

## 4 *Survivor*: Treacherous Play as a Spectator Sport

Russell. This hurts me. We got nothing in common. You played an unethical game. Admittedly! Played an unethical game! The crazy thing about it is that you're sitting there, and I'm standing here. Did you get to the right place by behaving the wrong way? I've never been in a situation in my entire life where that was the case, but you sit there proud of it.

—Erik, *Survivor: Samoa* (2009), Final Tribal Council

*Survivor*, the television series produced by CBS in the United States, turns treacherous play into a spectator sport. Created in 1994 by Charlie Parsons (but first aired on television as the 1997 Swedish show *Expedition Robinson*), the US *Survivor* (2000) has been renewed into its forty-second season with over forty regional versions, all of which follow the same loose structure: players making and breaking promises about their anonymous votes at each episode's Tribal Council, where a player is eliminated.

Although the show is typically lumped in with “reality television” (and voyeur television shows like *Jersey Shore* or *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*), the appeal of *Survivor* comes not from the overexaggerated shenanigans of the contestants or

manufactured drama but from seeing how the game will play out with roughly the same set of rules each season. Each episode's physical challenge is expertly designed to produce compelling drama, but the game of *Survivor* is played out in its social interactions. Like scamming in *EVE Online*, winning in *Survivor* is about my ability to deceive you, and your ability to detect my deception. *Survivor* just turns the players' thirty-nine-day ordeal into highly watchable forty-minute episodes of TV.

This way of understanding *Survivor* as a spectator sport helps make sense of its ongoing appeal. With two seasons a year since 2000, *Survivor* still maintains more than seven million prime-time viewers in the United States alone. Richard Crew's 2006 research into *Survivor* audiences found that the "realness" of *Survivor* was key to its appeal, as was its unpredictability and fairness.<sup>1</sup> *Survivor* fans talk about *Survivor* the way people talk about sport, critiquing strategies and making predictions about who will come out on top. *Survivor* shows that social skills can be part of the competition of multiplayer games, and the pervasiveness of deception and betrayal makes the show a fascinating site to understand the appeal and ethics of treachery in more detail.

In this chapter, I focus on Final Tribal Council, where a jury of eliminated players vote for the winner—the Sole Survivor—from the remaining two to three players. This is an unusual mechanism for deciding the winner of a multiplayer game, particularly when a prize of one million dollars is at stake. Typically, in competitive games, hard-coded rules like "highest points scored" or "last player standing" dictate who wins. In *Survivor* players are given little guidance on how to choose who should win, basing their decisions only on the knowledge they have garnered when playing, when watching each Tribal Council, and from the other eliminated players. This

mechanism means that in *Survivor* the player who played the best hand with the cards they were dealt can win, rather than the player who was dealt the best hand.

For our goal of better understanding treacherous play, this observation is extremely useful. In *DayZ* and *EVE Online*, treachery can occur without consequence,<sup>2</sup> but in *Survivor* it is guaranteed to come back to bite you. The power dynamic between the betrayers and the betrayed is entirely different. Final Tribal Councils provide a fascinating insight into the process by which *Survivor* players value treachery among the different ways of playing the game. The finalists' speeches variously attempt to increase the value of their play (and devalue their opponents' play) to win the million-dollar prize, and subsequent conversations with the jury further reveal the preconceptions and biases players have toward deception, betrayal, honesty, and how players draw on moral constructs to value play, even in a game so implicitly and inherently dishonest as *Survivor*.<sup>3</sup>

### Treacherous Play in *Survivor*

If you are unfamiliar with the structure, the *Lord of the Flies*-esque competition of *Survivor* divides sixteen to twenty players (or “castaways”) into two teams (or “tribes”) on a remote (typically tropical) location with limited food, water, and supplies and no contact with the outside world. A season involves approximately thirty-nine days of isolation, with each televised episode covering the events of about three days of play. A lot of small variation occurs between seasons, but here I will describe the typical structure.

Each episode has at least one “challenge,” an elaborate physical or intellectual test of the castaway’s strength, agility,

teamwork, and puzzle-solving abilities. At first, players compete as tribes, with the losing team sent to Tribal Council, where host Jeff Probst questions contestants about the events of the past three days, and players vote privately and anonymously on who should be eliminated from the game. All players must vote and cannot vote for themselves, and players form ad hoc alliances to avoid being eliminated. Whoever receives the most votes immediately departs, with Probst's catchphrase "The tribe has spoken . . . It's time for you to go."

Once six to eight castaways have been eliminated, the two tribes are merged. At this point, "tribal immunity is no more," and castaways compete in the challenges for individual immunity. Sometimes they face extra reward challenges, with prizes ranging from food, time spent with loved ones, or unique experiences (generally also involving food). Often host Probst will tempt castaways with a food reward during immunity challenges, seeing players give up their chance to compete for individual immunity in exchange for a reward.

Castaways eliminated after the merge join the jury, returning each Tribal Council to (silently) observe the game unfold, with their silent reactions as spectators incorporated as part of the atmosphere and narrative of each vote. Once only two or three players are left, the power in the game returns to the eliminated players on the jury, who get to vote on who should be awarded the million-dollar prize. Each member of the jury then gets to question (or often just rant at) the remaining castaways. Once the questioning is complete, the jury privately votes for the winner, who is revealed during a live show, several months after filming. Colluding and making agreements about sharing the prize are explicitly disallowed in the applicant agreement contracts.

An enormous amount of fascinating strategizing, metagaming, and competition constructs a season of *Survivor*, much of it far beyond the scope of this chapter. Various elements of the show are controversial, from its perpetuation of a specific kind of “caveman masculinity”<sup>4</sup> and its treatment and depiction of women<sup>5</sup> to its primitivism<sup>6</sup> and the spectacularizing of race.<sup>7</sup> The focus on betrayal was controversial when the show was first launched; during *Survivor*’s second season, the *LA Times* ran an article with the headline “Why You Shouldn’t Let Your Children Watch ‘Survivor,’” since “the language on *Survivor* is all about backstabbing,” suggesting that it “validates toxic values for our young.”<sup>8</sup> Rarely now, however, is this the focus of any critique.

Nevertheless, countless blogs, fan sites, and discussion forums fill each season with endless volumes of commentary, critique, and predictions.<sup>9</sup> Over time, different strategies and trends change the way the game is played each cycle, but few changes to the structure of the show have been made. The first season of *Survivor* was a cultural phenomenon—fifty million Americans watched the season finale—and each ongoing season continues to draw millions of viewers.

Treacherous play is an inherent part of *Survivor*. Anonymous voting provides an opportunity for deception and betrayal, with contestants variously promising their votes and making alliances they will often break. Although contestants are all working against one another—only one player can win the million-dollar prize—ad hoc collaborations and alliances are a key part of playing *Survivor*. Promises must be made, and promises will be broken, but a specific promise can always be kept. To betray one player is to choose not to betray another. It is *personal*, and reactions from players often reflect the

assumptions that treacherous play is unethical and antisocial and reflects badly on the player's "real" identity.

### Is *Survivor* a Game?

Can we compare the treachery in *Survivor* to a first-person shooter like *DayZ*? Or a massively multiplayer online game like *EVE Online*? Or is *Survivor* more akin to something like pro wrestling, where the contest and the outcomes are predetermined and closely designed, and thus incomparable? I argue that we can approach *Survivor* as a game, mostly thanks to the 1950s US quiz show *Twenty-One* (1956–1958).

In the 1950s, several "big money" quiz shows on television were involved in controversy after allegations that producers had rigged the outcomes of the contest. While it later emerged that many shows were unduly influenced, one of the most egregious cases was *Twenty-One*, which involved two players bidding to answer questions at different difficulty levels to be the first to score twenty-one points. In US congressional hearings investigating *Twenty-One* and other rigged quiz shows, former contestants revealed that almost every aspect of the show was choreographed: what answers to give, what to say to the host, and what answers to get wrong to keep popular players on the show and manufacture drama.<sup>10</sup> After these scandals, the US Communications Act of 1934 was amended in 1960 with the "Quiz Show Statute" (47 USC § 509), which stipulates:

- (a) It shall be unlawful for any person, with intent to deceive the listening or viewing public—
  - (1) To supply to any contestant in a purportedly bona fide contest of intellectual knowledge or intellectual skill any special and secret assistance whereby the outcome of such contest will be in whole or in part prearranged or predetermined.

As a result, it is highly likely that—at least in the United States—the producers of *Survivor* are extremely limited in their capacity to predetermine or interfere with the outcome of the show. After thirty-six seasons, only one contestant—Stacey Stillman, from the very first season, *Survivor: Borneo*—has filed a lawsuit against the show, alleging that producer Mark Burnett “directly solicited” players to vote against her. The media law scholar Kimberlianne Podlas concluded that the assistance Stillman alleges “would be illegal,” in violation of 47 USC § 509.<sup>11</sup> The suit settled out of court, and there has not been one since from any of the subsequent 590 players.

Of course, the producers of *Survivor* might influence or shape the way the game unfolds in many other ways beyond directing votes: choosing to introduce, or not introduce, advantages or twists; asking pointed questions in one-on-one interviews; deploying challenges that play to a particular player’s strengths; and so on. When these decisions influence the outcome of the contest of *Survivor*, they may violate the statute, but on-the-fly changes do not preclude the show from being a game. Without getting bogged down in an attempt to provide yet another definition of what does or does not constitute a “game,” I will say that there is certainly a game being played out in there somewhere, a contest of intellectual and social skill, responsive to whatever challenges emerge.

Nevertheless, the distillation of three days of social interaction into a forty-minute spectate-able episode, with cohesive narrative, does obscure our ability to view and understand the underlying gameplay. However, it still allows us to study treacherous play in a third context. What we are accessing when we examine a season of *Survivor* is the mediated, produced version of a game that was definitely played out on an island in the South Pacific.<sup>12</sup>

Acknowledging this limitation is not necessarily a weakness; it just places some limits on the types of claims we can make when studying a game-cum-TV-show like *Survivor*. I focus here on the debates and deliberations at Final Tribal Council, via a close analysis of eight seasons (transcribed and coded), illuminated by postshow interviews with players and online forum discussion on *Survivor* fan sites. This research would not allow me to make claims about, say, the strength of certain strategies over others, but it does allow us to access the ways treacherous play is treated and valued by players of *Survivor*. So some things might be obscured, and the importance of some things might be exaggerated, but *Survivor* is such a big deal, and the most popular and best-known example of treacherous play, that it would be dishonest—a betrayal, even—not to explore what the show can reveal about treacherous play.

### Bitter Betrayal

You will not get my vote, my vote will go to Richard. And I hope that is the one vote that makes you lose the money. If it's not, so be it, I'll shake your hand and I'll go on from here. But if I were to ever pass you along in life again and you were laying there dying of thirst I would not give you a drink of water, I would let the vultures take you and do whatever they want with you, with no ill regrets.

—Sue, *Survivor: Borneo* (2000), Final Tribal Council

*Survivor* is no exception to any of the other “feel-bad games”—a term coined by Staffan Björk for the unusually negative emotions they provoke in players—I have discussed so far. Comments like Sue's from *Survivor*'s first season are common; jurors will frequently avoid voting for contestants who have betrayed



them, and the “bitter betty” (Michaela, season 34)—a player who refuses to vote for stronger players who have betrayed them personally—heavily influences who has won many seasons of *Survivor*.

Take, for instance, Russell Hantz, who played in seasons 19 and 20 of *Survivor*. Hantz was an incredibly aggressive player in S19, making moves like burning his teammates’ socks to make them more miserable, and therefore more manipulable. Unsurprisingly his tribe, Foa Foa, lost the majority of tribal immunity challenges, making the merge with only four players left against an insurmountable alliance of eight Galu players. Hantz ensured through deception, betrayal, and the correct use of hidden immunity idols that the next seven votes saw Galu players eliminated, only having to vote out one of his own teammates because the last remaining Galu player—Brett Clouser—won individual immunity. Hantz won the next individual immunity, ensuring his place at the Final Tribal Council with three of his former Foa Foa members.

Season 20—which started five days immediately after the end of season 19—was themed *Heroes vs. Villains*, with two teams of returning players. Since S19 had not aired on television when S20 started, Hantz was the only player who was unknown to his competitors, and host Jeff Probst introduced him as one of the “ten most notorious [players] of all time.” Once again Hantz aggressively used deception, betrayal, and hidden immunity idols to eliminate his opponents and control the direction of the game at nearly every vote, reaching the Final Tribal Council two seasons in a row. Hantz is still regularly voted by fans as one of the top players to ever play the game.

Yet Hantz failed to win either season.



**Figure 4.1**  
*Survivor* players Mick Trimming, Natalie White, and Russell Hantz (left to right).

In S19, Hantz was runner-up 7-2-0 to winner Natalie, who had not orchestrated any of the moves to get players to the end. Natalie won thanks to the closer social relationships she had developed with other players and the ability to get to the end without angering the jury, who were upset by Russell’s unashamedly deceptive and manipulative play style. Hantz—not knowing the result of S19, which was unveiled after S20 was filmed—played the same way in *Heroes vs. Villains* and received zero votes (0-3-6) against players Parvati and Sandra, who had both won previous seasons. The heavily manipulated and betrayed jurors again picked a winner who had played *just enough* to survive to the Final Tribal Council while still maintaining good relationships with the jury.

The concept of betrayal aversion (that betrayal incurs an additional loss, a negative emotional experience because people care about how outcomes come to be, not just what the outcome is) does help us understand the bitter-juror phenomenon. CBS uploads “Ponderosa” videos—short online clips

that follow players to show their reaction to being voted out—that clearly show how significantly upset players are when blindsided by a betrayal, like the *DayZ* player breaking their keyboard. Yet in *Survivor* this upset affects not only the immediate emotional response but the final “rational” vote that is made weeks later. Reactions to betrayal can fully shape the way players view and understand the game. In the subsequent two sections, I unpack a little more the ways that treachery receives such an extraordinary reaction, building further on the insights into treacherous play that we developed when examining *DayZ* and *Survivor*.

None of this is to say that Hantz should have beaten Natalie or Sandra. At the reunion of *Heroes vs. Villains*, Hantz argued that his not winning either season was “a flaw in the game,” arguing that the public should get a share of the vote for who wins a season. In reply, Jeff Probst points out:

Our show is not that. Our show is very clearly defined in that you take a group of people, you put them in one situation, you vote out people, and in the end, the last group, the jury, decides who deserves it. This isn't a game in which you include America, that's a different game. So you haven't won this game. Maybe you would win that game.<sup>13</sup>

This was a point similarly made by Erik, a juror in S19 who argued that there is no reason Natalie's “weak” style of play should be considered “less admirable than lying, cheating and stealing.” One of the pervasive issues of *Survivor* is that some styles of play (such as playing a social or quiet game) are gendered feminine and subsequently devalued against the more masculine-gendered aggressive, loud, and physical ways of playing *Survivor*.<sup>14</sup> This is not something that is baked into the rules of the game; the way play is valued in *Survivor* reflects the society and culture in which it is played.

While Hantz has never won a season of *Survivor* (having had two more attempts, once more on the US version and once on the Australian version), his aggressive play in seasons 19 and 20 has had the effect of normalizing the presence of treacherous play in *Survivor*. *Heroes vs. Villains* is considered one of the best seasons of *Survivor*, and a large part of its popularity is due to Hantz's aggressive and betrayal-driven play. Russell has returned so many times because he is enjoyable to watch; his treachery is a core part of his appeal. After his first two seasons, fans of the game celebrated his entertaining style of play and admonished the jurors who had been "too bitter" to vote for him, subsequently carving a path for other players like him.

### **Bad Treachery, Good Treachery**

Since treachery isn't universally condemned, one of the ways that we can use *Survivor* to better understand treacherous play is by looking at how it is valued positively and negatively at Final Tribal Council.<sup>15</sup> The process of arguing about which of the remaining three players should win the million-dollar prize makes transparent the moral economy of the game: the intersubjective moral constructs, ideologies, and hierarchies the players have about what is "good" and "bad" in the context of playing with deception and betrayal. The contextual ways in which treacherous play is sometimes condemned and sometimes applauded highlight the nature of our aversion to betrayal and unveil the ethics of betraying in a treacherous game.

### **Good Treachery**

Over the thirty-eight seasons of US *Survivor*, several treacherous players have won the game. Hantz's aggressive season 19

helped to normalize the presence of treacherous play in *Survivor* and remind jurors (who are often big fans of the game) that they will be critiqued afterward if they are perceived to have let their hurt feelings influence their votes. In the seasons I analyzed, treacherous play was viewed positively in a few different ways.

First, treacherous play could be good if it was strategic. In a broad sense, strategic play has two dimensions in *Survivor*. In one way, it is presented as the art of planning multiple moves in advance, where it highlights a contestant's prescience, and where players can fit their decisions into a larger and more impressive narrative of *Survivor* play. The second way strategy is conceptualized is in terms of control and centrality, where players always vote the right way (since they were controlling what the right way was) or where their decision-making can be placed in the center of the game's pivotal votes.

In season 8, finalist "Boston Rob" defends his betrayal of his alliance as being both preemptive and retaliatory, arguing, "Yeah, I broke the alliance, but you bartered to get me kicked off beforehand, and I found out first, so I got rid of you before you had the chance to get rid of me." In season 16, runner-up Amanda similarly defends her betrayal of juror Erik because he was "unloyal" and was also trying to get her voted out. In these examples, betrayal is strategic because contestants were able to predict when the trust they were placing in another contestant had become misplaced—using a relationship only for as long as it was useful.

Such is the nature of treacherous play in *Survivor* that it is typically central to the story of a season, since a successful betrayal can significantly change the game's unfolding narrative. Finalists are often praised when they always vote the correct way, since if you always know the right way to vote,

it's because you're involved in directing the right way to vote. This is often linked to the way that actively playing the game is so important; players can't be seen to have coasted their way into the final three by "riding on coattails" (Ozzy, S13).

Finalists also try to minimize strategies to depersonalize their betrayals. According to this logic, betrayal is often justified when it is part of a larger plan, when it (flatteringly) removes a contestant's "biggest competition" (Richard, S01) for the prize at the final vote. Alternatively, it is minimized, as when Courtney defended going along with her alliance's betrayal of Frosty, because not betraying him would not have changed the outcome of that vote. Despite involving the same risks and effort, staying loyal means staying the course, so it cannot occupy the same centrality that a player flipping from one alliance to another does. Loyalty is a shared achievement, whereas betrayal gives the credit to a single person, making them central to the shared understanding of how the game unfolded, and who should get credit.

### **Bad Treachery**

Unsurprisingly, treacherous play is not always received positively. Betrayal is primarily critiqued as being either inherently unethical, where the "ends don't justify the means" (Mick, S19), or unnecessary. The suggestion that betrayal in *Survivor* is unethical often seems to mirror Ian Brooks's argument that betrayal is intrinsically unethical in situations—like *Survivor*—where players develop deep personal friendships with other players.<sup>16</sup> Since these friendships are indistinguishable from real friendships, and since it is unethical to betray a real friend, it is unethical to betray a friend in the game. Contestants are often aware of this, asking jurors to "see the difference between my strategic game and the relations I actually

built with you" (Todd, S15). In other words, betraying might be okay, but betraying a friend might not be.

Even jurors who don't feel that their personal relationships were exploited, such as Erik in S19, will critique contestants for having "played an unethical game," with a player's strategy devalued simply because it was based on betrayal and the exploitation of trust. These types of comments fall back on an underlying desire for "good" to win, shaped by the way a player's journey to the end is narrativized so that strategies can be compared. The foundational idea of betrayal aversion is that we don't just care about outcomes; we care about how outcomes come to be. Betrayal in *Survivor* is not just a simple, isolated, and depersonalized game of math as it is in Iris Bohnet and Richard Zeckhauser's experiments. It exists within the context of the game and the player's personality, but it bleeds into the broader cultural context of the American capitalist work ethic; US neoliberal ideas of fitness; and romanticized, historicized notions of chivalry and sportsmanship.

We can see this in the broader ways that positive values about players are attributed to a *Survivor* finalist's efforts, like being "up-front" (JR, S08), "fair" and "honest" (Becky, S13), and being "polite" and having "integrity" (Jonathan, S13). Conversely, traits like being a liar (being "two-faced" and "manipulative" [Sue, S01]), "superficial" (Eliza, S16), "arrogant" (Erik, S19), "nasty" (Andrea, S34), "entitled" (Jonathan, S13), and "ungrateful" (Amanda, S16) work to devalue a player's strategy and chances to win. In this way, we see how the way treachery is valued in the real world outside gameplay becomes part of how it is valued in the game.

Even players who don't think that betrayal is necessarily inherently unethical will critique contestants for having unnecessarily betrayed, a challenge to the logic of their

strategy. A common *Survivor* insult is to call someone a “flip-flopper,” someone who changes alliances too often. S34 winner Parvati’s betrayal-heavy play was critiqued because of “everything that [she] did that was not necessary for strategic advancement in the game” (Eliza, S16), and the S15 runner-up critiqued the winner on the basis that “if he is that good of a strategic player, why didn’t he play this game better to where he didn’t have to deceive and lie to all these people. He lied too much for me” (Amanda, S15). While betrayal is explicitly permitted, and I would argue encouraged, by the game rules, the fact that it is not absolutely necessary is key: “There is a way to play this game without going as low as you had to go” (Ozzy, S34, about finalist Sarah).

What is particularly interesting about this argument is that the critique of unnecessary betrayal is never applied to other strategies available for winning *Survivor*. Nobody has ever challenged someone for winning “too many” individual immunity challenges or put someone down for being “gratuitously” social. Even when players recognize that a betrayal was necessary, for whatever reason, debates about betrayal still attempt to minimize it in some way, such as by referring to social distance, complicity, and the extent to which players “didn’t really break my word to you, as much as [the other contestant] did” (Amber, S8). In this argument, betrayal is always bad, but I just betrayed you *less*.

In addition to being helpful if you ever find yourself at Final Tribal Council, this breakdown of how treacherous play is valued in *Survivor* emphasizes that *choice* is what really distinguishes treacherous play from deception in other games. Betraying a player is extremely personal in *Survivor*, stemming from the fact that players are, after all, choosing to betray you, and not me. To defend betrayal as strategic is to say “I had no



choice,” and to critique someone for having been only dishonest is to emphasize that, actually, they did have a choice. It is this element of choice—choosing to be a treacherous player—that leads to the third assumption people make about treacherous play.

### Are You How You Play *Survivor*?

**Kelly:** Russell. You’ve said many times you’re going to lie, cheat, and steal your way through this game. Does that apply to your real life also?

**Russell:** No, not at all. I am one hundred percent different outside this game. The thing that bothered me is that I don’t want my kids to think that this is how I really am. I’m not like this at all; I’m a totally different person outside this game.

**Kelly:** Instead of lie, cheat, and steal in real life, maybe what are three words that would replace that.

**Russell:** It might be hard to believe, but honor, integrity, and loyalty.

**Kelly:** Russell, it’s hard for me to sit here and believe that from you. Honor, integrity, and loyalty is the most important thing to you.

—*Survivor: Samoa* (2009), Final Tribal Council

While some seasons of *Survivor* involve returning players who have socialized outside the game, most seasons involve total strangers. The result is that *Survivor* gives us an opportunity to explore the assumption that the way we play a game suggests something about who we are in real life. In S01, betrayed jurors Sue and Lex argued that “this game exposes who we are as people to the core” (Lex, S01), and that runner-up Kelly’s behavior in the game showed juror Sue “the true person that

you are" (Sue, S01): strikes against their chances of winning. While this is typically used to devalue a player, in S34 (with returning players) Brad juxtaposed his athletic and loyal play style as being simply because "that's who I am," versus his opponent's betrayal-driven play style. My goal here is not to prove whether *Survivor* players are good or bad people but to use *Survivor* to unveil some of the inherent (and possibly unresolvable) tensions that exist around treacherous play.

The viciously negative attacks we see, such as the one between Kelly and Russell earlier, can be attributed to the unusual length and intimacy of *Survivor*. Players are marooned together in unusual and inhospitable conditions for thirty-nine days—nearly six weeks. These are, as noted earlier, real friendships. In season 36, on day 31 player Christian expressed disbelief that his closest ally, Gabby, was mobilizing votes against him, exclaiming, "Gabby and I have been together for this entire game. We haven't been separated for more than hour. . . . I have a hard time believing it." Clearly a massive difference exists between the intimacy of an hour-long, digitally mediated *EVE Online* scam and a *Survivor* betrayal. Hungry, cold, and tired, the players' real-life identities inevitably become interwoven with their in-game behavior and the decisions they make as players. *Survivor* players also have the external motivation of a million dollars, which cannot justify a *DayZ* player's actions.

One possible explanation of how contestants' play of *Survivor* is connected to who they are in real life is implicit in Lyn Abramson's attribution theory. In chapter 2, I argued that this theory helps explain why *EVE Online* players get more upset over losing a ship to a scam than in combat, even though the consequences are the same. The visceral upset a *Survivor* player exhibits after being voted out can also be explained in the

same way. Misplacing trust in *Survivor* is an internal, possibly stable, and global inadequacy, since the skills of social interaction and detecting deception are personal ones that apply equally to the game and real life. Players cannot attribute their failure to an external factor; it is their own fault. This therefore represents an example of a bad kind of failure, one that is hard to enjoy. But why does this influence how a juror votes at Final Tribal Council?

With time to reflect at Ponderosa—the resort where eliminated players wait out the end of the game in isolation from the wider world—players might begin wondering why their skills at social interaction and deception were not up to scratch. Since players are unlikely to enjoy the learned helplessness of a bad failure, it may be inevitable that they attribute their failure to an external factor. Recall, for example, Russell Hantz's claim at the reunion show that his not winning meant there was "a flaw in the game." Another option is for players to rationalize their failure at *Survivor* as being due to the fact that they are, in the game and in real life, an honest person. While it is a global inadequacy, it might not be a stable one, either; if they played *Survivor* again, they might do a better job the second time around. Returning players do generally play a lot better than novice ones. Novices are just not practiced at betrayal; they have not learned how to do it in real life. That's okay; it's not an inadequacy that matters. In fact, it's an inadequacy to be proud of.

The finalists, though: how did they get so good at it?

The following thought process tracks Lyn Abramson's argument about how we respond to failure, and goes a long way in explaining why treacherous play is so often seen as reflecting poorly on who you are in real life. Being able to deceive players into misplacing their trust in *Survivor* is a skill,

one shared with being deceptive in real life. We have all seen this ourselves; some people are just *terrible* liars. They might make up lies that are just way too big and complicated or can be picked apart with a few questions. Or maybe they will get embarrassed, blush, or refuse to make eye contact when they're lying. If you can lie straight to my face on *Survivor* for three days straight without my realizing it, and then vote me out, this is not your first lie.

A great example of this in action is finalist Sarah in S34, which featured twenty returning players. Sarah had played aggressively and had been the key vote in several betrayals that had changed the course of the game. In one episode, one of her allies, Sierra, shared with Sarah that she had a secret "legacy advantage" that gives immunity at specific votes, and if you are voted out before using it, you can bequeath the advantage to another player still in the game. Sierra had misplaced her trust; Sarah used this information to have Sierra voted out at the next Tribal Council but feigned enough surprise to convince Sierra to will the advantage to her. Sarah was then able to play it at the final six to save herself. She was not only central to how the game unfolded but in control as well; she knew who was going home at every Tribal Council.

Unsurprisingly, jurors were upset at Sarah over the close relationships she had built and manipulated. Her way of playing was depicted as being inherently unethical, with jurors arguing that "there is a way to play this game without going as low as you had to go" (Ozzy, S34). While commending her for the "brilliant game moves" that got her to the end, Andrea critiqued Sarah for how she "convinced everyone that they were your best friend. . . . You brought people's personal feeling into it and emotions, and I feel, it feels kind gross" (Andrea, S34). Other jurors questioned Sarah's behavior, showing shock at

the relationships she had formed with everyone in the game, believing their relationship with Sarah was genuine, “real” (Tai, S34), and why they thought they could trust her. When Sarah defended these relationships, saying, “I want everyone over there to know my personal relationships were a hundred percent real from the bottom of my heart” (Sarah, S34), the jury burst out in laughter, and a juror later asked what “allows you to say this is real Sarah, this is game Sarah” (Aubrey, S34).

Here lies the key—perhaps unresolvable—tension with betrayal in games, and why treacherous play receives a level of criticism that other types of transgressive play do not. There is clearly a perception (as Ian Brooks has argued in the context of *EVE*) that the “real” friendships developed during gameplay are independent of whatever norms, processes, or rules of gameplay make betrayal acceptable. Miguel Sicart argues that when we play, we create a “player-self,” a subidentity that helps resolve the contradictions between our values in everyday life (where betrayal is not okay) and our values when playing a game (where betrayal is okay).<sup>17</sup> Since Sarah had built what were perceived to be “real” friendships, that is, friendships that exceeded the player-self and were incorporated into her “real-self,” all her actions in game were viewed in the context of the values of her everyday life. As a result, the jurors felt she had transgressed in betraying them.

When viewed through the lens of attribution theory, the distinction between Sarah and the frustrated jurors was her exceptional ability to build these seemingly genuine relationships while still being willing to betray them when she needed to: a distinction between real Sarah and game Sarah, a global adequacy the jurors were hesitant to reward. At Final Tribal Council, Sarah ended up arguing that the way she played *Survivor* indeed reflected who she was in real life. She claimed

that her capacity to socially manipulate and establish clear boundaries “comes from being a police officer for the last ten years” (Sarah, S34). She argued that “when you’re undercover you have to shut off who you are and be someone else. You’re buying drugs, you’re a drug user now. If you’re a prostitute, you’re now a prostitute. I have to play a role of someone that I am not.” In part because she was able to provide this excuse—ethical to the jurors—for having the global adequacy at deception and betrayal, Sarah was able to win the final vote 7-3-0.

As *Survivor* evolves and matures over time, the tensions around treacherous play come no closer to resolution. Attribution theory helps us understand why players seek an external explanation for a finalist’s masterful skills of deception and betrayal, but the players themselves also grapple with what their play within the game implies about them in real life. In interviews before his appearance on Australian *Survivor* in 2018, Russell Hantz said, “I stayed that person”—meaning his ruthless *Survivor* persona—“for years after and that is just not a good person in real life,” attributing this behavior to his divorce.<sup>18</sup> During S40 (a season of returning winners), Sarah described how, for two years after S34, she “felt like I was such a bad person” because of how she had played, and many players have discussed the real-life consequences of being portrayed as a *Survivor* villain. In the S40 finale, Ben echoed the sentiment, claiming that he returned for S40 wanting “to be a more positive person, you know, represent my family in a better light and walk away from this experience with friends,” subsequently giving Sarah (his close ally) permission to vote him out to help her win, in complete opposition to his aggressive and individual play style in S35. Playing games is an act of moral interpretation, and despite the shared intentionality

of *Survivor* players to engage in treacherous play, the permeability of the “player-self”—with its ability to form genuine friendships—introduces complicated emotions and experiences that may have no clear resolution.

Makes for great television, though.

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# Treacherous Play

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