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Editorial

Kelly Bergstrom
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Marcus Carter
The University of Sydney, Australia

As 2017 comes to a close, and this special issue is prepared for publication, we have taken this opportunity to reflect on *EVE Online (EVE)* and the community of scholars that have coalesced around it. For a game with a reputation of being so unfriendly to newcomers, the scholarly EVE community has remained friendly and supportive. It might surprise some readers familiar with EVE's gameplay to learn that all of the peer reviews we received were constructive and collegial. Of course, this is not surprising to either of us. Instead, it is something that we have come to expect; some of the nicest people in game studies can be found researching EVE.

In 2012, studying EVE was so rare that at conferences senior scholars went out of their way to introduce us. At the time, we were both Ph.D. students who thought we were the only ones researching this particular Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG). These introductions subsequently led to workshops and panels at conferences like the Foundations of Digital Games and the Digital Games Research Association, and eventually, *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*, published in 2016 by The University of Minnesota Press.

Early work in virtual worlds scholarship focused on the radical other-ness of rich social worlds like *Second Life,* or in understanding the unprecedented success of games like *World of Warcraft*. EVE, it turns out, is a slow burner. EVE continues to grow its subscription base over many years, rather than peak after release and then rapidly dwindle. It has found a successful niche, with maintaining 20-30,000 concurrent players for the last 10 years and has risen to prominence out of the media coverage of its radical and unusual play. This coverage is no doubt a result of the game's strong communities, massive wars, pervasive betrayal and enormous heists. Despite being released in 2003, until recently there has been very little research into this niche space-themed MMOG. And yet, a recent surge of publications have tackled a variety of subjects ranging from the absurdity of EVE's wars (Milik, 2016), the interactions between different nations in its single-server environment (Goodfellow, 2015), relations of economic production amongst various populations within New Eden (Taylor et al., 2015), to the memorials players made in the game to the prominent players murdered in the 2012 attack on the US Embassy in Libya (Gibbs et al. 2016).

We recall that at one of these early EVE-specific workshops Mia Consalvo wondered aloud if EVE was going to be the 'next World of Warcraft' and whether it would dominate MMOG scholarship for the next few years. While there has not been enough work on EVE to eclipse work focused on *EverQuest* or World of Warcraft, that which has been produced has significantly extended scholarship on virtual worlds and online gaming. Harald Warmelink's *Online Gaming and Playful Organization* (2014) described forms of player organization that went significantly beyond what had been identified previously; our collection *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business* drew on chapters from non-academic EVE Online players to try to capture and reflect the spirit of EVE within a single volume; and several Ph.Ds have now been completed with more currently underway, that focused on EVE Online as a site that continues to extend our understanding of virtual worlds.

This special issue in the *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* highlights the ways that EVE scholarship has matured. A sub-discipline within a sub-discipline, writing about EVE no longer focuses just on what makes this particular MMOG so different to the more mainstream online games and virtual worlds, but now describes in fascinating depth the elements of this virtual world that have taken 15 years of play to develop. As guest editors, we are excited to share this collection as these five articles exemplify the contributions that EVE Online scholarship will continue to make long into the future.

The first of our five peer-reviewed articles explores this by presenting a conceptualization of EVE grounded in its exceptionalism. In **Making Science Fiction Real: Ideology, eSports and Real Life in EVE Online**, Mark Johnson and Robert Mejia present the argument that EVE Online is treated differently by players, and the media, because it is a neoliberal project, a virtual world that "*operates as an ongoing economic project that is imbricated with offline political economic and cultural processes*" (Johnson & Mejia, 2017). Through EVE's metagame and its eSport, Johnson and Mejia show how EVE privileges neoliberal ways of living, presenting the argument that EVE exerts an ideological force of its players that may well extend beyond the game.

Our second article similarly explores how the ideas and affects of technoliberalism are afforded to players through game processes. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork of CCP Games' conventions in Reykjavik, Iceland (where EVE is developed), Aleena Chia presents **Scaling Technoliberalism for Massively Multiplayer Online Games**, exploring the contradictions of a game that celebrates player agency while still being contingent on rules encoded into the game by the developers. As player-driven sandbox games grow in popularity, Chia explores how 'mass causality' – the opportunity for individual player acts to have global consequence – transfers empowerment and solidarity to player communities and their platforms, smoothing over those contradictions.

EVE's uniqueness is often attributed to it being played on single-server. This descriptor leaves out that indeed, players connect to the same server – except for those playing from China. Richard Page presents our third article, **To Win at Life: Tradition and Chinese Modernities in EVE Online**, describing a different EVE Online that exists on the sequestered Chinese server characterized by lower levels of conflict and a conservative play style. Based on ethnographic research, 2013-2014 in Shanghai, Page presents the significant insight that EVE, and the play of EVE, is "an 'assemblage' of global and local, modern and traditional flows". Page's suggestion that "Chinese EVE players are forming an alternative modernity that fits in with their traditional cultural expectations" has significant consequence for the future study of globalized and localized virtual worlds.

One of EVE's most popularised forms of play, and subject to significant prior research, is the pervasive occurrence of scamming, theft and betrayal. Ian Brooks explores **Is Betrayal in EVE Online Unethical?** through the lens of Aristotelian-ethics. Through establishing how relationships built in EVE have the capacity for genuine friendship, Brooks argues that betrayal in EVE is wrong. In doing so, Brooks contributes to the emerging body of work that is beginning to examine the ethics

of competition in multiplayer games an alternative perspective on one of the game's most interesting, and controversial, differences.

In either case, two of the largest player-organizations that perpetuate this play style at the focus of Oskar Milk and Nick Webber's article on **Barbarians at the Imperium Gates: Organizational Culture and Change in EVE Online**. Going beyond existing work that emphasizes the role that leaders play in game-organizations, Milik and Webber show how the cultural identity of EVE player organization is created more through symbolic meaning, naming conventions, and expressed through its established norms than is controlled or created by its leaders. This reconceptualization of how these successful organizations persist across generations of players, and over many years, moves us away from a 'social network' approach to understanding persistent player groups towards an approach situated within cultural understanding.

In our closing thoughts, we reflect on what it means to study a game that has survived and thrived for 15 years. This is an unusual problem for virtual worlds scholarship, but also an opportunity for the next generation of EVE research. The rise of game studies alongside the commercial explosion of digital gaming in the 2000's meant scholarship went broad; it covered journals and books and conferences with unexplored ground, reacting to shifts in the industry as much as shifts in what the academic community considered worthy of study. As the field has grown it has also slowed down, the opportunity for depth in our scholarship will characterize the next decade of research into online games, where work will grow most by building on the work that has come before it; restudying the same games; the same play; and the same – but changing – virtual worlds.

When data was collected is just as important as when the game was published. Statements made in early scholarship about EVE are now false in that they no longer apply to the EVE of today. Taken together, the five articles in this special issue capture a snapshot of EVE as it exists in 2017. Into the future, we look forward to the way that EVE Online will continue to contribute to virtual worlds scholarship, but even now we recognize some challenges. EVE is continually updated by its developers, with rules changing and new ways of playing being introduced. Its community continues to grow, develop, and mature, in turn changing the ways that EVE is played, talked about and studied.

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