: HEY WHAT THE FUCK

[NyanCo]: :)

[AxCronstedt]: I tried to dock in 6VDT and it said I wasn't allowed! THEN THE FLEET FUCKING BLEW ME UP

[AxCronstedt]: I RESPAWNED BACK IN JITA

[AxCronstedt]: WHERE'S ALL MY STUFF SHIT NYANCO

[AxCronstedt]: WHERE'S ALL MY STUFF

[AxCronstedt]: THAT WAS ALL MY STUFF

[NyanCo]: wiki.eveuniversity.org/Scams_in_EVE_Online

[NyanCo]: thanks for the 4 billion isk! o7

[AxCronstedt]: fuck you

This exchange epitomizes the highly negative reaction many scam victims have. Many players I spoke to discussed instances of thefts where the scammed player “never logged back in,” and while few would admit to feeling bad about their unusual style of play, the prevailing theme in every interview was that upsetting others was not their goal. Their primary motivation was to steal high-value items.¹⁷ When players of the alliance I studied provide accounts of their scams on the alliance forums or with other scammers, they don't place emphasis, like a griever might, on angry reactions but highlight screenshots of their haul, the social deception involved, and social dominance exerted. For the players I spoke with, the goal is deceiving and manipulating their opponent and demonstrating their excellence in *EVE's* social competition:

“The scams I do take a lot of social engineering. When they work out, I feel pretty proud and superior.” Trust is within the domain of competition in *EVE*, just as marksmanship is in the domain of competition in *DayZ*.

This notion of treacherous play as a form of social combat was also backed up by player’s descriptions of what skills you need to be able to scam in *EVE*. The advice from players was that “you just need to [be able to] keep talking” and maintain a good lie. Others described the way that their deception in *EVE Online* had helped their social skills off-line, teaching them a lot about conversational dynamics and helping build their confidence in the real world.

So who are these players? The scammers in my studies were overwhelmingly IT workers, reflecting the demographics of *EVE*. Some exceptions included a composer, two homemakers, and a serving member of the US Army who played treacherously from his base while deployed. It is beyond the scope of my research to claim that these treacherous players are as ethical in real life as any other player in *EVE Online*, but all described a life outside their play that just seemed, well, normal. They were all just like any other *EVE Online* player, only maybe a little more talkative.

It is straightforward to see how scamming, as a form of competition, would be compelling. No two “marks” in *EVE* are the same. Each needs to be convinced, deceived, and cajoled in subtly different ways. The breadth and variety of the social challenge, and the creativity involved in deriving new schemes—particularly in comparison to the other repetitive styles of play in *EVE*—offered players a continually engaging style of play, with an increasing difficulty level as scammers try to pull off bigger and bigger heists. Considering scamming

as a form of competition allows us to explore that first assumption: can scamming be ethical?

Can Scamming Be Ethical?

Most games in the MMOG genre involve only minor consequences for losing during competitive play. Lisbeth Klastrup describes death in *World of Warcraft* as a “risk-free endeavor,” like any number of repeatable activities that are part of everyday life in the game.¹⁸ *EVE Online* is different. The stakes are high in competitive play, and there are consequences if you lose. Ships, many worth billions of ISK, that are destroyed in combat are permanently removed from the game, with wreckage that can be looted by the victors. The consequences of *EVE* combat thus mirror the consequences of losing to theft; stealing a ship through deception involves the same “mere violence” to a player’s game goals as destroying a ship in combat.

To unpack this subject a little more, we can consider one of Nguyen and Zagal’s criteria for the ethical competitive game, which is that it must involve an “alignment of struggle between players,” in other words, that competition must be fair.¹⁹ An unethical example under this criterion is the experienced and powerful player who seeks out weaker, lower-skill-level players to kill them at little challenge. Under Nguyen and Zagal’s approach, the skill discrepancy means that the aggressor is doing something morally wrong.²⁰ *EVE* ship combat is interesting in this regard, as it is structurally an unfair competition. Rather than leveling up through repetitive game actions, *EVE* characters gain skill points over time. Trained skills gain access to more powerful ships and abilities, and leveling up skills (five levels, increasing in training time

exponentially) gives boosts (such as 5 percent more damage). This means that an account that has been playing *EVE* for five years has an unassailable advantage in game combat, not even taking into consideration the economic advantage the player has to fly more powerful and more expensive ships.

So, in terms of Nguyen and Zagal's ethics of competition, the "struggle" of social combat is more closely aligned between players than it is with ship combat. Any scammer is competing on a level playing field with their opponent, using the same social tools that both players are equipped with.

However, since *EVE* is such a complex game, a level playing field is not always the case. When I asked Hilmar, the CCP Games CEO, about the changing perceptions of scamming over the game's long history, he noted that some scamming has "gotten out of control, and we need to start to rein it in, because there is such a skill and information asymmetry that exists from old players to new players that is terrible, it's like too easy to set up easy traps for new players to fall into." Since these scams don't pose any risk to the scammer, and there is such a "power gap between the scammer and the scammees" in terms of their knowledge of the game, the risk to the scammer is not proportionate to the risk to the player.

This imbalance illuminates an interesting distinction between losing a ship to combat and losing a ship to a scam. To destroy my ship in combat, you would have to risk your ship in the fight. Other than my reputation, which can be refreshed through the use of "alt" accounts, a scammer running quick and easy scams on new players has not proportionally risked. Under this logic, relationship betrayal—which takes time and considerable effort—is okay, but market-based scams that prey on a player's lack of knowledge are not. After all, as Hilmar puts it, *EVE Online* is meant to be "cruel but fair."

Nguyen and Zagal's second criterion is the requirement for consent, which is not straightforward where competition involves deception. The players I studied would routinely reference the game's pervasive informal rule "DON'T TRUST ANYONE," and official game advertisements extolling the possibilities of scamming and espionage in *EVE*, along with game paratexts like *BBC News* articles about large in-game thefts, clearly establish that thievery is legitimate and to be expected.²¹ The *unnecessary obstacles* that construct the challenge of *EVE Online* play include the threat of deception. Players continually told me about their most satisfying scams being not necessarily the biggest but ones where they had either established total social control or tricked players who "should know better." The challenge of this form of competition is lost if the opponent trusts blindly.

This is not to gloss over *EVE's* culture, which is very different from mainstream game culture. It isn't anonymous, but it is extremely aggressive, combative, exclusive, and masculine, featuring the same genres of toxic racist, sexist, and homophobic language and memes that pervade other "hard-core" game scenes. *EVE* is notoriously difficult to learn how to play well, requiring incredibly in-depth knowledge. Eighteen years of hostility toward new and "casual" players have shaped an extremely homogeneous player culture (to reemphasize, some estimates put *EVE* at 97 percent male), perhaps doing more to explain the third assumption about treacherous play. How you choose to play may not say much about you, but the games you choose to play might.

This discussion also helps explain the interesting way *EVE* players act toward "newbros," the colloquial term for new and inexperienced players in the game and another representation of this exclusive masculine culture. Elsewhere I have written

with other *EVE* scholars about the ways that some of *EVE*'s powerful alliances use this term to create a culture of acceptance and encouragement for new players and to admonish players who are too harsh or critical of “newbro” mistakes.²² Scammers would often describe situations where they had chosen not to scam a player who was disadvantaged in some way, going so far as to warn them about potential scams in the future. For example:

I remember on one occasion there was a newbie. . . . I decided to go through with the scam regardless, not because I had any interest in his valuables but rather I wanted to offer up an important lesson about *EVE* to a new player. . . . After I cleaned him out . . . I came clean and explained what had occurred. I handed him his money and assets back to him, and even threw in a few faction frigates and quadrupled his total isk value. . . . I then chatted to him about various other scams to be aware of in the world of *EVE* and set him on his way.

This forgiving approach was by no means universal, though, and a common perspective was that “everyone who plays *EVE* understands how harsh of a world it is. If they don't, they need to learn.” Players who quit *EVE* after being scammed (a not entirely uncommon response) are part of a process of homogenizing *EVE*'s player base. *EVE* is hard and unforgiving, and only players who enjoy this style of play remain. This is something that the rhetoric scholar Chris Paul has noted about *EVE Online* and the way “elements of *EVE*'s design push players away from the game. . . . Early moments of the game effectively tell new people that they do not belong, that this is not a game they should be playing.”²³ Kelly Boudreau similarly points out how transgressive play in online games more broadly is a form of boundary keeping, because it works to maintain a particular form of toxic subculture.²⁴

To play treacherously is to play in a way that—consciously or not—hones the community of players into one constructed to accept and expect treacherous play, and the hypercompetitive, “cruel but fair” masculine “bro” player culture that exists alongside it. As a result, anyone left playing has consented to this form of competition.

You might be puzzled why people still fall for these scams in *EVE*. After all, the “number one” rule of *EVE Online* is “DON’T TRUST ANYONE.” When you read the exchanges between AxCronstedt and NyanCo, I’m confident that at some stage you grew a little frustrated with AxCronstedt’s obliviousness, his willingness to trust in a game advertised with the slogan “BE THE VILLAIN.” While scamming is pervasive, the majority of *EVE* players are not scammers. Volunteers run in-game help channels and assist in organizations like EVE University that are dedicated to introducing new players to the game. Players in corporations build up meaningful relationships during their play and make meaningful sacrifices for their allies. In fact, I estimate that fewer than 1 percent of *EVE* players pursue this way of playing the game. Trusting is part of playing *EVE*, and trusting is just not without its risks. In chapter 6, I further explore how this trust is necessary for treacherous play.

So I have now established the suggestion that scamming in *EVE* is a form of social, player-versus-player combat. This is backed up by player descriptions of the practice as a form of “playing people,” the appeal of a scam, and the skills a scammer needs. Scamming is a great example of treacherous play, as deception and betrayal are being used in a direct way for a clear purpose: financial gain. Yet another form of betrayal exists in the *EVE* game world, with a much more pronounced impact on the game world’s history, and much more complex effects and implications.

Espionage in *EVE Online*

Reflecting again how *EVE* is designed to closely model reality, in the wars waged between *EVE*'s powerful null-sec alliances, espionage plays a crucial role. In comparison to the direct, clinical ruthlessness of scamming, the deception and betrayals of espionage may go on for months and even years. While a scam might negatively affect a single player, key acts of betrayal in *EVE*'s "spy metagame" directly impact tens of thousands of players, as well as the very history of the game world.

The Fountain War was a conflict in 2013 between two of the game's largest alliances—TEST Alliance Please Ignore (TEST) and the Goonswarm Federation (GSF). After a period of tense relations, the nineteenth expansion to *EVE Online: Odyssey* made minor changes to the way that minerals could be found in null-sec, leading to GSF and its coalition invading TEST's home region of Fountain.

The Fountain War was won not principally by military victories but by espionage and betrayal. TEST's ally, N3, had a powerful "Australian bloc" who were consistently able to unwind the military efforts of GSF's superior North American pilots, resulting in a fiercely fought stalemate.²⁵ Yet GSF was able to gain a "beachhead" in Fountain to stage its war owing to an act of betrayal, as a discredited and unpopular former leader of TEST coordinated with GSF to "drop" control of five solar systems. GSF was able to quickly take control of the systems, gaining a useful advantage in the war, before TEST leaders realized what had happened.

Over the next two weeks, TEST and its allies slowly took back four of the five solar systems. Only 4-EP12 remained, and if lost, it could mean "closing the door on their invasion completely."²⁶ Attacking in Australian prime time (AUTZ) when

the GSF was at its weakest, 750 pilots arrived in the system, and the GSF fleet quickly withdrew. Yet despite this show of strength, 4-EP12 remained invulnerable to TEST's attack. A spy within TEST with trusted access had disabled TEST's claim for sovereignty over the solar system, so that TEST could not expel GSF from the system that night. Although a minor act of sabotage in the long war, this incident proves the effectiveness of sabotage against military superiority in *EVE Online*.

Betrayal characterized the remainder of the war. Goon-swarm diplomats persuaded a senior player in N3 to steal 350 billion ISK and forfeit *all* of the alliance's territory, forcing N3 players to return to their home systems to reclaim lost territory. Later, a TEST logistics director—after feeling insulted by another director—stole 130 billion ISK worth of logistical supplies from TEST, further hindering the war efforts. These public acts of betrayal were broadcast like propaganda to further demoralize the coalition that was quickly losing territory in Fountain.²⁷ Treacherous play had turned the tide.

As in any war, logistics are crucially important in *EVE*, and players who volunteered to assist in this way were under enormous pressure. Exacerbating the situation, GSF's espionage team was able to get access to a shared Google Docs spreadsheet that recorded the locations of TEST logistics structures in space (such as the location of a mine on a moon in a solar system). Rather than deleting the document to temporarily disrupt TEST, GSF simply introduced small errors to this document to add to the pressure and stress of logistics players, who would then arrive in the wrong system or at the wrong moon. The effect was to increase social tension, burning out the volunteers and tempting more to defect.

Alongside these instances of human intelligence (many *EVE* spies I interviewed would use terms borrowed from the

real espionage community), signals intelligence played a crucial role in fighting the war and detecting spies. One interview participant, who has led the espionage efforts of a major *EVE* alliance, developed software that automated scraping API keys of other players to give them access to player communications.

I had bots that scraped eve-mails, notifications, even out-of-game resources like pastebin for communications, api keys, etc, and filtered it all out to a handful of jabbers channel for me.

This player also used programs that automatically scraped enemy forums for keywords and another that pretended to be a player looking for in-game services to harvest IP addresses. The effectiveness of these technologically advanced examples of signals intelligence is that, by posting the data to a jabber (text chat client) channel, players were able to intercept enemy intelligence in real time. This gave their alliance considerable in-game advantage, such as knowing when enemy fleets might attack, where they currently were, who was leading the fleet, and even what specific ships the enemy fleet was targeting: information that could be relayed to the defense ships to begin healing a target before it had even taken damage.

In tandem with these efforts to automate spying, intelligence directors also used their technical expertise to uncover spying. One tactic is to identify the IP addresses of players using alliance-controlled forums and IT and then cross-reference this information with the known IP addresses of hostile players. This tactic is regarded as commonplace, and any spy uncovered using this method is considered careless. A more complex method is watermarking. With screenshot watermarking, for instance, forums are given unique watermarks, so that if private information is leaked via screenshot, it is possible to determine the identity of the person who took the screenshot (figures 2.1 and 2.2).

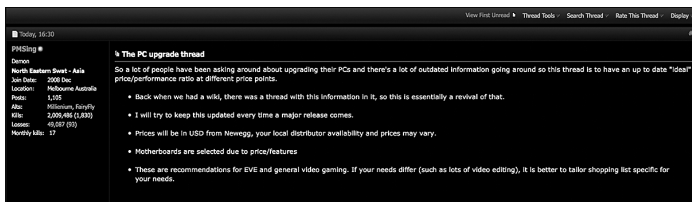


Figure 2.1
A screenshot from the private forum of a powerful *EVE Online* alliance (provided by Rami114).

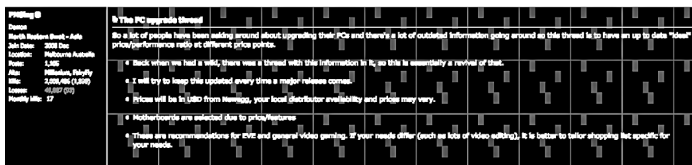


Figure 2.2
The same screenshot with the digital watermark revealed. The pattern is unique to the user logged in.

All these examples indicate the vital importance of treacherous play in *EVE*'s wars. GSF's use of a variety of forms of social competitive play eventually won the war. Misplaced trust was used to win—or avoid—key battles, and spies gave GSF access to information that was used to build relationships with potential defectors and sabotage opponents to cause frustrating losses. Writing in *Internet Spaceships Are Serious Business*, "Endie," the head of GSF espionage during the Fountain War, discussed another strategy of framing "innocent leading individuals within a hostile alliance" to cause "finger-pointing and suspicion between entirely loyal members."²⁸ As alliances are built on trust and relationships, it is inevitable in *EVE* that they would become a domain of competition in this way. According to Hilmar, these types of play are acceptable so long as they fall "within the four walls of the game."

Like scamming, espionage is a highly competitive style of social combat that requires intimate knowledge of game mechanics and the politics of enemy alliances. Playing *EVE* requires a commitment that exceeds that of many other games, and espionage players need to be two or even three *EVE* players at once. The appeal for these players lies in this challenge, in these unnecessary obstacles, and in the creativity they must bring to stay one step ahead of their opponents. Espionage is social player versus player at the grandest scale, and *EVE*'s wars provide a powerful narrative context that these betrayals contribute to, in turn imbuing treacherous play with the meaning of forging the history of the entire game world.

The Appeal of Being Betrayed

Playing *EVE Online* is a voluntary activity, so it must be appealing to its players. One of the reasons why treachery is extremely rare in games is that it typically incites stronger negative emotions than other types of consequential failure in online games. There are far more cases of players quitting the game because they were scammed than players quitting because they lost the equivalent value in combat. Why? Jesper Juul notes that failure in games is something of a paradox.²⁹ We generally try to avoid failure, but we seek it out in games, and games that are too easy are often not very appealing. To understand the difference between good and bad failure, one theory Juul draws on is Lyn Abramson's *attribution theory*.³⁰

Attribution theory suggests that, for every event, we search for a cause, particularly when we fail. So with something like being scammed, our immediate response is to consider whether to blame the game, ourselves, the scammer, or some other thing. Abramson suggests three dimensions to the ways we deal with failure: internal versus external, stable versus

unstable, and global versus specific. When failure is internal, stable, and global, players may experience *learned helplessness* where their confidence in their own competence is reduced. Conversely if players can attribute their failure to an external factor (the game is badly designed) or believe that it is unstable (they will improve), the negative experience of failure can be reduced.

This understanding offers us some insight into why treacherous play can lead to such strong negative emotions. To “fail” at treacherous play—for example, losing a ship to theft like AxCronstedt—is to misplace your trust: an internal, possibly stable and global inadequacy. In comparison, to “fail” at combat—losing the same ship in battle—suggests that you are inadequate at fighting with virtual internet spaceships, an internal but unstable and highly specific inadequacy. While each case has the same level of consequence (in both, the ship is irreversibly lost), when we understand treachery as a form of social combat, we see how being betrayed reflects an internal failure that is relevant to everyday life, a possible explanation for the strong negative emotions.

Here we also see another way that betraying (or detecting a spy) might contribute to *EVE Online's* appeal. Detecting a scam reflects social competence, an internal adequacy relevant to everyday life. For the betrayer, scamming someone does the same. This was a core part of the appeal of *EVE Online* scamming for one of my research participants, who strongly felt that scamming had improved their confidence outside the game.

While these theories, and the notion of betrayal aversion introduced in chapter 1, provide some insight into why treachery is so often met with strong negative reactions, it is worth considering how being betrayed can be a source enjoyment for players. When I explain this area of research, I am frequently asked, “What is fun about a game where you can’t

trust anyone?" I typically ask in response, "Well, what is fun about losing at chess? Or about being killed in *Call of Duty*?" The appeal lies not in the bounded experience of loss or failure but in the adoption of the unnecessary obstacles that constitute a lusory goal. Risk, after all, is exciting, and the presence of treacherous play ensures that social interactions are riskier, more intense, and more engaging. It is *because* of treachery that *EVE*'s social experience is so strong. Hilmar pointed out to me that "if betraying trust does not have severe consequences, then giving trust doesn't really mean anything." Just as the risk of losing a ship makes combat more intense and ensures that players put more effort into their play, so too does the risk of misplacing trust. Aided by the homogeneous demographics of the game, the culture of mistrust leads to players forming closer and more meaningful social relationships as a strategy to prevent betrayal. Leaders in *EVE* alliances meet up to form relationships "in person" to build trust, and thousands travel each year to the developer's headquarters in Reykjavik, Iceland, for the annual *EVE* Fanfest event. Treachery is not pro-social, but it contributes to the appeal of *EVE* by demanding a more intimate and meaningful social experience than can be found in the increasingly casualized MMOG market.

In examining what makes the difference between "good" negative and "bad" negative experiences, Kristine Jørgensen notes that positive discomfort is connected to game content that has a purpose within the narrative,³¹ and betrayal is by no means out of place in *EVE*, where it reflects CCP Games' desire to develop a game that offers players "all the spectrum of human emotions."³² We can also see this in the way many *EVE* players explain the game by simply saying, "*EVE* is real."³³ This colloquialism (which later featured centrally in an official *EVE* trailer) refers to the way in which *EVE*, particularly in

comparison to other games, is considered more real by players; the history of the game world and the stories of its empires, the intensely felt emotions of play, and the work and effort involved are *real*. Due to treacherous play, its social experiences and its wars are more real too.

This is a portion of the eBook [doi:10.7551/mitpress/12023.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12023.001.0001)
at

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/12023.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12023.001.0001)

Treacherous Play

By: Marcus Carter

Citation:

Treacherous Play

By: Marcus Carter

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/12023.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262367523

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2022

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

© 2022 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Carter, Marcus, author.

Title: Treacherous play / Marcus Carter.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2022. | Series:

Playful thinking | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021000494 | ISBN 9780262046312 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Games—Psychological aspects. | Deception.

Classification: LCC GV1201.37 .C37 2022 | DDC 790.1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021000494>