

3 *DayZ*: Treachery in the Zombie Apocalypse

we had some awesome stuff, 2 pistols, heaps of meds, then we saw a dude with no weapons.

He asked if we could give him a blood transplant so we figured we would, then as we were picking up the blood bag he went into our pack, took our stored pistol and shot us. . . .

MOTHER F*****R!!!!

—Andrew, *DayZ* player

Death in most games is a minor inconvenience, a metaphor for failure. When you die in *Halo*, you simply respawn a few seconds later, maybe a few moments back in time. This is not the case in *DayZ*, a zombie-themed survival game where you begin on the coast of a vast virtual world with only a few rudimentary items, needing to scavenge food, water, and weapons to survive for more than a short period. When your character is killed in *DayZ*, you do not respawn. Instead you must start again, losing all your advancement, potentially from hours of play. The entire experience of playing *DayZ* is transformed by the harsh and brutal experience of dying, raising the stakes of every choice and interaction the player makes.¹

DayZ was first released in early 2012 as a free modification (or “mod”) to the 2009 military simulator first-person shooter (FPS) game *ARMA II*. By late 2012, *DayZ* had garnered 1.3 million unique players, outstripping the sales of many blockbuster game titles, and was referred to in *PC Gamer* as one of the “most important things to happen in gaming in 2012.”² Although its popularity has waned, *DayZ* has been an incredibly influential game.³ Its scavenging-based survival mechanics have popularized the “survival game” genre, and the compelling and emotionally draining experience of high-consequence death in *DayZ* has repopularized “permadeath” as a game mechanic. The confluence of mechanics incorporated into *DayZ* was also crucial in initiating the recent genre of battle royale games like *Fortnite*. PlayerUnknown—the titular developer of *PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds* (2017)—first released his enormously successful battle royale game as a modification to *DayZ* in 2013.

For our purposes, though, the most interesting feature of *DayZ* is its proximity-based voice chat. Instead of having formally designated teams, players can communicate with one another using voice so long as their avatars are located nearby, a rare feature in FPS games, which typically do not enable chat between opponents for fear of harassment and toxicity. In *DayZ*, proximity chat creates opportunities for ad hoc collaborations to overcome the obstacles of the harsh virtual world, trade key supplies, and engage in rich and rewarding social experiences. Surviving on your own in *DayZ* is hard, and working together can be the best way to find loot, avoid zombies, and scare off other players looking for an easy kill.

This simple mechanic also introduces the opportunities and motivations for treachery. Why not work together with other players until they find something worth having, and

then bury an ax in their head? Who needs to be any good at shooting a shotgun if you can just trick a gunslinger into turning around? Or, in such a treacherous apocalypse where the stakes are so high, why would you risk your life to share a bandage with a player bleeding to death? The potential for treachery lies at the heart of *DayZ*'s social gameplay, and in this chapter, I explore what *DayZ* can tell us about the appeal and ethics of treacherous play.

Motivations for Playing Treacherously

One of the claims I make in this book is that treacherous play is a distinct phenomenon from griefing and trolling, although elements of it are clearly adjacent. Griefing has a range of definitions (often depending on the scholarly background of the researcher), but it is most often framed as antisocial behavior, with the griever seen as a problem user playing the “wrong” way (to be designed out), or as a cyberbully (motivated by causing displeasure).⁴ Without minimizing the negative impact that grief play has on player communities,⁵ Jaakko Stenros argues that the griever is rejecting the social contract that enables shared play, instead playing “by different rules without informing others present in the situation.”⁶ It's not that griefing isn't play but that it is a form of play that plays with, and against, a game's informal rules. Typically (as an act unrelated to the winning conditions of the game) the griever's intent is to ruin the experience of others.

Clearly, treacherous play falls within the rules of *DayZ*. It is endorsed by the game's creator and contributes to the authentic survival experience that he was attempting to create, similar to how treachery in *EVE* is coherent with the game's ruthless narrative. It's also something I've continuously found

to be accepted within *DayZ*'s informal rules and player communities. One of the reasons is that players have no clear way to win *DayZ*, since the sandbox survival game does not have clearly structured goals or points. As a result, "winning" becomes playing in ways that provide interesting or powerful experiences, which treachery offers in spades. I'll explore this subject a little more later in the chapter when discussing player attitudes toward dying in *DayZ*.

The crux, then, is the player's motivations. What motivates someone to betray? Ruining someone else's day? Or something else?

When the stand-alone version of *DayZ* was released, I and my colleagues deployed a player motivation survey to better understand the appeal of this game that had taken the gaming world by storm. Nick Yee describes the goal of this type of research as being to articulate empirical models that describe the underlying motivations players have for playing online games, providing a meaningful way to differentiate players and understand game preferences and behaviors.⁷ Our survey implemented a modified form of Yee's research, where he established an empirical model for motivations of play in games using factor analysis, finding three main components of player motivation, with ten subcomponents.⁸ Essentially what Yee's work shows is that players' motivations to engage in different elements of a game are related. For instance, players who enjoy chatting with other players are also more likely to enjoy helping other players (a social player type), while those who are interested in the mechanics of the game are also more likely to be competitive with others (the achievement player type).

Yee found that this player motivation typology was present across players of a number of different games in the massively

multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) genre, and his quantitatively sourced, generally applicable model for the different types of player motivations has been highly influential in games research. However, games in the MMORPG genre are largely homogeneous, drawing on the same design tropes and creating similar play experiences. Yee's survey is tailored toward these types of games, often referencing fantasy-MMOG-specific play that is not applicable to games in other genres, like *DayZ* (such as guild membership, persistent friendships, theory crafting), or not encompassing play unusual in MMORPGs, such as kidnapping or permadeath.

Our survey therefore combined questions from Yee's model with questions based on the types of *DayZ* play that are not common in MMORPGs, including betrayal. The resulting inventory of forty-one questions included thirty questions that asked about the player's enjoyment of game elements and situations (e.g., "When you play *DayZ*, do you enjoy stealing items from other players?"), and eleven questions that asked about the player's behavior (e.g., "When you play *DayZ*, how often do you make up backstories and personalities for your characters?"). The goal of this research was to test the applicability of these quantitative player motivation models to an emerging genre, along with examining how novel forms of play fit into this existing typology. Although it wasn't the goal when we designed the survey, since we included questions about treacherous play, this kind of research can help us understand what motivates the treacherous player.

Among the 1,704 players who completed our survey,⁹ we found nine subcomponents of player motivations, of which six mapped closely to Yee's player types (Competition, Teamwork, Socializing, Discovery, Advancement, and Role Playing).¹⁰ Three novel components reflected the characteristically

different experience of *DayZ*. The first was *Treachery*, such as using proximity chat to trick others. The second was *Domineering*, or gaining advantage over players by any means, with no prejudice against violating informal rules like killing new players or logging out of the game to save one's character. Domineering players resembled the player type often referred to as grievers, but treacherous ones did not. The third novel component was *Kidnapping*, which I discuss later in the chapter.

The next step in player motivations research is then to examine the correlation *between* these different subcomponents, finding three main *DayZ* player types. Unlike Yee's components, ours were not as distinct. We can summarize the three player types revealed by the rich text responses as follows:

1. **Social:** Enjoys socializing, teamwork and role play, and kidnapping as an alternative to murder or for an immersive moral role-play experience. Does not kidnap to advance, torture/betray, or dominate.
2. **Treacherous:** Plays competitively, is treacherous so as to advance in game (but is not domineering, does not engage in torture). Enjoys the challenge of killing other players who possess better items.
3. **Goal Oriented:** Motivated by immersion or advancement, with a strong competition component. Collaborates with friends but not with strangers.

Types 1 and 2 were negatively correlated, most notably around the subcomponent of competition. This finding suggests that whereas the social player interacts with others for the social experience, the treacherous player engages in social interactions as part of the competitive challenge to survive in the game. That is, the motivation for treachery is competition, not

causing displeasure or ruining the experience of other players. Qualitative responses reflected how this type of player used proximity chat to kill others, particularly when “they’ve got good gear and I’ve got nothing.” Your skills with a shotgun versus my skills at deception: a social contest.

In contrast to the conceptualization of a griefer as a cyberbully, the treacherous player is playing within the game’s shared intentionality to depict a ruthless zombie apocalypse, rather than rejecting it with the intention of causing displeasure. Like the *EVE Online* scammer, the treacherous player’s motivation lies in the value of the objects stolen, not in a player’s negative outburst. However, Jaakko Stenros notes another way of conceptualizing the griefer that may have more in common with some treacherous players: as an “entitled asshole.”¹¹ Drawing on Aaron James’s book *Assholes: A Theory*, Stenros suggests that another way of understanding griefers is as players who take special liberties in games, believing that they are entitled to special treatment, for whatever reason. In some acts of treachery, the griefer is treating other players as mere objects to be played with rather than equal opponents, reflecting the primacy the treacherous player places on competition and role play over social experience.

Our study also found that both the treacherous player type and the social player type were correlated with kidnapping play. Although not overtly supported in the original game design, kidnapping was an emergent social interaction that emerged from the combination of the proximity voice system to issue verbal demands to other players encountered in the virtual world, and the teamless and goalless structure of *DayZ*. At the time of the survey, items that facilitated kidnapping-style play (such as burlap sacks and handcuffs) were present, as was the ability to force-feed another player food (or poison)

and extract blood from a restrained player (which could be used to restore the health of another player with a blood transfusion). Quitting the game was not a solution, since logging out when handcuffed kills the player's character. The combination of permanent death and unpowered spawn (a *DayZ* character begins with no weapons) provides a high-stakes power imbalance that enables kidnapping play.

Questions about kidnapping featured in the survey because I was interested in this unusual way of playing that had gained traction in online communities around *DayZ*. While the items supported it, a few viral videos and stories encouraged it. Several of the respondents to the survey had themselves been kidnapped, rating it their "favorite interaction" even though in most cases it resulted in their death.

Both social players and treacherous players were positively correlated with kidnapping. That is, someone who enjoys the social aspects of *DayZ* also enjoyed kidnapping other players. The social players expressed this attitude in their qualitative



Figure 3.1

DayZ promotional screenshot highlighting kidnapping play.

comments, as though kidnapping offered a social alternative to killing another player. Rather than a player shooting someone who might be a threat, kidnapping offered a way of playing with this stranger that did not put your highly valued weapons and gear at risk. A common theme was that kidnapping was a form of role play within the game world, allowing players to experiment with the morality of their play. For treacherous players, who don't have a close correlation with the socializing subcomponent, the goals were not to cause displeasure or provoke a reaction but to steal other players' items without killing them (a competitive drive), and to satisfy their desire for role play. Betraying, kidnapping, and otherwise being "bad" in *DayZ* are forms of ethical role play, exploring what is right and wrong in the zombie apocalypse, using other players' bad luck to experience what that is like.

But why not just kill them?

Dying in *DayZ*

It's truly frightening, like not game-frightening, but oh my god I'm gonna die-frightening. Your hands starts shaking, your hands gets sweaty, your heart pounds, your mind is racing and you're a wreck when it's all over.

—*DayZ* player

If treacherous players were simply motivated by ruining the experience of others, killing would be the way to do it. Very few games feature permadeath as significantly and totally as *DayZ*. One of the players I interviewed described quitting the game for a few days after each time they died, and another broke a wireless mouse in frustration by throwing it in the air when confronted with an abrupt "You Are Dead" message.

Online, players often report getting notifications from their smart watches, alerting them to an unusually high heart rate despite minimal physical activity. A sign of heart disease? Or someone playing *DayZ*?

Death in *DayZ* helps us understand how the negative experience of betrayal can be an attractive and positive part of the game, because, despite these visceral reactions, an overwhelming majority of players view permadeath as a core positive feature. Fifty-one percent of the responses to our survey rated the consequential nature of death “very enjoyable,” and it was one of the most positively rated features of *DayZ*'s design. Providing a lesson in survey design, even players who rated their enjoyment of the character death feature as “not enjoyable at all” still often described it positively in the qualitative responses. Players referred to the *fear* of death as what makes the game exciting, citing the adrenaline they get when encountering other players as the profoundly different and unique experience that *DayZ* gives them.

But why do players enjoy the intense negative emotions present in *DayZ*? We find one possible answer in the way players describe seeking out danger in *DayZ* to avoid boredom. To some extent, this is reminiscent of the theory of flow, which holds that people seek out and enjoy tasks that are difficult enough to challenge their abilities, rather than easier tasks that provide little likelihood of failure.¹² However, whereas flow primarily concerns a level of challenge, the more salient feature of permadeath in *DayZ* is a level of risk. This risk creates real fear, as described by a number of players:

The death being so real, as far as it can be in virtual reality, makes the game seem more real, makes the fear real and the adrenaline real.

Michael Apter's reversal theory is of some use here.¹³ In the context of play, Apter identifies two different metamotivational states, ways of being in the world: *telic* and *paratelic*. While the telic mind-set is about being goal driven, the paratelic mind-set is about experience. For a player in a telic mind-set, the increased risk and anxiety of permadeath in *DayZ* are unpleasant because the long-term ambition is under threat. In contrast, increased risk satisfies the paratelic player's desire for high arousal, irrespective of whether it is positively or negatively valenced. This phenomenological approach to understanding play helps us see how negative emotions like anger, horror, and fear can be enjoyed, and why betrayal might, paradoxically, be something we seek out in play.

Of course, we have always been attracted to media that are designed to elicit negative emotions such as fear and sorrow. Games are nothing new here; two and a half centuries ago, David Hume posed the paradox "It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy."¹⁴ Noting that many experiences may be pleasant up to the point that they become painful, Hume posits that both positive and negative feelings are fueled by the same underlying level of passion and excitement, and thus a positive experience "acquires force from sentiments of uneasiness."¹⁵

What Hume describes is a rough encapsulation of the excitation transfer effect, first detailed in psychology by Dolf Zillmann.¹⁶ This effect concerns two dimensions of how we subjectively experience a stimulus: *arousal* and *valence*. Arousal describes our level of physiological excitement, which may be increased by various kinds of stimuli. Valence describes whether we are attracted (positive valence) or repelled (negative

valence) by a stimulus. In excitation transfer, our arousal is increased by a stimulus with a negative valence but becomes associated with a stimulus with a positive valence, resulting in an overall positive experience that borrows the intensity of a negative stimulus (or vice versa). On a roller coaster, for example, we draw our thrills from our intuitive perception of danger but experience the thrill as positive owing to our awareness that we are in fact safe.

This is consistent with the finding that players described dying in *DayZ* as not only compatible with their enjoyment but a direct cause of it. As Brendan Keogh notes, “the true effect of perma-death is not simply in the character’s death, but in how it drastically alters the player’s lived experience of the character’s life.”¹⁷ Players report playing more seriously, more intensely, and having a more immersive, “realistic” experience, as if they were in an “actual zombie apocalypse” (figure 3.2). While losing progress is genuinely frustrating, the anticipation of that negative experience meant that *DayZ* evoked unusually intense physiological arousal for a digital



Figure 3.2
DayZ comic, “YOLO,” by Virtual Shackles.

game, which lent an equivalent intensity to positive experiences of escape, survival, and cooperation.

We can therefore compare the appeal of dying in *DayZ* to survival horror games, a genre typified by player experiences of anticipation and dread. In a list of frightening games, the game review website IGN praises the horror adventure game *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* as “a gauntlet of tension, panic and anxiety” and commends *Silent Hill 2* for presenting “real terror and its consequences.”¹⁸ These descriptions could equally be applied to *DayZ*, and their appeal is equally founded in their ability to elicit uncommonly strong negative emotions in the reassuringly safe context of a video game. So long as players perceive an action to be unreal, they are able to transfer its heightened stimulation into heightened enjoyment.¹⁹

Killing in *DayZ*

We also recognize that others experience a fear of death too; players show strong evidence of moral anguish and guilt when killing another player in *DayZ*. Understanding offers insight into how being bad in a game can still be part of the appeal of play. In a chapter in Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen’s *Transgression in Games and Play*, Fraser Allison and I analyzed two hundred responses to the survey question “Do you ever feel bad when killing another player in *DayZ*?”²⁰ More than 90 percent of respondents said that they had, with 17 percent saying they *always* felt bad to some degree. This number is unusually high; previous research into moral concern in first-person shooter games had gone so far as to conclude that “moral management does not apply to multiplayer combat games.”²¹

What was clear from players’ text responses to the question was that they engage in *moral disengagement*, a process

theorized by Albert Bandura to describe how we negotiate the morality of our actions, based on studies of Nazi war criminals. Bandura characterizes morality as a process of self-regulation, in which we compare our actions to learned moral standards, subsequently avoiding actions that might induce guilt. When we engage in something that we perceive to be immoral, we disengage our moral self-regulation by reevaluating our actions in a way that defuses the potential for self-censure.²² In this way, moral disengagement can be thought of as evidence of a person having experienced guilt. In our study, we found evidence of every type of moral disengagement strategy.²³

DayZ's lack of formally designated teams burdens players with the choice of whom to kill and not to kill, thus introducing moral responsibility to gameplay. As Miguel Sicart argues, playing a game is an act of moral interpretation, and the way that *DayZ* gives players the responsibility to choose what is right or wrong forces players to engage with the morality of their gameplay. What is interesting about this, though—particularly in our exploration of treacherous play—is that the experience of this moral interpretation is not entirely bound up in the “player-subject,” the subidentity that helps resolve the contradictions between our in-game values and our values when playing the game. Killing in *DayZ*—when combined with the harsh permanent consequences of in-game death—affords a player experience of guilt, with comments like “I get a sick feeling in my stomach when I kill someone” being extremely common. The primary type of killing that causes guilt is the killing of new, unarmed, or “innocent” players, but not exclusively. Players described feeling guilty even when they killed a well-armed player, alongside the rush of succeeding in a high-stakes competition, reminiscent of Richard Connell's 1924 short story “The Most Dangerous Game.”

Guilt over killing, then, like the fear of death and displeasure of dying, is part of the (im)moral appeal of *DayZ*. The process of moral interpretation that happens when we play a game does not absolve us or protect us from feeling bad about our actions but provides an opportunity to experience these negative emotions in a safe way. After all, this is a game that shows how negative experiences can be attractive to players. When first released, *DayZ* was celebrated for “giving PC gamers an experience they weren’t getting elsewhere, but which they were clearly hanging out for”²⁴—an intense, high-stakes, and brutal experience, peppered with moral anguish and guilt over betraying and killing, and frustration and anger over death.²⁵ The way these two design patterns complement each other assembles the unique experience of playing *DayZ*.

This is not to say that killing is unethical; it is clearly ethical to kill another person in *DayZ*. In chapter 1, I introduced C. Thi Nguyen and José Zagal’s conceptualization of the ethics of multiplayer gameplay, which draws on Bernard Suits’s principle of the lusory goal—the in-game goal we establish *that is contingent on* a series of unnecessary obstacles.²⁶ Apter’s reversal theory helps us understand how this in-game goal can be paratelic—about the struggle of the competition itself, and the experience of fearing death and moral anguish. To deny you this *lusory struggle* is to deny you the ability to play *DayZ* at all. In the same vein, and as Nguyen and Zagal put it, the better I align my violence with your desire for struggle, the more ethically I am playing. *DayZ* highlights how this violence can go beyond the “mere violence” of, say, taking a chess piece to something more significant, even if it causes me to break my wireless mouse or quit the game entirely.

The experience of death and killing in *DayZ* is why I think it is unproductive to lump treacherous play in with grieving,

simply because it causes displeasure. Play does not always have to be light and positive; it can be brutal and harsh too. In virtual worlds like *DayZ* and *EVE Online*, competitive play is predicated on power imbalances and exploiting the mistakes of others. Is the treacherous player, who exploits misplaced trust, any more entitled than the player who stealthily creeps up on opponents, exploiting their misplaced sense of safety? *DayZ* is an amazing example of a game that offers us access to a broader range of human emotions, and the lack of explicit winning conditions provides a sandbox that encourages players to explore these darker aspects of the human experience. Just as with dying and killing, betraying and being betrayed are a part of what makes *DayZ's* depiction of the zombie apocalypse attractive to players.

Meaningful Death

Of course, bad deaths do happen in *DayZ*. These are deaths that do not contribute to the appeal of the game, and understanding the difference between “good” deaths and “bad” deaths is also useful for exploring the ethics of treacherous play. Or, as I put it in the introduction, the question of whether there is anything less ethical about using my skills at deception than using my skills with a shotgun.

What is clear in *DayZ* is that permadeath is appealing when it is a form of what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman call “meaningful play,” a concept that explains why the relationship between action and outcome needs to be clear to the player.²⁷ If a player’s actions have no discernible relationship with the outcome of the game, then play is meaningless. An example Salen and Zimmerman provide is how moves at the outset of a chess game influence the way the entire game

unfolds. If the opening moves in chess were irrelevant to the outcome of the game, then we would put no effort or care into those moves, and they would not be part of the enjoyable intellectual contest of chess.

While these examples each fit highly formalized games with clear win states or levels—which is not the case for the sandbox *DayZ*—when we understand permadeath in *DayZ* as being integrated with the broader context of play, we can begin to differentiate between “good,” meaningful deaths and “bad,” meaningless ones.

Overwhelmingly, the main kinds of “bad deaths” were those in which players were either killed in one shot by a distant player with a sniper rifle, or killed because of game crashes or bugs, or (to a lesser extent) “killed on sight” by other players who had no intention of interacting socially (KOS players). These deaths were variously referred to as “pointless,” “stupid,” “unfair,” and “meaningless.” “Kill on sight” and sniping both featured heavily in responses to the question “What do you like least about the *DayZ* stand-alone?” and were cited more than two hundred times. Ultimately what both of these types of behaviors do is erode players’ sense of agency: their ability to discern what will happen if they run across a field or approach a player. The interactions with the system (being shot) have discernible outcomes (dying), but it is the lack of agency that players have with *other* players that can make them experience some types of dying by other players as bad, and others as good.

Players who were new to the game and had limited literacy about how to play (such as where they could easily find food) also referred with frustration to deaths they attributed to their own “incompetence”; one player, for instance, expressed a desire to “play more to get better to the point that the deaths

that happen will be really memorable as in epic battles and betrayals rather than die through a small bug.”

Deaths due to glitches are a clear example of play that is not discernible. Examples of glitches mentioned in the survey responses included characters dying or breaking legs when climbing a ladder, the game crashing and a character consequently disappearing, and characters falling off a ledge “because the movement mechanic is still a bit weird.” In each of these examples, the connection between the player’s action (climbing a ladder) and the system’s response (killing the character) is not discernible or consistent, thus making the action seem meaningless. Meaningless glitches like these threaten to make all *DayZ* play meaningless, as they open the possibility that any action the player takes may result in death for no discernible reason. It is perhaps for this reason that the occurrence of glitches in *DayZ*—which was released as an alpha (incomplete) game—was so heavily criticized for reducing the coherency of the game world.

Examples of deaths described as “good” were those in which players died in discernible ways. Despite the incredibly negative emotions brought on by permadeath, for players, “it’s cool dying by zombies, hunger or illness.” Zombies are weak, but fighting them can be risky, as the wounds they inflict can become infected, and such a loss of health can mean the difference between life and death. However, zombies are also slow and predictable, their movements and aggression clearly recognizable. Hunger and illness in *DayZ* are similarly discernible to players, where actions (not eating food) have discernible outcomes (starvation, leading to death).

While for some, “every death is enjoyable,” players often referred to certain specific ways of being killed by other players as “good.” The notion of a “fair fight” was often invoked to

qualify player deaths as “good,” as well as similar references to “epic battles” or “duels.” Discernibility is an integral component of a fair fight, as a fair fight is one that players know they are in. This similarly explains one player’s extremely positive account of being “hunted through buildings for ten minutes” before being killed, despite not having any ammunition. The player described this as one of their most memorable gaming experiences.

Social experiences that ended in death were also consistently viewed as “good” permadeath, even when players were kidnapped or even “tortured” by other players. Deaths like these generated a unique story, providing players with a discernible narrative context for their death, as well as an unusual story to tell. One of the players I interviewed described his favorite death as having been when his player group chased a lone player through a town “while he taunted us” over the game’s proximity chat for close to thirty minutes. In frustration he “ran into a building alone and got shot in the face! This guy worked me up so much I took an unnecessary risk. At least my friends knew where he was then!!!”

This provides another way for thinking about treacherous play in *DayZ* as an ethical way to play. Death after deception and betrayal was for some the most “memorable” and “fun” way of dying, because deaths of this kind meet the criteria of meaningful play. While my friend Andrew (who messaged me the opening quote of the chapter one night after dying) was frustrated at being killed after helping someone, the death was meaningful. His actions (offering to help another player) had a discernible outcome (he got betrayed) and were coherent with the game’s dystopian zombie-apocalypse theme. Betrayal is a form of “mere violence” better aligned with a player’s desire for struggle than just killing someone on sight.

Like the high-consequence configuration of death, the possibility of betrayal was controversial. One respondent described the following situation as their “least favorite interaction in *DayZ*”:

I helped someone who I found, who had very little gear compared to me. Helped him gear up for 30mins then he found a gun and didn't announce it to me. First opportunity he got he shot me. The effort I put in made it feel worse, the betrayal of initial friendship.

I feel for this player, I really do. The betrayal is brutal, but in the context of *DayZ*, it is congruent with the game's appeal, and a discernible outcome of the player's actions. As another respondent noted in response to the same question, “You get angry about it at the time but it's all good afterwards and it is a part of the game and you should be careful about trusting people.” In the same way that the high stakes of death add adrenaline and allow players to experience “real” negative emotions of fear and adrenaline, this player's investment in an ad hoc collaboration increased the stakes of play. The same player described the following as their “favorite interaction in *DayZ*”:

Finding 2 other players and gearing up to go to the NWF [a high-end area of the game]. Played for around 5 hours together using various tactics, but also debating various moves and what to do, especially surrounding interactions with other players we encountered.

Here we see how the possibility of betrayal transforms the experience of positive social interactions in the game. In the same way that the fear of death makes players value a simple item like a water bottle much more, so too does the fear of betrayal make players value their trust with another player. As Hilmar noted in the context of *EVE Online*, “if betraying trust does not have severe consequences, then giving trust doesn't really mean anything.” Games like *DayZ* and *EVE* offer players

the ability to experience being betrayed, because betrayal in both games “is as real as in reality.”²⁸

Despite being ruthlessly betrayed, Andrew would go on to trust others again. It seems counterintuitive to trust at all in a game like *DayZ*, but this is where the role-play effect of *DayZ*'s permadeath feature affects the social experience of the game. With no connection between each character, players often spoke about playing each life differently.²⁹ After losing a well-equipped character who had played cautiously and slowly, the next might be aggressive and reckless, looking for a quick fight. So too did players speak of playing “a good character” or role-playing an “evil life.” Betrayal does not break these roles but becomes a congruent part of the story of a character's life.

To sum up, winning *DayZ* is not about achieving a goal but about having a *good death*, a death that complements and is coherent with the dystopian theme of the game, and betrayal is a *great death*. Treacherous play raises the stakes of trusting other survivors in the zombie apocalypse, adding tension and fear to more aspects of the game. Assessing the ethics of betrayal based on its negative experience overlooks the fact that the *lusory struggle* we seek when playing competitive games is not always fair or always pleasurable. Games like *DayZ* and *EVE Online* exemplify the pleasure we can take in frustrating deaths and devastating betrayals, and the appeal of exploring the friction between what is right and wrong in game worlds.

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>