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Making Science Fiction Real: Neoliberalism, Real-Life and Esports in Eve Online

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue that *EVE Online* is a fruitful site for exploring how the representational and political-economic elements of science fiction intersect to exert a sociocultural and political-economic force on the shape and nature of the future-present. EVE has been oft heralded for its economic and sociocultural complexity, and for employing a free market ethos and ethics in its game world. However, we by contrast seek not to consider how EVE reflects our contemporary world, but rather how our contemporary neoliberal milieu reflects EVE. We explore how EVE works to make its world of neoliberal markets and borderline anarcho-capitalism manifest through the political economic and sociocultural assemblages mobilized beyond the game. We explore the deep intertwining of behaviors of players both within and outside of the game, demonstrating that EVE promotes neoliberal activity in its players, encourages these behaviors outside the game, and that players who have found success in the real world of neoliberal capitalism are those best-positioned for success in the time-demanding and resource-demanding world of EVE. This sets up a reciprocal ideological determination between the real and virtual worlds of EVE players, whereby each reinforces the other. We lastly consider the “Alliance Tournament” event, which romanticizes conflict and competition, and argue that it serves as a crucial site for deploying a further set of similar rhetorical resources. The paper therefore offers an understanding of the sociocultural and political-economic pressure exerted on the “physical” world by the intersection of EVE’s representational and material elements, and what these show us about the real-world ideological power of science fictional worlds.

1. Introduction

Confronted by a genre where the average player spends “on average about 22.4 hours per week playing”, with 13.3% playing for more than 40 hours per week (Yee, 2001, p. 12), popular perception of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) has long been that of dangerous escapism. Indeed, in May 2002, one year prior to the release of EVE Online, CBS blamed Shawn Wooley’s suicide on his addiction to the popular MMO *Everquest*. Titled “Everquest or Evercrack?” CBS reported that Shawn often “spent as many as 12 hours a day online for more than a year”, and in doing so used his suicide as a cautionary tale for the 64% of *Everquest* players who were estimated to be addicted to the game (Morales, 2002). Since then, popular outlets have continued to warn of the dangers of MMOs (Keilman, 2017), with one clear exception: EVE.

Although experiences like our own with EVE—camping at a warp gate for a twenty-hour period, awaiting an enemy that never arrived, and consequently committing to a serious reevaluation of one’s life—would seem to be prime fodder for this two-decade-long concern with the dangers of online gaming, popular attention of EVE tends to be celebratory. Whereas marathon gaming sessions are cause for social panic with other games (Dolnick, 2016), with EVE, twenty-hour-long *single-day game sessions* are praised: “Epic game battle ends after 21 hours” (CBS/AP, 2014). Whereas online bullying is treated as a social epidemic with other games (Stafford, 2014), with EVE, regular hazing and harassment of new players serves as the backdrop of a story of revenge that “is the greatest thing ever” (Usher, 2017). Whereas being widely recognized as “boring and a bad game” is considered a death knell with other games (Bailey, 2017), with EVE, this sentiment is used as a term of endearment by one of its largest and most passionate player bases (Page, 2016). EVE is an “unbounded” game where an unusually wide range of activities are permitted (Carter & Gibbs, 2013, p. 47), leading to the tendency to treat EVE differently because, as The New York Times notes, “what other game has a Ph.D. economist on the staff who publishes a quarterly newsletter about the game’s virtual economy? What other game [has] an elected player council with ideas drawn from philosophers from Aristotle to John Rawls?” (Schiesel, 2007). In essence, we argue, EVE is treated differently from other games because of what it is: a neoliberal project.ⁱ

By neoliberal project, we mean that the virtual world of EVE operates as an ongoing economic project that is imbricated with offline political economic and cultural processes. Neoliberalism is mobilized by the belief that “everything for which human beings attempt to realize their ends, from marriage, to crime, to expenditures on children, can be understood ‘economically’ according to a particular calculation of cost for benefit” (Read, 2009, p. 29). EVE operates as a manifestation of this ideology because everything that exists within its virtual world is governed by this logic of competition; it is “a game celebrating unfettered capitalism and the pleasures and powers of/in accumulation” (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 380). This celebration of unfettered capitalism matters, for ideology is not a mere belief system but rather a system of concrete practices through which that belief system manifests (Althusser, 1970/2006); as Jason Read (2009) argues, “neoliberalism is not simply [...] a belief that one could elect to have or not have, but is itself produced by strategies, tactics, and policies that create subjects of interest, locked in competition” (p. 30). Although our application of neoliberalism to video games is not unique, as similar arguments have also been made about other video games (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), EVE is exceptional for the extent of its neoliberal mythos, and how that mythos engages with players in some quite distinctive ways. Players, developers, scholars, and journalists all readily acknowledge that EVE is better understood

ⁱ Despite some of the striking play activities we describe in this paper, EVE is relatively absent from popular game *addiction* discourses. As this paper suggests, we propose that when EVE generates interest in the mainstream community, it is precisely because it resonates at an obvious, immediate, visceral level with dramatic spectacles of neoliberalism; although we are sure that EVE is as addicting (or not) as any other game, this is not what typically generates interest from outside the community.

as a political-economic simulator than a game (in the conventional sense) (Carter et al., 2016). More than an economic simulator, however, EVE is an ongoing economic project that mobilizes and interfaces with real-world socioeconomic processes. To illustrate the nature and consequence of this interfacing, this article is organized as follows: (1) we build upon Walter Benjamin's (1974) concept of the "messianic zero-hour" and the game studies concept of the "magic circle" to illustrate the socioeconomic interplay between virtual- and real-world environments; (2) we analyze how EVE's metagame promotes, reinforces, and reconfigures the real-world substructures required to succeed *within* and *outside* of EVE; and (3) we analyze EVE's annual *Alliance Tournament* to illustrate how the game's socioeconomic logic is sustained. Our argument is that EVE operates as a useful case study for thinking through the immanence of play—that is, how games work to make themselves real. Or, to put it another way: how does EVE shape the lives of its players? We mean this not just in terms of the use of one's time and the purposes to which that time is put, but also in an ideological sense: what beliefs and practices are being trained into its players which might then find purpose beyond the virtual world of EVE? In this regard, EVE exerts an unusually strong ideological force upon its players, allowing us to use this virtual world to understand the behaviors of its players beyond the game.

2. The Role of the Virtual and the "Magic" of the Magic Circle

Building upon Walter Benjamin's "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", Priscilla Wald (2016) advocates looking to science fiction as a political resource for thinking through the problems of the *present*. Benjamin (1974) argues that articulating "what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was' [but rather] it means to take control of a memory" and recognize it as "sign of a messianic zero-hour of events, or put differently, a revolutionary chance [...] to explode a specific epoch out of the homogenous course of history" (pp. 2, 7). Benjamin's (1974) critique of Rankean historiography represented a hope that in the act of historical remembrance, "every second was the narrow gate" (p. 8) through which change could be enacted, or the potential for change discovered. Subsequently, Wald's (2016) application of Benjamin is novel for it reorients our conception of science fiction away from conventional understandings of an attempt to imagine "how it will be in the future" and toward being understood as an attempt for a "messianic zero-hour" for the present. We need not share Benjamin's (1974) or Wald's (2016) belief that whatever enters through this gate might be of great value nor necessarily benevolent (cf. Nietzsche, 1874/1980). Indeed, Wald (2007) herself is critical of how science fiction has infected "every aspect of the scientific and epidemiological process" (p. 262), thus affecting "survival rates and contagion rates" (p. 3). Nevertheless, in extending Wald's project to the study of virtual worlds, we are thus interested in how EVE serves as a resource to legitimate and make immanent the future that it presents.

Virtual worlds lend themselves well to this form of analysis because, in contrast to conventional understanding, virtual worlds are *productive*. As Tom Boellstorff (2015) notes, virtual worlds have "something to teach us about new frontiers in technology and society", yet there is an unfortunate tendency to treat those who occupy such worlds as "lost in escapism or fantasy, addicted to the virtual, neglecting 'real' friends and family" (p. xx). However, we are more interested in understanding how virtual worlds are contingent upon real-world processes and consequently carry with them real-world consequences. To this end, Alexander Galloway's (2012) conception of the virtual in terms of "the absolute" is a useful vantage point for thinking through why EVE matters; for rather than understand virtual worlds as distinct spaces, Galloway argues that "the virtual is responsible for the projection-forward" of the real in terms of "the absolute"—i.e., "perfection" (p. 113). From this perspective, then, EVE, does not merely replicate the mechanics of unfettered capitalism, but rather is an attempt to make manifest capitalism in neoliberal terms.

This is not to say that EVE is absolutely or even mostly successful in its attempt to do so. Since virtual worlds "exist whenever there is a perceived gap between experience and 'the actual'"

[...] were [the gap] to be filled in, there would be no [need for] virtual worlds” (Boellstorff, 2015, p. 19). The presence of this gap means that the power of virtual worlds are not absolute as audiences can resist, reinterpret, and reassemble these worlds (S. Hall, 2006). To the extent that they exist, nonetheless, virtual worlds operate through a variety of mechanisms that exert significant pressure on the real-world (Mejia, 2015). A fruitful lens for thinking through the mechanics that undergird the nature of the messianic zero-hour that are virtual worlds is that of the game studies concept of the magic circle. Although some have critiqued the magic circle for denigrating virtual worlds as an inconsequential space of play (Lehdonvirta, 2010), we believe this is due to a misreading of the concept; most scholars conceive of the magic circle in reference to Johan Huizinga’s (1949) summarization of “the formal characteristics of play [...] [as] a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’” (p. 13; cf. Lehdonvirta, 2010), but these same scholars obscure the fact that Huizinga’s analysis is invested precisely in the permeability of this magic circle. Far from conceiving of play as inconsequential vis-à-vis “ordinary reality,” Huizinga argued that virtual worlds are “not so much a sham-reality as a realization in appearance” and that “with the end of play [the effect of play] is not lost” (p. 14). In essence, the magic circle refers not to a virtual world apart from the real world, but rather to the infrastructure necessary for making virtual worlds a part of the real world (Mejia, 2015).

Although video games, and by extension virtual worlds, are often conceived of as ephemeral spaces, video games come into existence through a complex assemblage of real-world material and social forces. From transnational finance and labor circuits (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), the affective labor of social support networks (Bulut, 2015), political valorization and condemnation (Mejia et al., 2017), and the sexual, gender, and racial construction of play more generally (Shaw, 2011), virtual worlds intersect with and affect real-world processes. The way these socioeconomic resources are organized constitutes what is called the “magic circle” (Mejia, 2015), which configures who can legitimately enter, how, and to what effect. For instance, as it pertains to EVE, Kelly Bergstrom (2016) notes that the game’s hyper-masculine culture marks non-competitive play as illegitimate. The consequence of these cultural expectations is that feminine bodies—whether female or otherwise—are discouraged from entering this space, as all in-game activity is subordinated to economic and military conflict, and CCP press releases and popular coverage of EVE primarily celebrate the game’s real-world economic stakes. Likewise, because play must always be understood as “a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 13), the magic circle of play offers participants a space for creating new subjectivities (Mejia, 2015). Indeed, some games, such as gambling, are so intricately entangled into the lives of participants, that these games cannot “usefully be seen as essentially separate from other aspects of life” (Malaby, 2007, p. 98), meaning that the game is a central and constant part of that population’s reality. EVE, we argue, is one such game for many of its players.

Because play carries with it real-world consequences, the subsequent main body of this paper is dedicated to elaborating upon EVE’s configuration of its magic circle and the attendant socioeconomic consequences. Exploring this promises insight into the real-world consequences of how this perfected form of capitalism demands that players adopt a particular, neoliberal mentality that extends beyond the confines of EVE’s virtual world. To make this argument, the next section explores how the centrality of EVE’s metagame operates as a virtual world training ground for the real-world and how success within EVE’s virtual world is often contingent upon implementing those lessons into the real-world; then, our final section explores how EVE’s *Alliance Tournament* helps to exert a normative, neoliberal influence on the economic logic of the EVE universe. The consequence of these two intersecting elements, we argue, is that EVE’s virtual world is structured such that neoliberal ways of living are so strongly privileged that alternative ways of being are made difficult to both imagine and live.

3. EVE, Real Life, and Learning Neoliberalism

We now come to explore the intersection of these two elements: the uniqueness of EVE, and the manifesting of ideological concepts through virtual worlds. We begin by considering the nature of the EVE “metagame.” A precise definition of the “metagame” is contested, but within the context of *competitive* gameplay, Donaldson (2016) terms it the “sum of large-scale competitive trends” within a particular game (p. 2). To put it another way, the metagame is a way of understanding what particular strategies and tactics are dominant at a particular moment in a game’s history, and what “ways of playing” the game have been found to be successful, and are consequently used by the most skilled competitive players. However, metagaming can also refer to what (if any) elements beyond the formal technical fabric of the game, or unintended by game’s designers, are utilized by players. In this latter understanding, metagaming can be understood as taking part in play activities that exist beyond the scope of the core actions of the virtual world, but are nevertheless important to its play as actually, *de facto*, performed (Carter et al., 2012; Kow et al., 2014). EVE has a long history of competitive metagame practices which fall into both of these categories. These include the system of “safe spots”, player-created navigational bookmarks within dangerous systems far from obvious landmarks; corporations (the equivalent of “guilds” in other MMO games) encouraging their players to start their usernames with a letter in the middle of the alphabet to avoid being targeted in battles where enemy combatants are listed alphabetically; or simply stealing from and/or lying to one’s fellow players (Carter et al., 2015). These last elements are perhaps most famously seen in famous “defections” of powerful figures in EVE, whose shifts in allegiance can affect thousands (Welsh, 2009), and infiltrations of corporations by those who wish them harm (Francis, 2015). Such actions do not only involve the “handling” of the game through user interface technologies, but also involve subcultural assumptions and “meaning-making activities” (Rambusch et al., 2007:158) that circulate through and surround in-game actions, give them importance and consequence, and inform gameplay choices made by players involved in such metagame activities. EVE’s metagame is therefore complex and sweeping, can affect players beyond those immediately acting within it, and can reverberate significantly throughout the game world.

As such, we would argue that in EVE the metagame is more ubiquitous and more interwoven with its players’ activities than in many other games, or perhaps any other games. This is due to the centrality of the game’s *market* to its play. We can usefully turn to the tongue-in-cheek term “spreadsheet simulator” to assess the importance of this market, and some of the other behaviors that EVE manifests in its players via this element of its gameplay. *Spreadsheet simulator* is a phrase used to insult—whether jokingly and light-heartedly, or seriously and negatively—games like EVE which have a significant component of mathematics, statistics, and the general handling of numbers, as a core element of gameplay. In EVE, this takes centre stage as a result of the dominance of the market in the game’s simulation: EVE is famous for featuring a functioning and sophisticated economic marketplace (Lehdonvirta & Castronova, 2014, p. 7) which is pervasive across the entire game, shapes interactions between corporations and is shaped by them, changes over time, and allows a significant percentage of players to earn some or all of their in-game income via “playing the market.” Vast and ponderous *Nostramo*-esque freighters transport millions of tons of virtual goods across known space, simultaneously forging the backbone of the economy and offering rich pickings for opportunistic pirates; in-game wars cause prices of valuable commodities to soar or plummet, and in turn have a knock-on effect elsewhere in the game universe; new releases and updates to the game also change prices, with new items potentially raising or lowering the value of older items, or adding or removing methods for acquiring those same items. For example, EVE undergoes regular changes to the game mechanics for “sovereignty” or “SOV” for short—which is to say, the specific means by which territory across the game’s many solar systems is controlled. Such changes affect relationships with entities (players, corporations, resources) within the game, and most importantly transforms the market and fundamentally alters all previous economic relations. Keeping track of the play of

numbers, figures, stats, decimals, and their interactions, is consequently essential for navigating EVE's market; but more importantly, keeping track of the market and acting accordingly is essential for navigating EVE. In EVE, the traditional "epitome of white collar drudgery" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 374) becomes central to skilled play for many.

From this, we propose that the market-centrality and attendant central role of competition in EVE inculcates a sense that players must indulge in "extreme" behaviors *outside* the game in order to be successful *within* the game: behaviors which few if any other games demand from their players, and behaviors which represent a particular neoliberal, optimized, game theoretic mentality.ⁱⁱ The

most obvious of these is the transformation by which dedication to the game becomes comparable to that for one's work (Taylor et al., 2015, 365-370), which pushes out other activities from one's life, and changes playing EVE into an extreme form of "playbor" (a form of work in which "all social life is part of economic production, and economic production is suffused by social life" [Kücklich,

ⁱⁱ Like all sites of cultural production, EVE is home to an array of often conflicting cultural practices—not all of which are concerned with success in the neoliberal sense of the word (cf. Bergstrom & Carter, 2016). Nonetheless, like all sites of cultural production, the social and material forces that constitute the world of EVE privilege particular cultural practices over others (cf. Carter, Bergstrom, & Woodford, 2016). As Kelly Bergstrom (2016) argues, "the number of EVE players who actively participate in [competitive play] is irrelevant. What matters here is that [competitive play] is valued and exerts a normalizing influence over how communities feel they (and others) should or ought to be playing the game" (p. 158). We echo this assertion; not every EVE player may desire success in terms defined by the market and competition, but these definitions of success exert a normalizing influence on the virtual world of EVE.

2009, p. 348]). For example, as Taylor et al. (2015, p.365-370) show, EVE's "industrialists"—those who produce and transport the raw virtual material with which wars are fought and economies based—can readily be understood to experience their play as a form of "work" of EVE, and as a form of work that takes place both within and beyond the borders of the game. Other similarly demanding or striking behaviors include: a willingness to scam and deceive one's fellow players within the EVE ecosystem, an activity that appears increasingly rewarded in the contemporary economic milieu (Harvey, 2011); the romanticizing of notions of conflict and competition (cf. Goodfellow, 2016, p. 78), which can be mastered and triumphed over either by the grey-area means described above, or simply through work, effort, and the commitment of time; and, we propose, an understanding of the functioning of markets as being a dominant element behind *all* other aspects of life.

A closer examination of the use of time by EVE players, for instance, and the relationship of those activities to the structuring of their outside lives, is telling. We can perceive a clear difference in the public reception of success in EVE in contrast to other MMOs. In *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, for example, players who exhibit the highest levels of success within the game world are understood as having only achieved such success by failing to behave as a good neoliberal citizen; because they have "wasted" their time on leisure instead of work, their "deviance" in the real-world has translated to success in the virtual world (D'Anastasio, 2015)ⁱⁱⁱ. By contrast, success in EVE is a sign of the player's ability to act as a committed neoliberal citizen. Rather than using their time on leisure as

ⁱⁱⁱ Scott Rettberg argues that World of Warcraft also "offers a convincing and detailed simulacrum of the process of becoming successful in capitalist societies" (Rettberg, 2008, p. 20), and thereby occupies a dual existence as both a game, and also a "simulation that reinforces the values of Western market-driven economies". Developing this claim, he proposes that the activities one takes part in during World of Warcraft teach players how "to climb the corporate ladder, to lead projects, to achieve sales goals, to earn and save, to work hard for better possessions, to play the markets, to win respect from their peers and their customers, to direct and encourage and cajole their underlings to outperform, and to become better employees and perhaps, eventually, effective future CEOs". This argument suggests that there are many shared elements of all MMO games, not just *EVE*, which take on these forms and inculcate such behaviors and knowledges in their players. Nevertheless, compared to *EVE* it is rarely seen this way in popular discourse, and indeed also less often in scholarship.

traditionally understood, they have instead used their time on work of another sort, something “productive” rather than merely distracting or incidental: in-game work that is similar in its modalities and practices to real-world work, and a kind of work which trains its players for greater success within the real-world. In turn, what is notable is that many of the most successful EVE players are also widely recognized as highly “successful” in their real lives (Román, 2014)—far from the cliché of the young gamer living with their parents, these are career professionals whose chosen vocations offer them disposable income to spend in EVE, and the free time required to commit fully to the game’s play. Players can add extra money into the game atop existing subscription costs, which means those with disposable income can “accelerate” their progress in EVE’s world. Both time and money, therefore, are integral to success in EVE; but where significant commitment of those resources in other MMOs is most often met with scorn, ire, or even disgust, in EVE it is lauded, and integral to its ideological deployment. This importance of time and its ability to help players get ahead is also reflected elsewhere in the broader culture of EVE. Since EVE’s economy is built through the creation, exchange and destruction of in-game items within such a marketplace, it is “far more dependent on the work of players than other MMOGs” (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 371). In turn, Lehdonvirta and Castronova note that games with primarily or exclusively player-driven economies are more susceptible to farming (2014, p. 148), which is to say sometimes-dull repetitive actions, than those where virtual economy activity is more closely centralized under the control of a game’s developer. For both of these reasons, EVE encourages a kind of work centered on the in-game markets and the production, distribution, marketing and consumption of in-game goods as a primary form of play. This is work which requires dedication, extensive effort, and the commitment of time, in order to succeed.

There are also other elements to the relationship between funds (and other valuable possessions) in EVE, and in the outside world. For example, the interactions and entanglements behind the recent *World War Bee* (as it is known in EVE parlance) emerged from the blurring of these two worlds. On the one hand, the leader of the dominant *The Imperium* coalition was seen to be using in-game success for real-world profit, through interviews, visibility and even campaigns on crowdfunding site *Kickstarter*. This was one of many factors which led to a situation where, one former CCP employee suggested, “the collective psyche of the EVE community has gotten tired of it” (Hall, 2016a), leading to the rallying of numerous allies against the *Imperium*’s hegemony and seemingly brash arrogance. Equally, the opposing side was bank-rolled by an in-game casino created by one of EVE’s players, which can only continue so long as particular lines between the real and the virtual are maintained (Hall, 2016b). In this example we might suggest that just as neoliberalism is heavily invested in the health of the market, there comes a point where a sufficiently dominant corporation, such as *The Imperium*, is seen as constricting and lessening the flow and reach of that market, prompting major decisions from other actors.

EVE in a sense, therefore, both trains players for their real lives, *and rewards players who structure their real lives in a particular way*—the same way that one must act to be successful in EVE. This two-way exchange of ideology and its attendant practices is, we argue, essential to understanding how the “science fiction” of EVE makes manifest neoliberalism for its players. It encourages them to both play in certain ways and live in certain ways (where work in the former is strikingly similar to work in the latter). These ways of behaving are in turn *beneficial* to both career success in the market-driven world outside of EVE, and success in the market-driven metagame within EVE. In a sense, then, EVE is a game of the elite, and one which reinforces socioeconomic behaviors that both brought that elite to dominance, and which maintain the dominance of that same elite. This sense of elite play, we will now demonstrate, also extends into the relationship between EVE and another gaming phenomenon: that of formalized competitive gaming, also known as electronic sports, or “Esports”.

4. EVE, Esports, and Competition

We have now established that EVE encourages and inculcates particular behaviors in its players. Just as EVE is regularly understood as a game that reflects contemporary “real-world” ideologies of neoliberalism and axiomatic economic competition, this paper has sought to demonstrate that a *return* trip also takes place, with the non-virtual lives of players being shaped and reformed in particular ways in order to meet the requirements that anything but the lowest level of EVE play demands. Equally, EVE is a game that rewards those who have demonstrated, in the real-world, success at navigating neoliberal capitalism: those with well-paying jobs, flexible working hours, and significant spare time are those most able to succeed in EVE’s time-demanding and money-demanding virtual universe. There is, therefore, a two-way process at work here, whereby EVE is not just a “neoliberal capitalism simulator”, but rather interfaces deeply with the everyday real lives of its players, with the ability to navigate particular real-world socioeconomic circumstances being intricately interwoven with the game’s skilled play. To explore another dimension of this conflation, specifically the role of competition, we will now briefly turn to the case study of the *Alliance Tournament*, EVE’s only official “Esports” event.

“Esports”, which entails formalized competitive video game play with rewards for the most successful players, has grown rapidly in recent years. While some players embrace the formalization of competition and the potential financial success from one’s gaming skills, this transformation of play into something more competitive is not universally popular (Taylor, 2012), and many players fear the loss of the “fun” and “play” seemingly crucial to the video game experience. As opposed to pure “leisure”, Esports requires skill, competition, and “pushing edges” by exploring boundaries of acceptable play to develop new strategies—much like the EVE metagame in general. Those who pursue a game in this manner have been termed “power gamers”, who “operate with a highly instrumental game-orientation” (Taylor, 2003) when deciding what activities to partake in, and how to approach them. This is, in turn, a form of what Robert A Stebbins (1982; 2007) calls “serious leisure”—a deep commitment to a hobby that might transform into a career, or at the very least, has a significant impact on the lives of its practitioners. With the ongoing growth of Esports, the *Alliance Tournament* is EVE’s explicit response to the phenomenon—it is a yearly tournament attracting thousands of viewers (Carter & Gibbs, 2013, p. 47) in which some of the game’s largest alliances field groups of players, often in the game’s most expensive vessels with the game’s more expensive equipment. They compete in a double-elimination bracket of team-versus-team combat until only one remains; the entire competition is broadcast on live-streaming site *Twitch.tv*, generating an external spectacle (cf. Johnson & Woodcock, 2017) that the market politics of EVE ordinarily does not. Prizes, handed out to the highest finishers, are primarily limited-edition spacecraft with extremely powerful combat abilities. In most cases, these vessels are perhaps twice as powerful as the most powerful non-limited-edition ship in that class—*Frigate*, *Cruiser*, and so forth—and are therefore extremely desirable combat vessels. However, the difference between the extremely loose rules of EVE, and the stricter rules required by most forms of competitive behavior, remains a point of tension (Carter & Gibbs, 2013, p. 53).

Nevertheless, it is within the Alliance Tournament that the element of competition within the ideological discourses propagated through EVE become clearest. The Tournament, a rare “formal” part of EVE, does not exist in contrast to the ever-present, implicit, and sometimes covert metagame of the rest of the game, but rather alongside, and actually serves to reinforce many of the same discourses. The Tournament further romanticizes conflict and competition by using its increasingly “Esports” aesthetic to reinforce these notions, drawing on the notions of competition inherent in the field, and the expected norms and values of professional gamers (cf. Seo, 2016). Like other “mega-events”, events that capture widespread attention, the Tournament plays a key role in marketing and promotion, as well as wider virtual world development strategies, and therefore leaves “behind social, economic, and physical legacies which will have an impact on [the world] for a far greater

period than that [timeframe] in which the event took place” (cf. Hall, 2006, p. 59). Of course, digital rewards are present in other Esports games as well, but only in EVE are the discourses of competition and conflict so deeply written into the game itself, its play, and its public reception, and not just its Esports manifestation. The Tournament, then, is not a space of exception, but rather an annual reminder that the relative “peace and stability” brought about by the rise in mature player governance in EVE (Gianturco, 2016, p. 127) is temporary and always contingent.

The *Tournament*, as such, plays a noteworthy role in the current, late metagame of EVE; the stakes of which are perhaps most vividly illustrated by the use of the Tournament’s prizes within the tournament itself. As noted above, the ships that players are rewarded with are extremely powerful, unusually so for their ship class, and due to both their combat effectiveness and extreme rarity—with normally fifty of each ship given out in total, into a virtual world with several hundred thousand players—they are extremely valuable. In most cases, the prize ships are sold off to collectors, or to those with virtual money to burn, or flown in “shows of strength” by victorious alliances. In rarer cases, however, Alliances use ships won in a previous Alliance Tournament in a future Alliance Tournament. Many Alliances put significant resources in danger when they compete in the event, but putting a non-renewable resource at risk—a limited-edition ship—is a step above anything else. What should we make of this act, and what does it signify ideologically? We propose such an act is one heavily in keeping with the analysis thus far presented, for it is an act that displays another set of beneficial neoliberal traits: certainly confidence, arguably self-promotion, perhaps arrogance. It signals the wealth of the alliance that can afford to risk such ships in direct combat; it signals their confidence in their victory; it signals their previous success in the tournament, perhaps intended to function as an instance of psychological warfare; it signals their competitive ability, having already succeeded in a deeply challenging competitive domain; and it can also work as a trap, a ruse, a feign, for a team that commits to destroying the high-value ships simply because of their value might overlook greater danger from the more traditional spacecraft deployed in the match. Indeed, upon extensive viewing of the Alliance Tournament, it is difficult not to read the play-by-play of some matches in *exactly* this manner: that the deployment of these ships “threw the other team off” in some way that was essential to the victory of the team fielding the rare ships. What better prize for a game celebrating economic and military conflict within a virtual world dominated by economic and military conflict than one capable of tilting future economic and military conflict in one’s favor?

5. Concluding Thoughts

EVE Online is an MMO that has become central to the popular discussion around the entire genre. Far from the negative “press” other games get, players, commentators and non-players alike are fascinated by EVE’s central economic project, the sometimes extreme dedication to the game shown by its players, its complex and ever-present metagame, and the overall harshness and competition of the virtual playing field. Rather than examining EVE as a “self-contained” neoliberal project, we have instead in this paper sought to elucidate a two-way exchange of ideology between the real-world and the virtual universe of New Eden. EVE is best played by those skilled in particular neoliberal behaviors and who have found success with those behaviors in their lives and careers; equally, EVE rewards players who act in these same ways, and foster greater experience with those behaviors which players might take back into their lives outside of the game. Rather than being “just” a political economic simulator which presents an extreme version of our current economic climate to players, we argue that EVE is more ideologically active than this, reinforcing notions of neoliberal capitalism, competition, and the ubiquity and reification of the market, through its virtual-world structure and the real-world activities required for players to succeed. We therefore echo the assertion that there are ways in which EVE “both ideologically and economically supports the extension of capital into increasing aspects of our everyday lives” (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 365). This is comparable to Rettberg’s argument that “in modeling a moderately complex economy, World of

Warcraft offers its players training in the basis of supply-and-demand economics, markets, and arbitrage” (2008, p. 30). However, such elements remain less visible in public discourse over WoW than in EVE, given the far more visually and mechanically obvious nature of the training being performed—spreadsheets, negotiation, management—in the latter than the former.

It is not, however, our intention to merely condemn EVE simply on these grounds. Though EVE’s structure is such that economic and militaristic ways of playing and living are privileged to the extent that other sociocultural interests are considered illegitimate, this does not mean that all who occupy EVE’s virtual world play this way (Bergstrom, 2016). Likewise, because EVE’s world operates as a “simulation of possible human interstellar colonization” (Bainbridge, 2016, p. 31), or as we have argued, a “messianic zero-hour [...] to explode a specific epoch out of the homogeneous course” of the present (Benjamin, 1974, p. 7), EVE offers players the opportunity to experiment with the political economic and cultural logic of neoliberalism. This form of play, what William Bainbridge (2016) calls impersonation, can enable players to “discover truths and stimulate hypotheses” about the benefits and consequences of living in such a world (p. 31). The world of EVE demands that players adhere to the political economic and cultural logic of neoliberalism; but like all demands, players can and do find ways to say “no.” This analysis has chosen to emphasize the neoliberal demands made upon the player by the game; future studies may benefit from building upon this analysis to more thoroughly understand the success and failures of those players who instead say no. For what does it mean to readily occupy a game world that rejects you? Exploring this question in future studies may help to illustrate the strategies, possibilities, and limits to the resistance of neoliberal ways of world building, and the potential creation of alternatives.

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