

## 6 Treacherous Assumptions

I began the book by identifying the three main assumptions that we commonly make about treacherous play, which offer a useful lens for interrogating it in depth. My intention was not necessarily to dispel these assumptions but to problematize them and use them to explore this unusual and evocative style of play. Here, in the concluding chapter, I revisit these assumptions to examine what a deeper understanding of this style of play might contribute to our critical understanding of games and play more broadly.

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

The first assumption commonly cast around treacherous play is that it is an unethical way to play.<sup>1</sup> Interrogating this assumption first required us to develop an understanding about what makes play in competitive games ethical at all, provided by Nguyen and Zagal's philosophical framework for the ethics of competition.<sup>2</sup> When we play games, we set lusory goals that are contingent on unnecessary obstacles, and it is ethical for an opponent to provide those obstacles. But can betrayal ever be one of them?

Treacherous play is counterintuitive from this perspective because moments of betrayal are so harsh, at times cruel and unfair, and the experience so negative. To unpack this, I have explored the way that the broader play of *EVE*, *DayZ*, and *Survivor* mirrors these qualities but remains, arguably, ethical. Death in *DayZ* can be a punishingly harsh experience, and *EVE Online* is known for its reputation as a difficult and ruthless virtual world,<sup>3</sup> one that CCP CEO Hilmar calls “cruel but fair.” Particularly in chapter 3, I showed how approaching play from the phenomenological approach of Apter’s reversal theory reminds us that the lusory goals we set in games don’t have to be outcome based but can be experience based, and Zillmann’s excitation transfer effect helps explain how we can experience negative feelings like fear, anxiety, and anger in a positive way.

Betrayal fits into the coherent harsh and brutal aesthetic of these games; the goal of *EVE Online*’s designers was to develop a virtual world that was “as close to real life as you can get,” and the presence of betrayal is a key part of that overall design goal.<sup>4</sup> Betrayal makes the game’s social interactions and its player-driven wars more real. One of the appealing things about *Survivor* is watching people’s character being tested by the sum of the game’s challenges: a lack of food and shelter, extremely high-stakes gameplay, and betrayal by close friends. Returning *Survivor* players constantly talk about the personal growth they experience from being tested by this challenge, and the guilt a *DayZ* player feels from killing hints at opportunities for moral growth and exploration.

What treacherous play highlights is that the opportunity to safely experience these aspects of humanity is appealing. Perhaps a more interesting conclusion would be that betraying close friends in treacherous games *is* unethical, but this

doesn't mean that treacherous play isn't play and shouldn't be an experience designed into some multiplayer games. What makes treacherous play feel unethical is precisely why it is an interesting form of play, which speaks to the grand potential for games to provide us the opportunity to explore the whole picture of human emotions.

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

The second assumption is that treacherous play is antisocial, comparable to toxic behaviors like griefing that pervade online games. This is a reasonable assumption; exploiting someone's misplaced trust in most online games is a common form of griefing, of boundary keeping that works to push specific kinds of people out of online games and homogenize game cultures. We can all imagine, or might even have encountered, the experience of being betrayed in a game by someone whom we thought we could trust; and as the negativity of people's reactions shows, betraying someone in a game is a fairly ruthless thing to do. It is definitely the case that some players who engage in deception and betrayal can best be understood as griefers. In studying *EVE Online* players, I encountered transcripts of scams that did not end once the theft was over, but the scammers continued to provoke their victims, then sharing these transcripts with others who went on to celebrate just how upset the victim was.<sup>5</sup> But cases like these were exceptions, not the rule.

Part of my exploration of this assumption has been to uncover the motivations that players have for engaging in treacherous play. In chapter 2, I developed the case that *EVE Online* scammers are engaging in a game of social, player-versus-player combat, and pointed to evidence like their

treatment of inexperienced players as an indication that their motivations are contingent on scamming being a (cruel but) “fair” form of competition. In chapter 3, I drew on the results of a quantitative player motivations survey that indicates that motivations to engage in treacherous play are not correlated with the same motivations to grief other players. In *Survivor*, contestants are playing for the million-dollar prize, and in chapter 4 I discussed how the negative accusation of “unnecessary betrayal” that can cost someone this prize is in part an accusation of having other motives to betray, such as seeking power or domination, not just strategic advantage.

But another part of this exploration has been to acknowledge the similarities that do exist between treacherous play and griefing, both types of play that occur at someone else’s expense. We have seen how being betrayed is clearly upsetting in the *EVE Online* victims who “never logged back in,” the broken keyboards of *DayZ* players, and Sue’s famous speech at the first Final Tribal Council. Here Jaakko Stenros’s conceptualization of the griever as an “entitled asshole” offered a richer understanding about what makes treacherous play feel like griefing, even if it falls within the rules and is motivated by game advantage. The treacherous *DayZ* player, whom we found in our player motivations survey to be less interested in the social game and more interested in competition and role play, is ignoring the social goals of other players. In seeking social dominance over their marks, *EVE Online* scammers who engage in “social PvP” are similarly transforming the social domain of the game into a play object. Both acts resemble the entitlement that Stenros describes as characterizing the griever, who treats others as mere objects to be played with, rather than as equal opponents.

This is not to argue that treacherous players are griefers but to suggest that unpacking the similarities helps us understand what makes player interactions in games either detrimental or enriching. The bar for toxicity online is just extraordinarily low. The PlayStation game *Journey* is widely applauded for the universal positivity of its player culture, only achieved by removing almost all possibility for player interaction and designing a game that affords no possible opportunity for another player to affect you in a negative way. We can see the consequences of this gatekeeping in who plays online games (overwhelmingly straight white males), the types of games that are made (which cater to this straight white male audience), and the subsequent values expressed by vicious hate groups like those mobilized under Gamergate.<sup>6</sup>

Against this point, though, it has been interesting to note the ways that treacherous play has worked to *enhance* the social experience of games for players whom the presence of treachery doesn't push out.<sup>7</sup> Part of the reason why *Survivor* players are so upset when they are betrayed is because—to *truly trust another player*—they develop such close relationships with other players. In *EVE*, the possibility of deception and betrayal ensures a more closely bonded community and forces friendships that transcend the game. The alliance I joined and studied had numerous physical meetups, with many members staying together in Reykjavik each year for the annual convention. When *EVE* was quiet, they would play other games (including *DayZ*) together, and chat rooms were always filled with talk about topics beyond *EVE*. When trust can be misplaced, it is not easily given, and as a result treacherous games create an environment in which relationships are deep and highly valued.

These tensions reveal the uncertain place that social interactions have in games. Social interactions are at once a core part of why we play games, but also are separate from gameplay. By its very nature, treacherous play is a social way of playing a game, but in becoming a play object, these social interactions, the values we place on them, and how we experience them are transformed. Treacherous play gives us insight into how social interactions can be part of the play of a game rather than something wrapped around it that contributes to its appeal. This is perhaps most prominent in board games like *Diplomacy* and *Junta*, played with established groups. The presence of treacherous play means that players pay more attention to their social interactions, which become less superficial and more intense, and the gameplay itself becomes a social experience in a way that a cerebral game of chess does not. Treacherous play is not antisocial, but it does transform it.

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

The third assumption is that players who play treacherously must be a specific kind of person, maybe someone whom you might not want to spend time with or trust with your bank details. This assumption is predicated on the suggestion that the way you behave in a game is indicative of who you are, reflective of a virtue approach to ethics that asks, “What kind of person would do this?”

Unpacking the way treachery is valued in *Survivor* showed that people definitely make this assumption. Players like Russell Hantz, who reached the end of two seasons in a row but did not win, were punished by a jury of players unwilling to reward him for his style of play, lest they reward a bad person. Here attribution theory helped us understand not just why

players were so upset about being betrayed but how the process of searching for a cause for failure might lead us to assume things about the character of the person who betrayed us.

Treacherous play seems to draw these assumptions in a way that other transgressive play does not because distinguishing between “game trust” and “real trust” is hard, meaning that distinguishing between the characteristics of “untrustworthy in the game” and “untrustworthy in real life” can likewise be difficult. In general, players are exceptionally adept at distinguishing between acts simulated in a game and their real-world counterparts. We know that killing in a game is not *real* killing, so we don’t assume negative things about people who kill in games. The very nature of play in children and animals is predicated on their ability to quickly distinguish between, say, play fighting and real fighting. This aspect of treacherous play seems to imply an inherent, perhaps unresolvable, tension in distinguishing between “game trust” and “real trust” in a way that is not the case for other types of play.

This quality is tied into the centrality of choice to treacherous play; *EVE*, *DayZ*, and *Survivor* all afford players the responsibility to choose whether they are a treacherous player or a trustworthy one. Many games offer ethical role play, but rarely to this degree. Miguel Sicart notes *EVE* as an example of a game closest to ethical soundness for this reason; an *EVE* scammer is not simply following an unethical story laid out to play but is given the *choice* to be ethical, by the player’s own determination.<sup>8</sup> This is the perspective that Hilmar has toward the ethics of scamming and espionage, arguing that “morality and ethics are things which are at play in *EVE* more so than any other game because we, the developer, have not taken a moral or ethical stance.” Hilmar argues that *EVE Online* allows its players to “experiment with a player role you would not dare

even try in reality because everything about your own being is at stake,” and giving players this opportunity is important, because “morality and ethics are some of the most powerful things in human society. . . . We have created a playground where these are some of the tools at play . . . and I think that this is a very powerful thing, because morality and ethics need to be played with, to be fully explored, otherwise no one can evolve.”<sup>9</sup>

This is the very nature of ethics; we must decide for ourselves if our choices are right or wrong. Choosing is how we can be considered to be ethical at all. Indeed, in simply pondering the question of whether it is ethical to spy on an enemy alliance in *EVE Online*, you have become a little bit more ethical yourself. The overall argument that I am putting forward in this final chapter is that treacherous play—irrespective of whether it is ethical or unethical, within the rules or a form of grieving—shows the potential for play to give people the opportunity to explore aspects of themselves in bounded ways. As I showed in my discussion of *DayZ*, players do feel guilty when they kill another player in the game. Players recognize the shared desire not to die, and they grapple with the choice to kill. Morality and ethics are being played with, not ignored or suspended, thus affording an opportunity for moral growth. It is a strength of games as a medium that they can genuinely offer players the ability to explore the boundaries of our moral identity and how it feels to be bad.

### **Play Doesn't Have to Be Fun**

I teach an undergraduate introduction to game studies at the University of Sydney, and I try to persuade my students not to use one word: *fun*. It is a mediocre stand-in for a much more



complex and interesting phenomenon that the word “fun” just doesn’t capture.

Games and play are not always about just positive experiences, and players don’t always want to be protected from harsh, painful, and unpleasant experiences. As I reported in chapter 3, over half the respondents to our survey of *DayZ* player experiences testified that they found the extremely unpleasant, high-consequence nature of death “very enjoyable,” and many respondents who rated it as “not enjoyable at all” still nominated it as their favorite feature, “what makes [the game] exciting.” As with horror movies and roller coasters, there is an appeal in experiencing the unpleasant in the relatively safe and bounded context of a game.

Where we can see the allure of frustrating and punishing, treacherous play also highlights the similar appeal to playing *bad* that games alone can satisfy. Irrespective of whether it is ethical or not, running a scam in *EVE Online* or betraying a companion in *DayZ* allows us to experience—momentarily, and in the same safe and bounded way—the experience of being bad. Ultimately these kinds of experiences also teach us what it means to be good.

Personally, I have never run a scam or spied on an enemy alliance in *EVE*. I have killed a few players in *DayZ*, but with bullets, not betrayal. Unfortunately, I haven’t had the opportunity to play *Survivor* (yet . . .),<sup>10</sup> but the presence of treacherous play in these games contributes significantly to their appeal and success far beyond the positive experience players have when scamming victims, betraying collaborators, and voting out opponents. Treacherous play shows how complex and provocative playful experiences can really be.

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>