University Library

MINERVA ACCESS

A gateway to Melbourne's research publications

Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
CARTER, M;Bergstrom, K;Webber, N;Milik, O

Title:
EVE is Real: How conceptions of the 'real' affect and reflect an online game community

Date:
2016

Citation:
CARTER, M., Bergstrom, K., Webber, N. & Milik, O. (2016). EVE is Real: How conceptions of the 'real' affect and reflect an online game community. Well Played Journal, 5 (2), pp.5-33

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/91553

EVE IS REAL: HOW CONCEPTIONS OF THE 'REAL' AFFECT AND REFLECT AN ONLINE GAME COMMUNITY

Marcus Carter, Kelly Bergstrom, Nick Webber, Oskar Milik

ABSTRACT

Used in a wide variety of contexts, a common colloquialism among *EVE Online* players is the phrase '*EVE* is real'. In this paper, we examine the various ways in which *EVE* is considered 'real' by its players, identifying a nuanced and powerful concept that goes significantly beyond real/virtual distinctions that have already been critiqued in game studies literature. We argue that, as a form of paratext, colloquialisms like this play an enormous role in shaping *EVE Online's* informal rules (in particular towards treachery), constructing the identity of *EVE Online* players, communicating the seriousness of *EVE Online* play while in other cases, emphasizing the gameness of the MMOG.

Keywords

EVE Online, paratexts, players, community, linguistics, identity, online interaction

INTRODUCTION

EVE Online (CCP Games 2003) is a science fiction themed massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) in which players

assume the role of 'capsuleers' in a single shared virtual world with over 4,000 solar systems. Marketed as a 'sandbox' game (CCP Games 2015a), players are told they are free to choose their own path and that even the smallest player decision can have wide-reaching consequences on the entire single-shard gameworld. Therefore, the majority of *EVE Online* play is driven by interactions between players, ranging through the complex marketplace where the majority of products are made by players using minerals mined by other players, to the lawlessness of 'null-sec' where vast Alliances of tens of thousands of players wage bitter wars over game territory without the protection of any sort of NPC intervention when facing attacks.

A widespread colloquialism used by both *EVE Online*'s players and its developer (CCP Games) is the term '*EVE* is Real'. This phrase is mobilized with a variety of meanings and tensions that extend much further than what is captured in early game studies scholarship on distinctions between 'real' and 'virtual' (for an overview, see Lehdonvirta 2010). In this paper we present and explore the multifaceted ways that '*EVE* is real', and argue this emic term (along with a few other phrases commonly used by this MMOG community) are powerful paratexts that play an enormous role in shaping *EVE Online's* informal rules and culture, constructing the identity of *EVE Online* players, communicating the seriousness, and work involved in, *EVE Online* play while also working in other cases to emphasize the gameness of the MMOG and encourage others to take the game less seriously.

Consequently, this paper works in tandem with scholarship on a wide variety of games that is emphasizing the important impacts that game paratexts have on shaping the culture and identity of multiplayer game worlds as well as the meanings brought to and taken from individual acts of play. We argue that this case study of such a seemingly straightforward phrase ('*EVE* is real') and the significant impact it has on both the play and

experience of *EVE Online* emphasize the multitudes of very real meanings that players attribute to this MMOG's play.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this paper we approach the colloquialism of '*EVE* is real' as a form of paratext. The concept of paratexts was originally developed in the context of literary theory by Gerard Genette (1991; 1997) who argued that a literary text rarely appears "without the reinforcement and accompaniment" of paratexts "which assure its presence in the world, its reception, and its consumption" (Genette 1991, 261). Mia Consalvo (2007) introduced the concept to game studies for understanding the influences of games' peripheral industries (gaming magazines, online discussions, trailers, developer diaries etcetera) on contemporary digital game play and the meanings players bring to and take from that play. One example is how "what we know about videogames is shaped by what we learn about them before they are ever released" (Consalvo 2009, 51); screenshots, developer diaries and news (all forms of paratexts) frame the initial reception of the game. They "serve a specific role in gaming culture and for gaming capital; they instruct a player in how to play, what to play, and what is cool (and not) in the game world" (2007, 22).

The concept has been widely employed in game studies following Consalvo's *Cheating* (2007) and has been applied to game guides (Carter 2015; Iacovides et al. 2013), game trailers, online discussions, developer diaries (Consalvo 2007), patch notes and underlying mathematical mechanics (Paul 2010; 2011), prior versions of the game (such as in the case of sequels) (Carter 2015a; Consalvo 2009), 'easter eggs' and other hidden content (Harper 2013), 'bots' and 'mods' (Burk 2010). Walsh and Apperley see the paratext as "the key example of a tangible form of exchange" between gaming capital and literacy (2009, 4), and also include other mass media such as commercials, music and movies which have become inextricably intertwined with the

media ecology of contemporary digital games. This typical application of the term 'paratext' has also been critiqued as being conflated with the concept of intertextuality (Dunne 2014).

In his original conceptualization, Genette distinguishes the paratext into *peritext* and *epitext* where "paratext = peritext + epitext" (Genette 1991, 264) based on a number of salient qualities, including its special relationship to the text, officiousness and permanence. Elsewhere, Marcus Carter has argued that the evolving and interactive nature of many contemporary games (in particular *EVE Online*) has resulted in a substantially different form of paratext, the *emitext*, "a form of paratext which emerges from within the game as part of play, rather than as part of a peripheral industry that surrounds it" (Carter 2014, 21). Carter notes that, unlike most literary texts, games change over time through continued updates, patches and expansions, while influxes (and exoduses) of players can radically alter a game's culture and informal rules. He points to *EVE Online* propaganda, persuasive images, videos and rhetorics employed strategically as part of *EVE Online's* large Alliance warfare, to demonstrate the ever evolving nature of game 'texts' and the fluidity of the relationship between 'text' and paratext.

In this paper we approach game community colloquialisms like 'EVE is real', as well as a small number of other common sayings such as 'Excel Online', 'Internet Spaceships are Serious Business' (or *Srs Bznz*, Carter, Bersgrom & Woodford, 2016) and the categorization of *EVE* as a 'sandbox game' as forms of epitexts. Like online discussions, game reviews and adverts these paratexts shape our perceptions of the game, how the game is experienced and the meanings brought to and taken from *EVE Online* play. Understanding the varied meanings and usage of these terms is necessary for understanding *EVE Online* play, *EVE* culture and *EVE's* identity but also demonstrates the impact that such simple paratexts can have on game worlds and their experience.

EVE Online

EVE Online is a science fiction themed MMOG at the periphery of its genre. Unlike the relatively homogenous avatar-based fantasy MMOGs that draw on tropes and mechanics largely unchanged since their original implementation in games like *Ultima Online* and *Everquest*, *EVE Online* is an avatar-less (see Carter et al 2012; Woodford 2012) virtual world navigated by players in uncustomizeable spaceships. The majority of play is player-driven, and features a complex in-game economy where the majority of ships flown are manufactured by players, using minerals mined by players from the in-game environment (see Taylor et al 2015). Unlike most MMOGs that are distributed across multiple shards, all *EVE* players share a single virtual world (see Emilsson, 2016).1 Within it, players form Alliances and Coalitions of tens of thousands of players who wage vicious wars over in-game territory and power (see Bergstrom & Carter, 2016 for an overview of *EVE* play).

Beyond this emphasis on player driven gameplay, *EVE Online* has several unusual game mechanics and design patterns that heavily contrast it from nearly all other online games. Couched within *EVE Online's* dystopic, ruthless and hyper-capitalistic fiction, *EVE Online* features condoned and pervasive treacherous play, including scamming, theft, espionage and bribery (see Carter et al. 2012; Carter & Gibbs 2013; Carter 2014, 2015; Harrison, 2016). Similarly rare, *EVE* employs consequential game play — when ships are destroyed in combat, they are considered destroyed and their entire value to the player lost (which can often exceed $9,000). In theme with these two unusual design patterns, *EVE* has a reputation as an incredibly harsh and difficult game, and Chris Paul (2011, 2012, 2016; and with Bergstrom et al. 2013) has argued this elevated difficult has a role in homogenizing the player base, forcing players to reach out to others for help and consequently have a more social experience. However, both Paul (2011) and Bergstrom (2013) point out that

the sorts of help and new player guides that exist are often more available to certain demographics of players, which in turn leads to a more homogeneous player population than other popular MMOGs.

There has been much speculation about *EVE Online*'s outlier status in the MMOG marketplace and its resultant player population, namely that the playstyle offered by *EVE* is not attractive to female players. Indeed, while the majority of other MMOGs player populations are assumed to be 30-40% women, *EVE Online's* population is apparently – at best – 2 to 4% women (Bergstrom 2012, 2016; Leray 2013). The result of this harsh, unwelcoming, homogenizing and player-driven virtual world is a rich and varied culture distributed widely across various forums, subreddits, chat rooms and voice servers with dedicated news websites, twitter hashtags and third party applications to support play. Without linear narratives to follow, *EVE Online* forces players to create their own goals to imbue their play with meaning.

Methodology

This research brings together insights from a number of different studies conducted separately by the authors, drawing on a variety of different research methodologies. Carter has conducted a grounded theory study of the practices, experiences and impacts of treacherous play in *EVE Online* (Carter 2015b; Carter & Gibbs 2013), and an ethnography of the *EVE Online* Alliance, TEST Alliance Please Ignore (see Carter 2014; Bergstrom et al. 2013). Bergstrom has investigated *EVE* and its community from multiple angles including observing *EVE* play in a lab-based study (Jenson et al. 2013) interviewing current players at LAN parties and at the annual Fanfest convention (Taylor et al 2015). Her doctoral research investigates how *EVE Online* is understood by former and non-players to learn more about how this game is viewed from the periphery of its community. Webber has explored the historical discourses

presented around *EVE Online* to understand how *EVE* functions as history (Webber 2014), while Milik has examined how *EVE Online* players create their social identity through the lens of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1959) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967). These methods were combined to more effectively study the categorization strategies (Milik 2012) of individuals in *EVE Online*, particularly in TEST Alliance Please Ignore.

While each results section corresponds with the research interests of each author (Carter, Webber, Milik and Bergstrom respectively), each has offered findings and insights relevant to each use of the term '*EVE* is real', capturing a variety of perspectives and approaches to the colloquialism in order to best understand its tensions, its meanings to players and its impacts on *EVE Online*, its culture and its experience.

RESULTS

In the subsequent sections, we discuss four uses of the colloquialisms '*EVE* is real' and the phrase's consequent effect upon *EVE Online*. While widely used by players, the term was first popularized by *EVE Online's* developer CCP Games in 2011, where it is cited as coming "from an internal discussion about how to explain the game to outsiders" (via Martensson 2011). Centrally reiterated at the 2011 Fanfest (the annual player-convention in Reykjavik, Iceland) and in an official "EVE is Real" player-made video contest, the term has been freely appropriated by *EVE* players in a wide variety of contexts.



Figure 1 – CCP Games CEO Hilmar Peturson at EVE Online's official convention in 2011 (via Martenson 2011)

EVE IS REAL, JUST LIKE THE REAL WORLD

One of the most powerful ways in which the colloquialism '*EVE* is real' has influenced the game is by helping shape *EVE*'s informal rules to accept a wide variety of treacherous play styles that are otherwise unacceptable in other online games. This takes a wide variety of forms in this game: espionage and sabotage in *EVE's* Alliance warfare; bribery and betrayal in *EVE's* eSport (see Carter & Gibbs 2013; Carter 2015b); and the most common, scams and thefts. Elsewhere, Carter (2015c) has argued that scams in *EVE Online* are a form of "social" player-versus-player (PVP) combat where social skills (rather than game skills) are the domain of competition; the scammer's ability to deceive you, and your ability to detect the scammer's deception, for example. As it is motivated by in-game reward such as financial advantage, rather than causing a negative experience on other players, it is unfair to consider it a form of cheating or griefing as it has been in prior work.

CCP will rarely intervene in complaints made against players who scam or "cheat" within this gameworld. A consistent rationale behind these distinctions between what requires

intervention and what does not (and cases of enforcement in borderline cases) seems to focus on disallowing technical exploits (such as hacking the game client to make your character stronger, which would not be possible in the physical world) but allowing social exploits (which would be possible). There are only a small number of exceptions to this, such as impersonating CCP employees and forbidding harassment. The official *EVE Online* support page defines a scam as follows (emphasis ours):

> **As can happen in the real world**, someone in EVE may try to cheat you out of your hard-earned possessions… A scam is what happens when someone takes advantage of your misplaced trust, temporary confusion or ignorance of game rules, and robs you via legal in-game means. When this occurs, there is nothing the Support Team can do for you. Although low and despicable, scams do not violate any game mechanics and cannot be compensated for by the GMs [Game Masters], nor can the scammers generally be punished for their actions. (CCP Games, 2015b)

The appeal to the 'real world' is clearly evident in this description. Further, on this page (and throughout various developer blogs and other CCP-created resources) they distinguish between scams and exploits, where an exploit is "when someone bypasses normal game mechanics… allowing him to take advantage of other players without them having any means of preventing it whatsoever" (CCP Games 2015b). The consequence of this distinction has resulted in '*EVE* is real' being widely utilized by players in order to justify various treacherous acts that are possible in the real world, but normally condemned in game contexts. In Carter's scamming study (see Carter 2015c), numerous participants appealed to the concept of *EVE* being 'real' or like the real world in order to justify their play:

> EVE is real…ly just as screwed up as the real world.
> Anything is possible in EVE
> I mean, you have to be careful with who you trust in the real world, and I like that in EVE

Similarly, forum comments discussing the legitimacy of scamming within *EVE* often simply state "*EVE* is real" or "as if the real world isn't already like that?" in reply to people complaining about the presence of scamming in *EVE Online.* In 2012, allegations emerged that a candidate for the 'Council for Stellar Management', a player-elected council that convenes with CCP Games regarding the game's ongoing development, was scamming players for votes in the election by claiming they would be paid in-game money if they provided proof they voted for him.

> if I remember correctly he did this in last elections already… nothing new – EVE is real – move on…

Discussions around this specific instance and some similar cases result in many players referencing the way in which 'real' politicians are "lying snake bastards", consequently demarcating such behavior as acceptable in the MMOG.

In Carter's study of *EVE Online's* eSport (see Carter & Gibbs 2013; Carter et al. 2014), in which bribery, spying and sabotage are crucial and legitimate strategies, '*EVE* is real' is similarly brought up by players in debates and discussions about the legitimacy of treacherous play strategies in the sport:

> EVE is reality, its reallife with spaceships in a game
> Diplomacy, management, leadership and morale are all very real and human factors.
> how do you know this sort of stuff doesnt happen in professional sports?

Interestingly in this case the colloquialism was also used in these debates in tandem to suggest that such conduct isn't acceptable, as *EVE's* eSport is a 'real' sport, where such conduct would be disallowed by tournament organisers (see Carter et al. 2015b for an expanded discussion of this). This reveals a tension inherent in the concept, as '*EVE* is real' does more than simply assert the 'realness' of *EVE* play, but sometimes the way in which it is also

not just a game. Thus, it is not strictly the colloquialism shapes the rules, but that – when put to work by players – it reflects the attitude of those shaping (or attempting to shape) the rules in different ways.

Finally, *EVE Online's* large Alliances engage in espionage in order to gain in-game advantage. This can involve anything from simply monitoring the private communications of enemies to gain strategic advantage, to in-game acts of sabotage that rival the contribution of military skill. As in Carter's studies of scamming and *EVE's* eSport, the 'real-ness' of these practices, and how '*EVE* is real' are crucial for their legitimacy:

> EVE is real right? Its just much more realistic. Just like in real life you weigh the costs and benefits in trusting someone or not …
>
> I like it [espionage], it adds an insane amount of immersion and complexity that i've never gotten out of any other game… Spying on a group that you are actually at war with feels really… Visceral I guess.

In reference to a case where a player was denied an in-game fight because of sabotage,

> Its annoying sometimes but that's what war in EVE is meant to be its meant to be more real, its harder, its more intense

These quotes, that exemplify widespread attitudes identified during this study, demonstrate how this use of the '*EVE* is real' colloquialism is important in legitimating certain types of play in *EVE Online*. When used to dismiss complaints about *EVE* treachery in online forums, or in order to advertise the game, players learn to expect treachery and that it is acceptable to enact it. The distinction also places a clear ceiling on what conduct isn't acceptable (such as technical exploits); as you are unable to hack the physical world to make yourself invincible, you are not allowed to do so in *EVE Online*. Finally, a further tension is explicit in that these practices are only possible as play because

EVE is in-fact NOT real, an irony rarely explored by EVE players but one we will return to in a subsequent section of this paper.

EVE is REAL, History

Given that this conception of 'realness' is fundamental to many players' engagement with the world of *EVE*, therefore, it is only to be expected that it finds its way into many different aspects of the *EVE* experience. One notable venue for such deployment is in discussions focused on the historical experiences of the game's players. In fact, in *EVE*, the space of history is one in which the notion of realness is repeatedly explored, not only by players but also by *EVE*'s developer, CCP.

The *'True Stories'* project is perhaps the most significant repository of historical engagement around *EVE*, although other locations, such as the extensive range of player blogs and the broadly defunct EVEHistory wiki, also reflect upon this theme. Initiated on the tenth anniversary of the game, *True Stories* was an environment in which player experiences could be captured in narrative form. Contributions were driven by the attraction of a prize, along with the possibility that, following a vote, the 'winning' stories might appear as books, comics, TV series or films. Although it did not directly deploy the phrase '*EVE* is real', *True Stories* indicated a synonymous objective: 'to collect the most important stories of *actual* events' [our emphasis]. And, in fact, in its very title, *True Stories* made a claim to a strict form of reality and deliberately so. The name was reportedly coined by CCP CEO Hilmar Veigar Pétursson to describe the essence of *EVE*: 'It's a collection of true stories set 20,000 years in the future' (Rosenburg 2013).

CCP's assertion of reality was, of course, matched by player responses. The stories, and the players' commentaries on them, reflected an insistence on the realness of the experience of EVE, alongside ongoing debate about associated issues: whether or not particular stories were true, which stories were important, and how the presentation of certain stories showed evidence of bias.

Here, 'EVE is real' was a marker deployed by several authors to warrant the qualities of their stories:

> This story highlights something we've known all along. That EVE is real. And yet, we say that without really clarifying what we mean. EVE is real because the emotions are real (Firstly, debate point 1414 in support of Firstly 2013);
>
> EVE is Real. I want to show people that EVE is more then a game of internet spaceships (Sahriah Bloodstone, debate point 1435 in support of Bloodstone 2013);
>
> Because EVE Is Real, stuff matters and wormholes are awesome (Sephira Galamore, debate point 901 in support of Galamore 2013);

with one notable commenter transforming it into an adjective:

> Best eve is real story I have read (Myelinated, 2 May discussion point on Xenuria 2013).

Such claims do not, of course, always pass unopposed. In one indicative exchange, a player called Xenuria set out a resumé of his own achievements as an entry into the *True Stories* competition, with an authorial coda that 'I was there, it was real. This is a true story of eve online' (Xenuria 2013). Yet even though the story received support from respondents like Myelinated, quoted above, who called it an 'accurate depiction of what occurred' (debate point 1209), others rejected it:

> This didn't happen. Totally fabricated (bandwidth, debate point 1208 in opposition to Xenuria 2013);
>
> Badly written, poor grammar and according to EVE history, total fabrication (Thorn Galen, 8 May discussion point on Xenuria 2013);

Xenuria subsequently sought out and posted evidence to support his claims, but the actions of his detractors here, along with those responding negatively to other stories on the site, clearly indicate that some players felt it was important to challenge particular versions or interpretations of the past. Thus the attempted truth of *True Stories*, in representing EVE's past – "our history", as the

EVE Online Facebook page has it (EVE Online 2013) – had some form of significance to players. Yet it is not entirely clear, from the debates which took place there, that *EVE*'s realness and the truth or 'actuality' of its history are quite the same thing.

Consideration of these uncertainties is not a purely academic endeavour, and just as much as *True Stories* can be seen as an attempt to summarise *EVE* for a broader public, its presentation and existence have taken these issues along with it. Media coverage around *True Stories* has often seemed happy to elide realness and truthfulness, referring to 'real stories of events inside the sandbox' (Drain 2013) and, when interviewing Daniel Way, the writer who interpreted the winning story for publication, 'the draw of playing historian to the very real events in a fictional universe' (Sunu 2014). Yet Way himself was evidently conflicted about how he should understand the story with which he was engaged, remarking in 2013 that

> the story's based upon actual events that never "actually" happened, y'know?… The trick was to focus upon the initiative and intent of the players *behind* the campaigns. What *they* did *was* real and *did* actually happen (Way in Narcisse 2013)

but in early 2014 that

> The appeal was instant — it's an epic heist, plotted and executed to perfection *and it actually happened* (Way in Sunu 2014).

So, we are forced to wonder, is the interviewer's 'real' the same as Way's (changing) 'actual'? Are either or both the same as the story's 'truth'? And are any of these things reflections of what is meant when contributors to *True Stories* state that *EVE* is real?

There are two perspectives on *True Stories* which perhaps help us to think through these issues, and more fully understand what meanings are being indexed when '*EVE* is real' is employed in this context. The first of these is an entry to *True Stories* which attempted to capture the nature of *EVE*, under the title of 'The One True Constant' (Kitchner 2013). For the author of that story,

Inquisitor Kitchner, *EVE* is real because the players care about it. He explains:

> It is because we own our actions our history and our legacy that we care about it. We are willing to put ourselves through meetings, spreadsheets and otherwise grim but tedious tasks unseen in other games to ensure we carry on surviving, to ensure that we leave a legacy worth leaving (Kitchner 2013).
>
> … because people care about the connections they have made and the empire's they have built they are willing to do the "dull" things that keep empires running. It's why EVE is real (Inquisitor Kitchner, debate point 1129 in support of Kitchner 2013).

Kitchner's comments are echoed elsewhere, in a thread on the *EVE* forums asking players to vote in support of a story to create the kind of legacy that Kitchner mentions – to 'Forever Immortalize Arek'Jaalan' (Antiquarian 2013). Here, then, is an appeal to the value of the deeds of the past preserved (both by action and record) for the future. In this analysis, *EVE* is real because actions from its history have conditioned its present, and promise to condition its future.

The second instructive perspective comes from a blog post, written by *EVE* player Phox Jozarkul and entitled "EVE is REAL…The True Stories" (Jorkarzul 2013). Jozarkul sees *True Stories* as part of a set of activities which can be seen to, in his words, 'make EVE a game that it truely real to those that play it' (Jozarkul 2013). Jozarkul draws our attention to the planned media outputs from *True Stories* – in the first instance a comic book, and possible subsequent television series – along with CCP's plan (now completed) to build a real-world monument bearing the names of all *EVE*'s characters. Jozarkul's reality, then, would seem to be the manifestation of 'tangible' assets outside the game: media you can hold in your hands or watch on your TV, a monument you can visit.

Problematically, both of these perspectives on realness are imbued with a sense of the unreal. The principal output from *True Stories* to date has been, as Jozarkul indicates, a comic book.

Irrespective of whether or not we consider the story it holds to be real, the very format itself serves to diminish any such claims by situating it in a media form which itself struggles to achieve cultural legitimacy. Equally, when Kitchner considers *EVE's* realness in terms of its history, he begs the question of the trueness of the *True Stories*. As Hayden White reminds us, history may make claims to recount truth, reality and/or actuality, but it remains at heart just another form of writing, just another story (White 1973, 6-7).

So is *EVE* real? And can its history make it so? We come full circle, to Firstly's comment near the start of this section. '*EVE* is real', he says, 'because the emotions are real' (Firstly 2013). Kitchner tells us that *EVE* is real 'because people care'. *EVE's* history is important because history is about people; the *True Stories* make *EVE* real because they were actual stories that happened to actual people, and made them care, made a difference to the way they thought. The emotional context of Firstly's comment suggests that, when authors of *True Stories* say *EVE* is real, they not only attest to the reality (the truth, actuality, objectivity) of their stories, but to their experience of those events – as Xenuria said, '*I was there*, it was real' – and it is doubtless significant that, although various authors deploy '*EVE* is real' as a comment on their own stories, players responding to those stories hardly use the phrase at all. So to say *EVE* is real is perhaps to set these experiences on a par with other modern cultural events, defined by presence. In relating their tales of *EVE*, these authors then lay claim not only to reality, actuality and truth, but also to authenticity – this is *EVE*, and *EVE* (for me, in this experience) was real: *I* was there.

In summary, then, *EVE* is real because players can reflect on their past within the game – their history – and see how this has shaped their play experience and how they situate themselves within the world of *EVE* in its broadest sense. History for *EVE*, therefore, is another form of emitext (see Carter, 2014), and it and the concept of *EVE's* reality are mutually reinforcing. Thus,

EVE history is real because, for those who experienced it, it mattered.

EVE is REAL, WORK

A third common invocation of '*EVE* is real' is in the context of the enormous work involved in *EVE* play, or how serious, professional, and complex it is. From industrialists to bankers, from leaders and human-resources directors, from soldiers to spies, players tend to expend very "real" amounts of time and effort in order to try to achieve meaningful and complex goals within the game. By studying individuals' use of roles, a dramaturgical analysis shows that the relative success and professionalism displayed by an individual in *EVE Online* is very important. This is particularly true for those players that might present themselves as being more "serious." The legitimacy of these roles, and their importance to the play of *EVE Online*, is widely reinforced by reference to how "*EVE* is real".

While there are numerous contexts for PVP combat in *EVE Online,* the type of PVP that requires the most player-labor is warfare in *EVE's* 'null-sec', the area of the game where player groups can hold sovereignty over in-game territory. The largest of these groups exceed 10,000 members. Group leaders dedicate vast amounts of time and personal effort in order to achieve in-game goals and provide content for other players. A widespread and recognized risk of such significant work is 'burn-out', particularly in roles related to logistics, a position that is less public than other roles. The player's dedication is not something explained by a desire to be "popular" within a group, as leadership positions often are the ones given the least respect. This is something that is addressed in many speeches and forum posts. For example in one speech a leader in TEST (a large player Alliance) states:

> [Directors] are just doing a job. They put hundreds or thousands of hours into TEST. And when you guys, and this is a small minority

> of you when 20 you guys come in and shit all over them without giving them the opportunity to explain why they did what they did or what their position was… You know, it makes them feel bad. You know, they're just internet spaceship nerds just like you.

Despite the understanding of how draining these tasks may be, there are many individuals that still take on the necessary roles. Directors assume various semi-official roles in-charge of public relations, IT (forums and voice servers), human resources (and recruitment), and diplomacy. In the larger null-sec alliances, organizations take a form similar to that of many offline corporate entities, with compartmentalized departments being able to operate independently. These players approach and structure their 'play' through notions of 'real' professionalism, which has proven essential to continuing to exist as a competitive Alliance within *EVE's* harsh wars. As with *EVE's* history, which is 'real' in that it has meaning to players, the 'real' work conducted by *EVE* players is legitimated through the professional approach and appreciation by other players. The social relationships, roles, and obligations, in *EVE* are real.

Beyond these formalized, community based roles, similar 'real' professional constructs are used by individual players. Non-leader participants of null-sec alliances will encourage others to create a professional mindset about what they are supposed to be doing for the group. Not participating in the online activities with other members without good reason can be seen as not living up to the proper role of a member. As one forum-poster states:

> Just because the sun is out and about doesn't mean we shouldn't be playing with other nerds online fighting them off. Log in for fleets; try to at least participate and become a true internet nerd for 1 day".

By creating a professional and dedicated role (that of a participant "true nerd"), the speaker is trying to create a social requirement in order to exist within the alliance. This can be tied to many Corporations and Alliances having a minimum

participation rate, where players not included in enough kill-mails (a common measurement tool for combat participation) in a month may be fined or removed.

EVE Online play further resembles 'real' work due to the mathematical complexity of play which has led to a similar colloquialism, 'Excel Online'. This comes from due to the widespread need to employ Excel spreadsheets to attain in-game mastery. An industrialist, for instance, needs to be able to have a perfect understanding of resource value, production, transportation and sales costs for their production, or else they might find that they had not even made a profit from a long-term investment. PVP players similarly use spreadsheets to theory-craft (see Paul 2010) the effectiveness of weapons in different contexts, and Alliance logistics teams use spreadsheets to coordinate their logistics efforts (spreadsheets which then become the subject of enemy espionage attempts).

The complexity, extent, and hours of seemingly unappealing work involved in *EVE Online* play is unusual in the broader context of leisurely game-play. Through constant reference to *EVE* being 'real', 'real' professionalism and work roles are legitimated as an acceptable (and positive) way to engage with *EVE Online* at both individual and community levels.

Are some parts of EVE more real than others?

Up until this point of the paper we've examined the rhetorical underpinnings of the phrase "*EVE* is real" as an external claim. Used in this manner, *EVE* being real is an attempt to tear down the offline/online divide to highlight that the activities and interactions of *EVE* players are not limited to 'playing a game'. However, '*EVE* is real' is in some instances used by players as a means of ridiculing others who take the game *too* seriously. As helpful as '*EVE* is real' may be for once again picking on the magic circle of play, it is also a form of boundary patrol that limits the full potential of *EVE*'s sandbox and reinforces its status

as a game that exists apart from the moral obligations and legal systems of the offline world.

A visit to the official *EVE* discussion forums (hosted at forums.eveonline.com) will inevitably lead to a series of posts from players complaining about being scammed. This, given Carter's (2015c) ongoing work about the darker/ruthless elements of *EVE Online* play, is not surprising. As scamming is not explicitly prohibited by the Terms of Service (TOS), it can (and does) happen on a consistent basis within New Eden. What is interesting is that in some cases, such as the thread started on August 16, 2014 by Darth Ah'Na-tik,2 the complaints about scammers going unpunished are met with a reply of "*EVE* is real", and:

> Learn to distinguish fantasy from reality before you go making RL comparisons regarding EVE. It will help you immensely, as will knowing something about the game to begin with.

As evidenced by Carter's research described earlier in this paper, the ruthless elements of *EVE*-play (e.g. scamming, assassinating prominent players, etc.) necessitates *EVE* being only a game, as in the offline world many such activities would be highly illegal. However, while *EVE Online* may allow some members of the community to 'play' at scamming without repercussions, this does not mean that the disappointment and frustration felt by Darth Ah'Na'tik and others are any less real. And yet, this is where '*EVE* is real' gets complicated, as when it is used sarcastically (as above) this same phrase serves as a reminder to fellow players about what 'Real *EVE*' consists of acceptance that one has been scammed without expecting justice or sympathy. Being scammed is an essential 'part of the game' that should not be taken so seriously; it is just a game, after all. Indeed, such interactions on the forums serves as an example of *EVE Online* being real is actually dependent on which part of the sandbox is being discussed. Ultimately, the slipperiness of *EVE* being real or not real becomes more stable when we pay closer attention

to what activities are seen as being (really) "real", and what is mocked and derided as (sarcastically) "real".

'Real *EVE*' in the sense of what play is legitimated by vocal members of the community and the game's developer is discussed by Taylor et al. (2015). This paper serves as one of the first investigations of the miners and industrials who produce much of the raw materials that keep the in-game economy afloat. Taylor et al. argue that not only do the more PVP-oriented members of the community see the play practices of career miners and industrialists as not being 'Real *EVE*', but PVE play is also de-emphasized by CCP Games. Using a developer blog post ('Dev Blog') about the Burn Jita protests (CCP Explorer 2012) to illustrate their argument, Taylor et al. remind us that each time Jita – an important trade hub – 'burns' (e.g. is shut down by player-PVP), the server disruption locks out PVE players from a key site of their gameplay (p. 17). And yet, CCP Explorer's Dev Blog states, "as developers we watched in awe at another amazing thing our players brought to the universe we created" (para. 12) with no acknowledgement of the implication these protests had for players who come to Jita wanting to sell their wares or buy new supplies. *EVE* may be a sandbox, but Taylor et al. argue that within the 'sandbox' is a hierarchy with PVE at the bottom:

> To regard EVE as a site of experimentation in virtual governance is to note the ways that industrialists are denied the degree of agency afforded to the more vocal, visible, "EVE-ier" PVP players – those who are most responsible, in CCP's attempts to set EVE apart as edgier, more challenging, more hardcore than other MMOGs, for "making the game what it is". (Taylor et al. 2015, 17)

While feelings of frustration at not being able to access one's preferred mode of *EVE*-gameplay are real, any sort of responsibility is negated with a sarcastic comment to remind the complaining players that they are crying over internet spaceships.3 This brings us to a second ubiquitous phrase "internet spaceships are serious business" sometimes stylized as "srs bsns"4 and often appearing alongside the more sarcastic

invocations of "EVE is real". This phrase is used to *undermine* any arguments that EVE is real, serving as a not so gentle reminder that it is, in fact, "just a game". Furthermore, this is used as a sort of "reality check" to remind players that despite the large number of hours and deep emotional investment that they pour into the game, at the end of the day the wealth accumulated in New Eden is nothing more than pixels on the screen.

From the outside looking in, *EVE* may appear to be a monolith of badly behaved players doing terrible things to each other. However, this paper, in conjunction with recent work by Taylor et al. (2015) and Goodfellow (2014; 2016) act as evidence that *EVE* is not nearly as homogenous as its outward appearance may suggest. In this paper we have taken a first step towards articulating the tension between "EVE is real" and *EVE* being "internet spaceships", and how notions of 'realness' in a persistent, global virtual world are much more complex and multifaceted than they may appear in a shallow analysis.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this paper has been to emphasize how various emic *EVE Online* terms play an enormous role in shaping *EVE's* culture, its informal rules, its identity and its play. We have focused on the complex and multifaceted concept of '*EVE* is Real' due to its relevance to game studies scholarship that has dissected the real/virtual dichotomy. Our research contributes to the growing body of literature focusing on *EVE*, but primarily highlights the impact that relatively minor colloquialisms can have on game worlds, and the complex tensions when this power is put to use in a heterogeneous game community.

While in some cases, such as the professionalism of EVE players, "EVE is real" is an appeal to *EVE* as a non-leisure activity (an attempt to place it alongside work and professional sports), it is a concept that primarily attempts to (re)contextualize *EVE Online* play and its experiences in the context of other digital games, to attribute meaning to it without (necessarily) making

claim to its realness. Players do not necessarily believe that *EVE's* history is real in the same way as, say, the history of the Aztec Empire, but they do feel that the experiences of *EVE Online* players more closely resemble real-world (non-game) experiences than other games. Many *EVE Online* players are proud of the way that their chosen MMOG differs from the mainstream and continually replicated formulas of *World of Warcraft*, *Everquest*, *Guild Wars* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. It is not that players believe that "*EVE* is real" in the same way as Wall Street banking or Cold War espionage, but that *EVE* is simply more real than these other games; more like what is acceptable in the real world, more dependent on actual work, more susceptible to dismissal and a more authentic experience. The tandem sarcastic use of "EVE is real" (and the similar, 'Internet Spaceships are Serious Business') is employed to remind everyone that EVE is, after all, just a game, and many of the transgressive acts are only acceptable in their game context.

Finally, we wish to note that this analysis focuses predominately on PVP-related activities, which highlights how not all *EVE* play is viewed equally. Work by authors such as Goodfellow (2014), who focuses on the maligned experiences of *EVE's* Russian minority, and Taylor et al. (2015), who examined pervasively denigrated PVE players, highlights how many *EVE* players, along with their desired style of play, are treated as less valuable by many players and even through the actions of the sandbox's developer. Thus, it is not simply that the '*EVE* is real' paratext is used by a mythically homogenous '*EVE* player', but that it is used by different communities of *EVE* players to value (and devalue) different play styles and communities. We argue that this poses a pressing question for future research by game scholars: who, exactly, is *EVE* real for?

ENDNOTES

1. With the exception of Chinese players who are separated as a result of Chinese gaming legislation.

2. At the time of writing, this thread is still online and available at: https://forums.eveonline.com/default.aspx?g=posts&m=4917897#post4917897
3. While outside the scope of this paper, we draw attention to a similar sort of tension between one's own experience and deriding the assumed experience of imagined other MMOG players, as described by Bergstrom, Fisher, Jenson (2014).
4. Here we note that the serious business of the internet is not limited to *EVE.* While outside the scope of this paper, this phrase's history can be found in studies of "chan-culture", see for example Dibbell (2008) or Manivannan (2013).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Antiquarian, The (2013) "Forever Immortalize Arek'Jaalan," Available at https://forums.eveonline.com/default.aspx?g=posts&m=3065720 (accessed Jan. 2015)

Bergstrom, K., de Castell, S., & Jenson, J. "Worlds Beyond Warcraft: Studying Multiple MMOs," In Proceedings AOIR'10 (Seattle, WA, 2011).

Bergstrom, K. "Virtual inequality: a woman's place in cyberspace," in Proceedings of FDG'12 (Raleigh, NC, 2012), ACM Press, pp. 267-269.

Bergstrom, K., Carter, M., Woodford, D. and Paul, C. "Constructing the Ideal EVE Online Player," in Proceedings of DiGRA'13 (Atlanta GA, 2013), DiGRA.

Bergstrom, K. "EVE Online Newbie Guides: Helpful information or gatekeeping mechanisms at work?" In Proceedings AOIR'12 (Denver, USA, 2013). Available at: http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/article/view/692

Bergstrom, K., Fisher, S. and Jenson, J. "Disavowing 'That Guy': Identity construction and massively multiplayer online game players," *Convergence.* (2014), pp. 1-17.

Bergstrom, K. "Imagined Capsuleers: Reframing discussions about gender and EVE Online," in M. Carter, K. Bergstrom & D.

Woodford (Eds.), *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*, University of Minnesota Press , 2016.

Bergstrom, K. & Carter, M. "EVE Online for the Uninitiated," in M. Carter, K. Bergstrom & D. Woodford (Eds.), *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*, University of Minnesota Press , 2016.

Bloodstone, S. (2013) "The Engagement," Eve Online – True Stories. Available at https://truestories.eveonline.com/truestories/ideas/1004-the-engagement.html (accessed Jan. 2015)

Burk, D. L. "Copyright and Paratext in Computer Gaming", in Emerging Ethical Issues of Life in Virtual Worlds (C. Wankel and S. Malleck, eds), Information Age Publishing, Charlotte, NC, pp. 33-53, 2010.

Carter, M., Gibbs, M. & Harrop, M. "Metagames, Paragames and Orthogames: A New Vocabulary," in Proceedings of FDG 2012 (Raleigh, North Carolina, 2012), ACM Press.

Carter, M., Gibbs, M. & Arnold, M. "Avatars, Characters, Players and Users: Multiple Identities at/in Play" in Proceedings of the 24th Australian Computer-Human Interaction Conference (Melbourne, Australia, 2012), ACM Press, pp. 68-71.

Carter, M. "Emitexts and Paratexts: Propaganda in EVE Online," Games and Culture (2014), pp. 1-32.

Carter, M. "The First Week of the Zombie Apocalypse: The Influences of Game Temporality," Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds, vol. 7, no. 1, (2015a), 59-75.

Carter, M. "The Demarcation Problem in Multiplayer Games: Using Boundary-Work to Understand the Development and Disputations of Informal Game Rules in EVE Online's eSport," Game Studies (2015b), http://gamestudies.org/1501/articles/carter.

Carter, M. "Massively Multiplayer Dark Play: Treacherous Play in EVE Online," in T. Mortensen, J. Linderoth & A. Brown (Eds.), *The Dark Side of Game Play* Routledge, London, 2015c.

Carter, M. and Gibbs, M. "eSports in EVE Online:

Skullduggery, Fair Play and Acceptability in an Unbounded Competition," in Proceedings of FDG 2013 (Chania, Greece, 2013), SASDG.

Carter, M., Bergstrom, K. & Woodford, D. 2016. *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*. Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press.

CCP Explorer. (2012, May 2). Observing the "Burn Jita" player event. Available at http://community.eveonline.com/news/dev-blogs/observing-the-burn-jita-player-event/ (accessed Jan. 2015)

CCP Games. (2003-2015). *EVE Online.* [PC], CCP Games, Reykjavik, Iceland.

CCP Games. (2015a) *Find Your Path in the Sandbox*. Available at http://www.eveonline.com/sandbox/ (accessed Jan. 2015)

CCP Games. (2015b) *Scams and Exploits*. Available at http://community.eveonline.com/support/knowledge-base/article.aspx?articleId=34 (accessed Jan. 2015)

Consalvo, M. Cheating. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007.

Consalvo, M. "There is no magic circle," Games and Culture, vol. 4, no. 4 (2009), pp. 408-417.

Dibbell, J. "Mutilated furries, flying phalluses: Put the blame on griefers, the sociopaths of the virtual world." *Wired Magazine* 16.2 (2008): 16-02.

Drain, B. (2013) "True stories of EVE Online to become comic book and TV series," Massively. Available at http://massively.joystiq.com/2013/04/27/true-stories-of-eve-online-to-become-comic-book-and-tv-series/ (accessed Jan. 2015)

Dunne, D. "Paratext: a more interactive movement," in Proceedings of DiGRAA'14 (Melbourne, Australia, 2014), pp. 18-20.

Emillson, J. P. "Universes, Metaverses and Multiverses," in M. Carter, K. Bergstrom & D. Woodford (Eds.), *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 48-54.

EVE Online. (2013) "EVE Online True Stories," [Facebook post]. Available at https://www.facebook.com/eveonline/posts/10151563755404394 (accessed Jan. 2015)

Firstly. (2013) "Outbound Connections," Eve Online – True Stories. Available at https://truestories.eveonline.com/truestories/ideas/989-outbound-connections.html (accessed Jan. 2015)

Galamore, S. (2013) "Starbase under attack," Eve Online – True Stories. Available at https://truestories.eveonline.com/truestories/ideas/592-starbase-under-attack.html (accessed Jan. 2015)

Genette, G. "Introduction to the Paratext," New Literary history, vol 22. (1991), pp. 261-272.

Genette, G. Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1997.

Goodfellow, C. "Russian Overlords, Vodka, and Logoffski: Russian- and English-Language Discourse About Anti-Russian Xenophobia in the EVE Online Community," Games and Culture. (2014), pp. 1-22.

Goodfellow, C. "The Russians are Coming! Stereotypes and Perceptions of "Russianness" in EVE Online," in M. Carter, K. Bergstrom & D. Woodford (Eds.), *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 77-92.

Garfinkel, H. Studies in Ethnomethodology. Prentice Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1967.

Goffman, E. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Anchor Books, New York, NY, 1959.

Harper, T. The Culture of Digital Fighting Games. Routledge, London, UK, 2013.

Harrison, K. "The Accidental Spymaster," in M. Carter, K. Bergstrom & D. Woodford (Eds.), *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 115-121.

Jenson, J., Bergstrom, K., and de Castell, S. "Playing 'for Real':

A Lab-Based Study of MMOGs," in Proceedings AOIR 12 (Denver, USA, 2013) Available at: http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/article/view/790.

Jozarkul, P. (2013). 'EVE is REAL… The True Stories'. Never Pheed the Troll. 30 April. Available at http://neverpheedthetroll.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/eve-is-realthe-true-stories.html (accessed Jan. 2015)

Kitchner, I. (2013). 'The One True Constant'. Eve Online – True Stories. Available at https://truestories.eveonline.com/truestories/ideas/780-the-one-true-constant.html (accessed Jan. 2015).

Lehdonvirta, V. Virtual Worlds Don't Exist: Questioning the Dichotomous Approach in MMO Studies, Game Studies. (2010). http://gamestudies.org/1001/articles/lehdonvirta

Leray, J. (2013). "Better Design Will Attract More Diverse Players, Says CCP." Destructoid. http://www.destructoid.com/boy-s-club-why-don-t-morewomen-play-eve-online–254710.phtml. (accessed Jan. 2015).

Manivannan, V. "FCJ-158 Tits or GTFO: The logics of misogyny on 4chan's Random–/b." *The Fibreculture Journal* 22 2013: Trolls and The Negative Space of the Internet (2013).

Martensson, P. (2011). EVE Online Fanfest. Game Reactor. Available at http://www.gamereactor.eu/articles/6978/EVE+Online+Fanfest/ (accessed Jan. 2015)

Milik, O. (2012) Studying Identity and Contro in Online Worlds: Ethnomethodology and Categorization Analysis and its Applicability to Virtual Space. (Unpublished Master's Thesis). Boston University. Boston, MA.

Narcisse, E. (2013) "Your Space Battles Shaped The Stories In The New EVE Online Comic Book," Kotaku. Available at http://kotaku.com/your-space-battles-shaped-the-stories-in-the-new-eve-on-1443540885 (accessed Jan. 2015)

Paul, C. A. "Optimizing Play: How theorycraft changes gameplay and design," Game Studies, vol. 11, no. 2 (2010)

Paul, C. A. "Don't play me: EVE Online, new players and

rhetoric," In Proceedings of FDG'11 (Bordeaux, France, 2011), ACM Press, pp. 262-264.

Paul, C. A. Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games Routledge, London, 2012.

Paul, C. A. "EVE is Hard and it matters", In M. Carter, K. Bergstrom, & D. Woodford, *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Rosenburg, A. (2013). "EVE Online's second decade begins today with a peek at the future," Digital Trends. Available at http://www.digitaltrends.com/gaming/eve-onlines-second-decade-begins-today-with-a-dust-514-update-and-a-peek-at-the-future/ (accessed Jan. 2014).

Sunu, S. (2014) "Way Tells "Eve: True Stories" for Dark Horse," Comic Book Resource. http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=50983 (accessed Jan. 2015)

Taylor, N., Bergstrom, K., Jenson, J., and de Castell, S. Alienated Playbour: Relations of Production in EVE Online," Games and Culture (2015), pp. 1-24.

Walsh, C. S. and Apperley, T. "Gaming Capital: Rethinking Literacy," in Proceedings of AARE'08 (Brisbane, Australia, 2009).

Webber, N. 'What is Videogame History?' in *Engaging with Videogames*, edited by Dawn Stobbart and Monica Evans. E-book. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014.

White, H. Metahistory. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, USA, 1973.

Woodford, D. "Hanging out is hard to do: Methodology in non-avatar environments," Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds, vol 4. (2012), pp. 275-288.