

5 Designing Treacherous Play

The three games I have discussed so far—*DayZ*, *EVE Online*, and *Survivor*—are all examples of what I consider to be *successful* games with treacherous play, in that deception and betrayal contribute to the games' appeal and commercial success. In *DayZ*, the possibility of treacherous play provided new and unique player-driven social experiences that took the gaming world by storm. Scamming and espionage in *EVE Online* are part of what makes the eighteen-year-old sci-fi MMOG *real*, key to its niche but ongoing appeal to paying subscribers. For *Survivor*—renewed now into its forty-first season—the thrill and challenge of a contest grounded in deception and betrayal have allowed the show to transcend reality TV and become spectator sport. In this chapter, I survey these games to identify and draw attention to the design patterns that enable successful treacherous play.¹ My purpose here is not to argue that more games should enable treachery but to simply identify the key patterns—the design causes and consequences—that seem to be crucial for this style of play, which can help understand the broader design of social and evocative play like treachery.

Treacherous Design Patterns

The first and perhaps foremost treacherous play design pattern is that **relationships between players must be ambiguous**. In the majority of games, the relationships between players are formally designated by the game's rules. In a game of soccer, you are either on team A or on team B, with no ambiguity. You can score a goal for the other team, but you can't switch sides halfway through the match. In most first-person shooter games, attacking players on your own team is disabled. Betrayal is coded out of the game. When you join *World of Warcraft*, the race of your character assigns you permanently to either Horde or Alliance, so you don't need to worry that the Tauren shaman approaching might be a spy. If it turns out that the player is a thief and can't be trusted, you can complain to an official game moderator, who will return any stolen goods and ban the player from the game. In all these examples, coded and formal rules ensure that trust between teammates is explicit.

This is, of course (admittedly by definition), not the case with treacherous play, where player relationships are defined by the players themselves and not enforced by coded or formal rules. Another player in *DayZ* is ambiguously friend or foe, someone with whom you could trade, form an ad hoc collaboration, and enhance the sociality of your play—or someone who might betray you the moment you turn around. You are required to make a decision about your relationship with a player. *EVE* takes this concept to a grand scale with its global alliances of thousands of players, but it is in essence the same design pattern of ambiguous social relationships. It is the responsibility of players to decide their relationships to other players: which players to trust, which corporations to

join, and which alliances to fight. While *Survivor* players are unambiguously enemies—only one can win the million-dollar prize—getting to the Final Tribal Council requires coordination between players at each successive Tribal Council. The conflict that arises from these decisions provides the player-driven conflict that keeps *EVE* and *Survivor* fresh.

Quite a few games feature deception and betrayal but do not meet the criteria of treacherous play because it is *necessary* to betray and deceive someone. In the game *Among Us*, one or more players are assigned the role of impostor. While other players complete tasks in a virtual spaceship, the impostor attempts to kill as many people as possible without drawing attention and being ejected from the ship. The impostor's task is simple: lie and pretend to be a nonimpostor player and survive to kill again. If the players successfully kill all the impostors, they win. The impostor player is deceiving and betraying, but this is required by the game. The relationships between players are not ambiguous, thus removing the friction that emerges when players have to reconcile that an act of betrayal is a conscious choice.

The second design pattern is that **players must be able to openly communicate with one another**, an uncommon feature in online games.² One of the primary ways that the relationships between players are established is by limiting communication to only teammates. After all, what purpose is there for communicating with your opponents beyond smack talking, trolling, and the occasional “good game” at the end of a match? I don't have anything particularly nice to say to the player who just killed me in *Call of Duty*, and I definitely don't have any interest in what they have to say to me. The majority of online games limit player-to-player communication in some way, and those that do not often face issues

with in-game harassment.³ In a landscape of online environments permeated by annoying voices, frustrating spam, and unrelenting harassment, the decision to limit communication between players to teammates (in the short term) and agreed friends or guild mates (in the long term) makes perfect sense. Allow communication with other players where it is expected to add value—coordinating with teammates, socializing with friends—and limit it where it isn't.

On the one hand, this may explain why treachery is associated with hostile or toxic online communities. The same facility for open communication provides opportunity for harassment, gatekeeping, and abuse. As an off-line game, *Survivor* obviously has no such restrictions, enabling the sociality of the game to become part of its contest. But both *DayZ* and *EVE Online* are characterized by a highly homogeneous player base, with uncharacteristically low numbers of female players. Open communication (and the opportunity to exploit it) might allow for the kinds of social interactions where treachery is performed, and where trust can be misplaced, but there is clearly a cost to who feels welcome in the game's community.

The third design pattern is that **the game must have interactions that require players to trust one another**. We place surprisingly little trust in the people we play with online; we rarely have to. When I join a player in a multiplayer instance in *Destiny*, I don't gamble that they are actually a member of the Fallen, waiting to betray me. The risk I typically take in multiplayer games is limited to the possibility of a *Rocket League* teammate who leaves the game midmatch to receive an Uber Eats delivery. If I wanted to trade a legendary item in *World of Warcraft*, I could list it at an exact price in the game marketplace, knowing that I could trust that marketplace to make the trade. For treacherous play to be a part of the game

experience, trust must be something players can give, with the possibility of it being misplaced.

Survivor requires trust, via its anonymous and simultaneous voting mechanic. It is extremely advantageous to coordinate votes with other players, forming alliances to vote out specific opponents. This requires trust, trust that your opponents will vote with you, which can be misplaced when it turns out they were voting against you. *DayZ* does not require trust in the same way; many of the players we studied engaged in “kill on sight,” never entertaining the possibility of trusting someone in the game. Yet some of the interactions in *DayZ* do require trust, such as the blood transfusion item, which can restore the health of an injured character. Other forms of emergent play—socializing, trading, ad hoc collaborations—also require trust, introducing treachery to the game.

A huge breadth of mechanics in *EVE* require trust, most notably in the game’s null-sec areas, where the in-game police will not intervene in an unprovoked attack. Players trust the fellow members of their corporations not to shoot them, their fleet commander not to lead them into a trap, their espionage agents to give them useful intelligence, and the alliance leader not to be secretly profiting off their war. The most exciting parts of *EVE*—its large, player-driven wars—are built around trust (and won off misplaced trust). Where trust is not required, a big part of the challenge of scamming is getting players to trust you when they don’t actually *need* to trust anyone.⁴

The fourth design pattern is that **play must be consequential**. When we make a mistake in most games, the consequences are surprisingly minor, meaning we lose very little as a result of our failures. Dying is a minor inconvenience, a few seconds of delay before you can respawn and rejoin the fight, or the game might simply reload at an earlier save point, a safe

moment a few seconds before you died. Games typically will not let you kill a character crucial to the story line; you can't accidentally lock yourself out of the narrative with a murderous spree.⁵ Generally you have more than one opportunity to play the game. You can't make the wrong decision as a *Sim City* mayor and be permanently banned from any further leadership roles. An erroneous city-planning decision can be quickly and cheaply undone. While a few interesting games have played around with consequences—my favorite is Zach Gage's *Lose/Lose*, a *Space Invaders* clone that deletes a file on your computer each time an alien is killed—games typically minimize or avoid them entirely.

It is not a coincidence that *DayZ*, *EVE*, and *Survivor* are all games characterized by the high consequence of their play. When you die in *DayZ*, your character is permanently dead; you respawn without your items on the beach of the game's vast virtual world. If you're lucky, you might be able to sprint to your corpse and loot any items your assailant didn't want, but any case of death in *DayZ* is much more than a minor inconvenience. *Survivor* is like a battle royale game that you only get to play once in your life; no matter how you get voted out, once the "tribe has spoken," you are eliminated permanently.⁶ If your ship is destroyed in *EVE*, it turns into a wreck, salvageable by the next pilot to come by. The value of that ship is permanently lost, ranging from the equivalent of a few cents to a few thousand dollars. Although your character doesn't die (it is respawned "from a clone"), you can also lose thousands of skill points and abilities.⁷

Like these other aspects of the game, treacherous play is also consequential. If you destroy my ship while I am mining asteroids, or if you steal it from me in a scam, the consequences are the same. As far as I am concerned, that ship

is gone permanently. If I defeat your massed fleet in combat and take from your alliance a prized strategic solar system, it has the same consequence irrespective of whether I won that battle through subterfuge or my exceptional abilities at flying internet spaceships. Any means of leaving *Survivor*, be it medical emergency, a unanimous and open vote, or a vote predicated on layers of deception and betrayal, has the same consequence. Death in *DayZ* is not worse because of betrayal, but in some cases better. The loss of advancement is weighed against the richer and more meaningful death story that it provides. As a result, the high consequences of betrayal in these games do not stand out from other ways of losing. This works to legitimate it as a strategy and integrates it as a coherent part of the overall *feel* of playing the game.

Treacherous play must also take place within the rules of the game. Acts of deception and trickery happen widely across online games where such play is against the rules, but the experiences of treacherous play accounted for in this book demand that it falls within the rules of the game. The expectation of betrayal is necessary for it to be part of the contest of playing a treacherous game, as it is in *EVE*, *DayZ*, and *Survivor*. *EVE Online* scammers, who describe their unusual way of navigating their virtual world as “playing people,” demonstrated how it was necessary for their enjoyment that their play occurred within the rules. If it didn’t, why bother betraying people in a game where the number one rule is “DON’T TRUST ANYONE”? Much easier marks can be found in other MMOGs, where trust is given without hesitation. Several of the *EVE Online* scammers whom I interviewed even reported returning stolen goods to new players who didn’t know that *EVE* was populated with thieves: a lesson given, rather than a pointlessly easy mark. When treacherous play takes place within the

rules and therefore is expected, it becomes part of the *lusory challenge* we seek when playing multiplayer games and thus is enjoyable on the same terms as other competitive play.

The example of *Survivor* is slightly different. As a nondigital game, without the restrictions that coded environments can enforce, its formal rules are more strictly enforced by producers. Players are not allowed to physically intimidate or steal from other contestants, and players who break these rules are removed from the game. As I showed through the analysis of Final Tribal Councils, while players do contest the value of treacherous play, permitting treachery works to legitimate it. Since players should *expect* to be deceived (an expectation that has evolved over time), to deceive someone becomes an accomplishment, an example of one of the game's three core tenets and a measure of success: *outwitting*. If a successful betrayal gives players power or propels them to the end of the game, then the advantage gained from the act is clear, legitimating it as a fair strategy.

Two further design patterns shared between the three treacherous games I have covered contribute to the successful inclusion of treacherous play but may not be as necessary. The first is **the inclusion of a dystopian imaginary**. Scholars often take for granted the role that the imaginary (the fictive game world in which gameplay is set) plays in constructing player experience. Imaginaries are the theme of the game, the coherent ecological environments that support, influence, rationalize, and contextualize the actions of the player.⁸ They are rarely set out explicitly but are hinted at and built up through costumes, architecture, accents, story events, and intertextual allusions. Their consistency is key to immersion and a player's sense of being in a game world, and just as a mobile phone would confuse the experience and expectations of a *Skyrim* player, so treachery has to fit too.⁹

As with the general high consequence of play in treacherous games, it is clear that a dystopian imaginary is crucial to successfully integrating treacherous play. *Survivor* host Jeff Probst has suggested in the show's broadcast that the series is loosely based on *Lord of the Flies* (1954), a novel about a group of British schoolchildren stranded on an uninhabited island, whose attempts at social organization quickly fail, with primitive human instincts causing a quick descent into torture and murder. In this vein—and the collected transtextual imaginaries of shipwrecks, cannibals, and island survival—the betrayals of *Survivor* fit neatly and indeed are justified by this dystopian fiction. *DayZ* is set in a postapocalyptic virtual environment infested with zombies. The Romero-esque starting situation for the player, on the beach with no instructions or items, invokes the dystopian tropes of zombie cinema. Through starting cinematics, advertisements, game trailers, and publicity, *EVE*'s virtual world is also established as a ruthless, hypercapitalistic dystopia. Betrayal and dishonesty are congruent with these imagined worlds, helping set player expectations, guide the moral interpretation of their actions, and shape their experience of treacherous play.

The final game pattern that contributes to the success of treacherous play is a **clear ceiling on what is acceptable in gameplay**. Something that became clear in my studies is that conflict often emerged when players engaged in forms of deception that exceed other players' intersubjective understanding of what is, and is not, acceptable. This was the case in *EVE Online*'s Alliance Tournament IX, in which one team stopped playing and allowed itself to be defeated. It turned out that the two teams had been entered by the same alliance, which had spied, bribed, and manipulated the tournament brackets so that it was guaranteed to win the final. Responding to player outrage, the game's developer implemented new

rules to prohibit coordination between teams, but not the spying and espionage that got them to the finals.¹⁰ My point here is that, more than just being *within* the rules, even treacherous play needs to be bounded, and these boundaries help constrain deception and betrayal as play objects rather than boundary-defying play like griefing or cheating.

In *DayZ*, the limits of what can be achieved within the virtual world constrain treacherous play. In the expansive realm of *EVE* gameplay—where much more is possible—the game’s developers have placed the ceiling by limiting acceptable betrayal to cases where trust has been *misplaced*, that is, where it has been given where it should not have been.¹¹ Hacking an opponent’s forums is not acceptable, but if access to a forum was given by a player, then exploiting that access for strategic information is okay. Hilmar, the CCP Games CEO, describes this limitation as being guided by the idea that it “has to be within the four walls of the game,” which in the case of *EVE Online* include the play that happens in game forums and chat rooms. There is a pervasive rumor (at least, I’m pretty sure it is a rumor) that a player’s electricity was turned off in the middle of a battle so that the player’s *Titan*-class ship could be destroyed. Since trust was never placed in an opponent that their electricity be left on, this behavior would fall outside what is acceptable and lead to a player being banned. Similarly, *Survivor* is strictly controlled and managed by the producers, with rules against stealing and promising money in exchange for votes, implicitly condoning any other way of getting advantage in the game.¹² Successful treacherous play, then, is not so much about removing the boundaries that constrain player conduct in multiplayer games as about expanding them in a deliberate and designed way.

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

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Citation:

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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

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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>