eSports in EVE Online: Skullduggery, Fair Play and Acceptability in an Unbounded Competition

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ABSTRACT

Officially organized, spectator driven eSport tournaments occur within the notoriously transgressive and ruthless game *EVE Online*. In these tournaments spying, bribing and throwing matches is commonplace. Based on results from interviews with players, spectators and commentators, this paper discusses the way in which the 'unbounded' attitude of the developers of *EVE Online* towards acceptable forms of play has been transposed into its eSport iteration. Indicative of professionalization, *EVE*'s developer CCP Games has recently begun bounding tournament conduct and offering their first real-money tournament prizes. We argue that this is problematic, against the 'spirit' of *EVE Online* and a misreading of the effect of transgressive acts on the success and enjoyment of the emerging eSport.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0 [**Personal Computing**]: General – Games

General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords

EVE Online, eSports, metagame, spectatorship, game play, fairplay, sportsmanship, tournaments, skullduggery, eveSports.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2006 *EVE Online* (*EVE*) has held the *Alliance Tournament*; structured team-based player-versus-player (PvP) competitions, publicly live-streamed and commentated for non-competitors. Alliance Tournament matches routinely draw over 10,000 live spectators. In late September, 2012, *EVE's* developer (CCP Games) announced the *New Eden Open*, a public tournament with $10,000 of real-money prizes to be held in late November and early December 2012. Prior to this, prizes for the tournaments were limited to in-game items and prestige for the winning Alliance. This tournament is partnered with eSport broadcaster own3D.tv, and CCP Developers have stated that professionalizing *EVE*'s eSport – both culturally and financially - is a "*long term goal*". [13]

What makes this transition to professionalized eSport problematic is the fact that *EVE* is 'unbounded'; compared to most other

online games, *EVE* Players are less bound or restricted by terms of conduct and social norms of fair play, honesty and sportsmanship. Consequently, ruthless play acts such as scamming, stealing and espionage are commonplace. This unboundedness is one of *EVE's* unique attractions, and feeds into its harsh capitalistic narrative and rhetoric of difficulty.

Our findings indicate that this unbounded interpretation of play acceptability has been transposed into *EVE's* eSport tournaments. Spying on other teams, bribing team members and even purchasing ship kills or game wins occurs frequently. Through permitting these activities, CCP Games encourages them, at times even publicly commending exciting examples of *EVE's* eSport 'metagame'. More recently however, CCP have begun attempting to bound the tournament, banning teams who threw a Tournament final and stipulating rules to try to professionalize the conduct of players.

This paper overviews the six year history of *EVE's* eSport (from herein, *eveSport*s), and presents results from interviews with *eveSport* players, spectators and commentators investigating its appeal and how players deem certain tournament acts unacceptable. We argue that the principal issue facing the development of the practice into a self-sustaining eSport is a conflict between the needs of the spectator and the competitor as a result of the opaque practices of *eveSport*s metagame. Rather than attempting to bound *EVE's* unique transgressive, ruthless play culture, the true success of the eSport will only occur if the 'metagame' is made transparent to the spectator.

At the outset, we wish to make it clear that under no circumstances do we believe that the unboundedness of *EVE* play discussed in this paper should be 'designed out' of *EVE Online* or *eveSport*s. These qualities are what make *EVE* unique, and further, what makes *EVE* and the existing *eveSport*s exciting and appealing to many players. If *eveSport*s can become professionalized along with the ruthlessness, malfeasance and bastardry that accompany the *EVE Online* MMO, it should do so, as it has the potential to provide a unique, exciting and incomparable spectator sport.

2. ESPORTS

Before discussing *EVE Online* and *eveSport*s in detail, we will first overview some of the existing research into eSports. We will make no attempt to provide a history or overview the movement, as such a narrative has been excellently provided elsewhere [32]. Rather, we will discuss the principal point of contention within much of the academic (and non-academic) literature surrounding the cultural phenomenon of eSport; the legitimacy of the use of the term 'Sport' in its label.

T.L. Taylor [31, 33] and Emma Witkowski [38, 39] respond to criticisms of the use of the term sport by providing account for the true professionalism and athleticism that surround the culture and performance of eSports, and which make it distinct from amateur

play. Their analyses illustrate that eSport is a physically draining, expertise driven activity which hinges on performance in both the physical and digital domains. Any conceptualization that eSports are a fully virtual performance is false. Further, in *Raising the Stakes* [32], Taylor provides an excellent account for the professionalization of eSporting culture and practices. Her research makes it explicitly apparent that the perception of eSport as an amateurish activity is misguided and fails to capture the current state of eSport culture.

A second approach towards legitimizing the use of the term eSport is derived from sociological analyses of the history of sport, and how it has developed into its modern form in contemporary culture. Michael Wagner [37] utilizes Chris Tiedemanns [35] definition for sport, which emphasizes sport's character as a cultural activity of contrived importance. Rather than sport being something intrinsically physical or attached to the physical domain, sport is physical because fitness and wellbeing was what was culturally important during the development of contemporary sport following the industrial revolution. Consequently, "*it has to be expected that the values we accept as sport disciplines will change as our value systems change, for example due to technological progress.*" [37]

Similarly, Hutchins [24] draws on the similarities between the development of eSport and traditional sports through its origins in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Hutchins presents a reading for the history of modern sport in which it is considered to have developed "*simultaneously and symbiotically*" [28, p. 62] with modern media, industrialization, nation states and civil society. Changes in the scale and capacity of transport and media technologies created fundamental transformations in the structure and cultural practice of sport. Hutchins argues that as modern sport was born out of modernity, eSports are the *inevitable* result of similarly affective social changes; globalisation, neoliberalism and the ubiquitous proliferation of ICT technologies.

We wish to present a third complementary approach grounded in one of the fundamental transformations that *EVE Online* is struggling to make in order to become an successful eSport; its shift towards the newest stakeholder, the spectator. An important development in the history of sports was the development of mass, immediate communications technologies. First with 1920's radio, and later with television [22], modern technologies enabled fans to follow a game live, fundamentally transforming their popularity and our understanding of what constitutes 'sport' [27]. Through enabling sports fans the privilege of mass spectatorship, these technological revolutions "*transformed contemporary sport into mass mediated entertainment*" turning athletes into "*high profile entertainers.*" [27, p. 267]

Spectatorship has long been an understood as an important component of the appeal of contemporary sport. Duncan [21] examined the symbolic dimensions of spectator sports, illustrating their important social implications. Trial et. al. [36] evaluated the appeal of spectating traditional sporting events, finding that factors such as achievement, drama, escape, knowledge, physical skills and socializing were important components of the motivational appeal of sport spectatorship. Cheung & Huang [15] found Starcraft spectators found watching eSport matches appealing for "*many of the same reasons*" as Trial et. al. found in traditional sports. Bryant et. al. [4,5] has also discussed the importance of sport commentators in enhancing the spectator experience. Reiterating this, attempts to implement an eSport experience in Guild Wars II, have been developed "*with spectators in mind.*" [34].

Consequently, eSports can be understood as sport through their acknowledgement and design for the spectator. In a talk at the Berkman Centre, T.L. Taylor [32] briefly touched on the importance of studying spectatorship for game studies. She argues that "*there has been a lot of interest* [in game studies] *in ... pulling in interactivity, which is always about hands on the controller, but I think we need to get back to a conversation about audience, spectatorship and their role in play.*" Several other authors have called for the importance of considering spectating in the design of games [e.g. 20]. As live-streaming sites such as own3d.tv and uStream build in popularity [see 26], it is important to consider the role that spectatorship has in not just the appeal of eSports but the way in which it is involved in the cultural practice of eSport and more broadly, game play.

3. EVE ONLINE UNBOUNDED
As a brief sojourn from the discussion of eSports, we will now introduce and discuss *EVE Online* and its unbounded player culture. Released in 2003, *EVE Online* has never achieved the popularity of other games in the Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) genre. To articulate it one way, its membership has 'stagnated' for nearly 10 years between 300,000 – 400,000 players. To articulate it another, *EVE Online* is currently providing ~350,000 actively subscribed users with a play experience unavailable elsewhere in the online game market.

This is because, for many reasons, *EVE Online* is unique. *EVE* is truly one world; all 350,000 players occupy the same vast virtual world, allowing each player to directly or indirectly affect any other player in the game. *EVE* is hard (see [29] for a discussion of this rhetoric and its affect on new players) and the intricacy of its financial market has seen the game given the nickname 'Excel Online'. *EVE's* player Corporations (its version of 'Guilds') are often enormous, the largest are in excess of 4,000 players. These Corporations then form powerful Alliances and Coalitions (the largest has over 10,000 members), which hold sovereignty over game space, amassing vast in-game wealth and power. Further, *EVE* is avatar-less [see 7, 41] and has an unparalleled low female player base. [3]

The principal unique quality that informs the focus of this paper is the fact that *EVE Online* play is (comparably) *unbounded*; its developer has made a pointed effort not to restrict play of the sci-fi sandbox with rules of conduct. Consequently player attitudes towards acceptable and unacceptable play are markedly more 'loose' than what is found in other MMOGs. The result is (oft morally ambiguous) extraordinary emergent gameplay.

The foremost example of this *unboundedness* is the phenomenon of stealing in *EVE Online*. Players are permitted by the game developer to steal from one another, as long as that stealing act does not utilize technological exploits. Nate Combs has called the result a "*culture of mistrust*" [16], which ultimately serves to improve the sociality of *EVE Online*. CCP provide some official materials for player's interpretation. A scam is defined on the official Wiki as when:

> someone takes advantage of your misplaced trust, temporary confusion or ignorance of game rules, and robs you via in-game means. When this occurs, there is nothing the Support Team can do for you. [12]

Consequently, the official recommendation for new players, reiterated throughout *EVE* paratexts [17] is "*DON'T TRUST ANYONE*".

The 'Scams and Exploits' Wiki entry has the similar intent regarding play acceptability as 'Terms of Conduct' documents found in most online games; it is a document which outlines what

player practices are, and are not, acceptable. However, rather than attempting to bound play through specifically identifying inappropriate conduct or more broadly articulating the 'intent' of the game, the *EVE* 'Scams and Exploits' page appeals to the game's label as a sandbox, beginning with, *"As can happen in the real world, someone in EVE may try to cheat you out of your hard-earned possessions."*

This approach to acceptable conduct within *EVE Online* has informed emergent play practices beyond scamming or stealing. It has had the affect of removing the boundaries put in place by concepts such as fair play and sportsmanship that limit the range of acceptable player actions.

Illustrative of this unboundedness of play in *EVE* are the strategies and tactics used by players of *EVE*'s powerful alliances. These alliances, involving thousands of players and vying for control over vast in-game wealth, utilize tactics such as identity deception (spying and espionage, [see 19]), unsportsmanlike metagaming (DDOSing TeamSpeak Servers and avoiding 'fair fights' [see 6]), evocative propaganda (videos, images and text) and dishonest conduct (bribes and diplomatic betrayals). In a game such as *World of Warcraft*, these would be considered unsportsmanlike and dishonest acts, reprimanded and 'designed out' of the game experience. However, in EVE, they are an essential and exciting component of the game that contributes to its appeal for players.

EVE's unboundedness has ensured that *EVE* has developed into a ruthless virtual world, aligning with its dystopic, hyper capitalist sci-fi narrative. It confronts the leisurely, pleasurably and safe conceptualization of play which permeates traditional western understandings of games and mainstream game design. Currently, the impact that unboundedness and the resulting ruthlessness has on play, player cultures and emergent play is insufficiently understood. This paper seeks to address this impact in the context of *EVE's* eSporting culture.

4. METHOD

In order to examine the problematic transition to eSport *EVE* faces, 18 interviews were conducted with a mix of competitors, spectators and commentators. These semi-structured interviews, conducted via through a variety of media (text chat, email and offline) involved discussing the appeal of *eveSport*s and previous *eveSport* matches and their opinions regarding certain forms of play. Many of the players interviewed were members of teams entered in the Alliance Tournament and New Eden Open.

Three cases were discussed in each interview in order to encourage interviewees to articulate what was acceptable in *eveSport*s, and their reasoning behind it. These scenarios were identified through our initial analysis of previous tournament matches, forum discussions, blog news posts and other paratexts.

Interviews were analysed using grounded theory informed methods [23]. Interview transcripts were manually coded into relevant themes and these themes formed the basis for theory development. Interview subjects were principally sourced from TEST Alliance Please Ignore, the largest *EVE Online* Alliance. This alliance is a 'nullsec' alliance, meaning it holds sovereignty in non-policed (zero/null security) areas of the game. As such, the interview results are not indicative of the attitudes of the entire *EVE Online* community. Those players that exist in 'nullsec' are attracted to the harshness and increased difficulty of this area of the game (non-nullsec players are colloquially referred to as 'carebears'). However, a large percentage of *EVE* players are members of a nullsec alliance, and the few non-nullsec players interviewed appeared to reiterate the same attitudes towards ruthless play as the nullsec players. We also examined publicly available forum posts and discussion boards, which presented a more diverse opinion on the second scenario. Further research is likely necessary to determine the extent to which the reported attitudes are apparent in the wider community.

5. DISCUSSION CASES

The first scenario discussed with each interview participant was a qualifying match between the Alliance 'No Holes Barred' (NOHO) and 'TEST Alliance Please Ignore'. With a few minutes to spare, TEST had destroyed all but one of NOHO's ships, a fast electronic attack ship, unable to achieve victory, but able to move sufficiently fast to avoid being killed by TEST in the time remaining. TEST needed maximum points from the match in order to advance to the group stage, so one of their players publicly propositioned the NOHO pilot; 2 Billion in-game credits to let them destroy the ship. The NOHO pilot accepted the money and stopped the ship, allowing TEST maximum points letting them advance to the next stage. Without this purchase, TEST would not have advanced, literally buying their way into the tournament. This scenario received no punishment from CCP.

However, the second scenario discussed was both publicly and officially condemned. The final of the 9th Alliance Tournament was between 'Hydra' and 'Outbreak' – 'A' and 'B' teams from the same in-game alliance. As the match began, it became quickly apparent that the final was being thrown; the B Team actively changed their winning tactics in order to ensure easy victory for the A Team. Following this thrown final, it emerged that the two teams had spied on all other teams in the tournament, and selectively fed intelligence in order to manipulate the brackets to ensure an easier victory for both teams. Accounts suggest that this effort required hundreds of hours of difficult subterfuge. While some players called it *"great metagame"*, others decried the *"ruined", "disappointing"* final as a *"slap in the face to all people who wanted to see the game."* [11] CCP stepped in, nulling the match and banning players of both teams for entering two teams and practicing together (which other Alliances have frequently done).

In an early interview, a participant in this study suggested a hypothetical scenario of spying and team betrayal. This became our third scenario and was presented for discussion to subsequent interviewees as follows:

> *In the final of a tournament, Team A had a spy who was a member of Team B. At the beginning of the match, this member of Team B switched sides and effectively joined Team A, shooting at their teammates and subsequently handing the victory to Team A. What would your opinion be of that?*

A later interviewee, who had played *EVE* for 8 years, recalled a very similar situation in which a player had joined a team and in an early qualifying match, shot his teammates. Rather than being a spy, however, this player had had a long-term grudge against the alliance he had joined as they had defeated his alliance in-game a year earlier [40]. This enabled us to compare our findings from interviews about scenarios with data from forums and bulletin board postings about a real event. Our participants offered very similar reactions and interpretations of the hypothetical scenario to those comments made by players about the actual event. Our informant's comments also aligned with comments made by CCP developers who called it *"so so funny"* [14].

6. EVESPORTS

EVE's own version of eSports has evolved considerably since its first official iteration in late 2005. Involving 59 teams of 3, the 3-

day tournament was comparably simple to its modern day form; an elimination style tournament with each team limited to 1 of each basic ship type. Players were given a 15-minute time limit to destroy as much of their opponents as possible without leaving the 'arena'. Except for those fortunate enough to be brought along as a spectator by a competing team, the matches were not broadcast to spectators (although a recording of the finals from the perspective of a player is available). This tournament, titled the *Caldari State Capsuleer Tournament* was introduced as, and embedded within, the games narrative.

After this successful foray into structured PvP, CCP announced a second tournament in May 2006 that featured larger teams, more prizes and was played over a longer period. The most significant development of this tournament, the first to be called an 'Alliance Tournament', was that *EVE TV*, an independent fan-run video streaming site, broadcast the matches live. Through linking the tournament to the powerful in-game alliances, *eveSport*s was imbued with the history and greater narrative of *EVE Online* player communities. A further impact of attaching the tournament teams to in-game alliances was its utilization as a form of propaganda. Those alliances which style themselves as having a smaller membership of elite PvP players (compared to the larger alliances which utilize unskilled 'blob warfare' techniques) exert considerably more effort in winning the tournament and publicizing their dominance over all other players.

Grounded in this appeal to both spectators and participants, each iteration of the tournament tinkered with the team structure and setting for the matches; ships were given points values enabling more varied fleet compositions, the arena size was reduced by 40%, and the length of each match reduced from 15 to 10 minutes. These restrictions encouraged 'theory crafting' [see 30], making the composition of a tournament fleet crucial. Consequently, the ships being brought to the match needed to be kept secret, to prevent their opponents from bringing a perfectly designed counter-fleet.

An *eveSport* match is commentated on by two people, often experienced Alliance Tournament players who control a virtual camera capturing the viewpoint displayed to the audience. This camera can be attached to any of the competing ships and can be orientated in any direction, or zoomed out sufficiently to display the entire arena and tactical movements.

The live broadcast of *eveSport*s matches has evolved over time, with augmentations and new screen formats aimed at improving the quality of information conveyed to the spectator. Each ship competing has always been represented on the broadcast with three bars adjacent to its image represent its 'health', filling with red as it takes damage. When all three bars are red, the ship is destroyed and removed from the broadcast (mimicking its removal from the battle). In 2012, this information was supplemented by the speed of the ship and affects being applied to it (such as repairs). Along with a tactical overlay (a 3 dimensional mini-map) added in the 9th Alliance Tournament, these changes improve the spectator's ability to accurately discern the condition of each ship competing and the status of the match. Webcam feeds of the commentators were also added in 2012.

The principal achievement of each of these improvements has been to more effectively and accurately convey information about the status of the PvP engagement to the spectator. This highlights the transition that the Alliance Tournament has undergone from its initial iteration as a fictional PvP focused event for competitor enjoyment only, to a fully-fledged, spectator-focused eSport.

Another recent development is the *New Eden Open*, a $10,000 real-money tournament held in late 2012. Sponsored by eSport broadcaster own3D.tv, the *New Eden Ope*n involved 27 teams competing over 6 days in a double elimination tournament spread over 3 weekends. Unlike the Alliance Tournament, *New Eden Open* teams were detached from in-game alliances, although most teams were mostly constituted of players from the same alliance.

7. RESULTS

In previous sections, we presented a brief overviewed of the six year history of *EVE's* eSport, and highlighted how the successive redesign of the Alliance Tournaments to provide a better spectator experience is indicative of its evolution into a sport. In the following section, we will present research results exploring the appeal of *eveSports* and how players rationalise the acceptability of tournament conduct. Following this, we will discuss CCP's efforts to provide hard-coded regulation in response to what they deem as unacceptable and 'unprofessional' tournament activities, and how that is potentially problematic for *eveSport's* ongoing successful development.

7.1 The Appeal of eveSports

7.1.1 An Unbounded Sandbox

For the competitors, there was a wide range of motivations for participating in the tournament. For some players, their participation was driven by the appeal of competing in a 'true' unbounded sandbox. One competitor (in both the Alliance Tournament and real-money tournament) offered the following explanation for the appeal of competing in *EVE's* eSport:

> Anyone who plays EVE does so because of the social aspect. EVE allows you to investigate areas of societal interaction which are sort of considered scummy or are kept underwraps by the power elite... Diplomacy, management, leadership and morale are all very real and human factors. You get to don your cape of evil or mount your white horse and be a slightly different person. It is not so much role-play as actually applying a totally different persona in the sandbox.

The sandbox metaphor appeared in another explanation from a competitor of the appeal as a playground:

> [EVE is] a playground for people to let their morals have a little bit less halter and a little more of the reigns, if you take my horse analogy. And that's interesting – often fascinating – even if it's not always fun.

The appeal of *eveSport*s in this regard wasn't limited to the competitors. One participant in the research, who had never participated in the tournament, identified the presence of metagaming as being an important part of the spectator experience; "*I love that it isn't just about the actual skill of the pilots flying, but also includes other parts of the game too.*" Another tournament participant, discussing the appeal as a spectator, stated:

> I do find it [metagaming] part of the appeal, it adds intrigue because you have no idea what's going on behind the scenes and you might think that a match is a dead set outcome, and then suddenly out of nowhere a deal is struck and the underdog is the winner.

Thus, we can consider *eveSport*'s metagame a core component of the tournament's appeal for both competitors and spectators.

7.1.2 Tribal Valuation

Another important component of the Alliance Tournament's appeal is its structure as a competition between the member

driven, in-game alliances. A frequent metaphor utilized by informants was the comparison between the soccer World Cup and league based competition:

> *Part of the appeal of the AT for me is the alliance vs alliance nature and the interaction of everyone who is represented by those teams. It's similar to World Cup in soccer, vs the various league cups.*

One spectator articulated the affect of the Alliance-base for the teams as providing a "*frame of reference",* for appreciating competition between two teams. Another expanded on this in more detail:

> *Without a story it's a mess of pixels shooting each other. If you tell me "oh, these two teams are rivals, the guys on left are returning champions", well now I have some frame of reference and an idea of the tension. If on the other hand, I personally know the story of these two teams, have seen them arguing online for 4+ years, and know the amount of ego riding on it, that's something that's much more interesting still.*

This element of the eSport's appeal is well drawn upon by the commentators of the live stream; each tournament match is prefaced and immersed in discussion of the rivalry and histories of the two teams, involving both their previous tournament performance and the in-game politics between those two Alliances. For members of an Alliance competing, spectating was suggested to be "*like watching your local sports team"* and was an important drive for many of the spectators who "*watch the ones that are relevant to my alliance's interest.*" Further, one competitor suggested that this was one of the discerning factors of *EVE's* Alliance Tournament in comparison to other eSports which are "*mostly watched without that narrative and tribal valuation.*"

7.1.3 High Level Competition.
The desire to compete at a high level, and explore a new kind of *EVE Online* play, was cited frequently as a draw card for the Alliance Tournament:

> *I learnt ALOT about ship fittings and small gang PVP and generally how to fly. That was the main appeal to me, the learning about different ships, how they work together and what roles they fill and stuff like that.*

> *Before ATX* [Alliance Tournament 10] *it was my one 'Hadn't done this yet' thing for EVE.*

This appeal was reiterated when discussing the appeal for spectating an *EVE Online* tournament. The appeal of seeing players participate at a high level (one of the strong draws of watching other eSports) was frequently mentioned:

> *The appeal in spectating is seeing the cream of the crop doing theory crafting and flying at the peak of performance*

> *The finals and ones that I were told were good I watched mostly to just watch for the actual PvP.*

Surprisingly, while players were "*proud"* of their participation, motivations of celebrity seeking were absent, but perhaps likely to the self-reported nature of the data collection. One informant did note the fact that everyone would be watching only occurred to them the night before the match, thus did not constitute an important part of the appeal of competing. Similarly, a draw to many competitors was the nature of *eveSport*s as small, team-based competition, *"being part of a team feels good, and winning feels even better. Honestly, I can't really describe it better than that.*" Multiple participants in this study reiterated this attraction to compete.

7.2 Determining Acceptability
While the *unbounded* attitude towards acceptable types of play in *EVE* is a component of its appeal for most competitors and spectators, understanding the way in which players rationalize the distinctions between unacceptable and acceptable play is important for understanding whether the unboundedness of *EVE* has been transposed into *eveSports*. Overwhelmingly, players interviewed found the NOHO vs. TEST scenario to be acceptable and the Hydra vs. Outbreak final unacceptable. This sentiment was reiterated when reviewing forum discussions, YouTube comments and other paratexts. However, the reasons and rationale for these conclusions were quite broad.

7.2.1 Anything In-Game is Fair
The sole way in which *EVE Online* play has been bounded is through disallowing technical exploits. This attitude was similarly transposed into justifications for calling something unacceptable:

> *Literally anything in-game is fair game. If you can do it with an internet connection, through an un-modified EVE client, its kosher to me*

> *As far as what I consider 'unacceptable', it would probably only be mechanical exploits in the game.*

One player reasoned this in an interesting way; everything they were okay with was "*defensible against,"* and technical exploitations weren't. *EVE* is, as another player put it, "*fairly unfair*", as everyone is allowed to spy, steal and metagame. No respondents said that technical exploits were acceptable.

7.2.2 That's Just EVE
Play acts such as scamming, stealing, spying and espionage are accepted as part of the *EVE* MMOG. The interview results indicated that the unbounded attitude towards normally transgressive acts has been transposed into players' perceptions of *eveSport* practices. When discussing the NOHO example, several interviewees succinctly responded along the lines of; "*It's EVE, it's normal";* "*perfectly normal and fits into EVE*"; "*totally acceptable, and is a part of EVE as much as any other part.*"

This sentiment was very strongly reiterated in the comments of the official YouTube video for the Hydra/Outbreak final:

> *lol nothing new here, EVE is just the same as it has always been... if you play EVE you should be used to this, and come on, it has it's fun.*

> *this tournament and last were *both* won by metagame (spying, intelligence, bribery, et. al), all of which are part of EVE.*

Through use of the term metagame, the conduct in both matches is argued to be within the sphere of what constitutes the play of *EVE Online*, therefore suggesting it is acceptable conduct in the tournament. This presents strong argument against investigating eSports as detached from the amateur games from which they are derived. One player stated explicitly, "*if it's legal in the actual game, it should be legal in the tournament.*" Consequently we see that conduct in *eveSports*, at least, are understood through the same lens of acceptability as the broader *EVE Online* game.

7.2.3 As Long as they Earned It
Another theme that emerged relates to concepts of 'best effort' in sport. One common justification for the NOHO vs TEST match was that the "*match was already won; they* [NOHO] *were already out guaranteed"*. Essentially, purchasing a ship kill at the beginning of the match would have been unacceptable but purchasing a ship kill when the result of the match was clear was

fine. For NOHO, "*it was the best deal they were going to get, instead of going home empty handed having lost, they could go home 2bil richer*".

In the 2012 Olympics, 4 badminton teams were disqualified for "*not using one's best efforts to win a match*" [2]. These players had attempted to lose a match in order to gain more favourable placing (against easier opponents) in the next stage of the tournament. On his blog, Jesper Juul identified four interpretations of this concept of best effort: best effort in every single moment; best effort to win a match; best effort in order to win the tournament or 'do whatever you want' [25].

In the NOHO case, the players had exerted best effort to win the match. Since the result of the match was clear, and the selling of their final ship would not affect that result, players seem to view that as acceptable. Curiously, a different interpretation of the 'best effort' concept for competitive play was utilized in justifying the Hydra Outbreak case by some players. The extensive work that they put into winning matches, spying and manipulating the tournament brackets was recognised as another form of effort which meant they earned the result to play the final however they wanted. Public comments on the final's YouTube video [11] and forum discussions [1] reiterated this sentiment; "*how is it cheating if they beat both sides of the tournament bracket to get that far?*" And, "*fair play on the meta though, you put in the time.*"

In comparison, several participants in the research stated that the Hydra/Outbreak case "*felt different since it was the finals*" it was a bigger deal than the NOHO vs. TEST match which was a "*small thing*". However, the principal issue with the thrown final was identified through rhetoric of performance for the spectator.

7.2.4 The Spectator Experience
Reiterating the extent to which transitioning to eSports represents a shift towards the spectator was the opinion of some interviewees that the NOHO vs TEST case was acceptable because it enabled "*interesting discussion for the commentators*" and that it "*added to the tournament feel*". One player, who's opinion seemed to align with the 'best effort' arguments presented above, measured acceptability through a lens of contribution to the spectator's experience.

> I wouldn't agree with a team throwing a match in the first few seconds of the first round, and neither do I agree with the final match being thrown. The meta should only come in the mid sections of the tournament, where it adds the most unpredictability / excitement / intrigue.

Similarly, when discussing the efforts of CCP to 'design out' some of *eveSports*' less desired conduct, two interviewees disagreed, both similarly using language of addition or detraction to the experience of the spectator in articulating in their rationale:

> The in-game deals and stuff just add an interesting and harmless dimension to the tournament that you don't see in other eSports.

> I do think in some ways it takes something away from the viewer in a sense because alot of the enjoyment from sports comes in being able to analyse different teams and make predictions/bets about who will win/lose and adding in a completely unseen meta could possibly cause negative feelings for some people.

This same rhetoric of adding to the spectator experience was utilized in rejecting the thrown Hydra/Outbreak game. Rather than adding to the experience, by throwing the match the spectator experience was significantly diminished. Comments on the

YouTube video of the match [11] frequently drew upon this theme. As user JayLPsShiz stated:

> The real gripe not that the match was boring (it was interesting to see the metagame become so blatant here), but that nobody outside of EVE could see the metagame, along with most of those inside.

In an apology thread several days after the tournament, Amber Saint, one of the senior members on the Hydra team competing in the thrown tournament final posted an official apology thread from both teams (prior to their punishment from CCP):

> I'm really sorry guys, it wasn't what was planned, we were planning on making it a hardcore brawl and to hopefully have it be a close match, but things didn't go as planned. When we started the tournament we agreed to make the finals be a real match because we didn't want to **** people off, we didn't achieve this, we completely ****ed up, I'm really really sorry.

Another Hydra player similarly reiterated this in the ensuing discussion: "*We failed to entertain in the final (even though we intended to), I'm sorry and ashamed of that.*"

Thus, while the unboundedness of *EVE* has been transposed into the way players understand acceptable conduct in *eveSports*, the spectator, the newest stakeholder, and the quality of the spectacle created by these acts of play is crucial to the way that both players and spectators determine the acceptability of their conduct. As the Hydra/Outbreak final illustrates, the unstable status of this transition is problematic, and needs to be managed carefully as *eveSports* becomes professionalized.

8. BOUNDING *EVESPORTS*
In the lead up to the New Eden Open real-money tournament, the CCP Development team in charge of *eveSports* made several public blog and forums posts with regards to the forms of conduct acceptable in the new tournament format. CCP Fozzie posted the following clarification of rules (emphasis our own):

> Our guiding principles are:
>
> 1. Do not break any applicable laws, or the EULA or TOS of EVE Online
>
> 2. No individual can compete on more than one team
>
> 3. Each team must be attempting to win the tournament, and must fight with the intention of winning in each match they play. **This means that throwing a match to help an allied team win is against the rules**. In a change from Alliance Tournament rules, the New Eden Open will also not allow negotiations to throw a match for any payment, during or before any match. [9]

In the ensuing forum discussion, CCP Fozzie further clarified:

> You can bribe a member of their team to feed you their setup, just not bribe them to throw the match.

In order to enforce principle 2, a new classification of 'player' was required, reattaching virtual personhood to the physical body:

> You may only participate as a player on one team regardless of how many EVE Online accounts you own … Once you have a player character on a team, attempting to place another character on a second team will result in disqualification for both of those teams. [8]

In our interviews, players were asked about their views on the upcoming real-money tournament and CCP's efforts to enforce these hard-coded rules against certain forms of conduct.

Overwhelmingly, players felt that the real-money tournament suggested a new route for *eveSport*s, one in which there was "*less metagaming*" in order to "*get a professional scene going.*" CCP's new rules represented the "*cleaning up*" of the competition to "*make the tournament more 'fair'*" as CCP "*try to mainstream ... and broaden the appeal to the casual gamer*".

Reflecting on this, one participant said:

> *Perhaps those* [metagame components] *should be celebrated and used to make the game stand out in eSports instead of pulling the curtain over them. Those differences are what are going to make EVE stand out. If it was just like any other eSport then you are back to the fact it is sorta a boring game.*

These new rules represent an attempt to provide hard-coded rules of conduct, in effect, bounding *eveSports* play. Their intent aligns with the results of this research; the acceptability of *eveSport* conduct is determined through its effect on the spectacle for the spectator rather than through concepts of 'fair play' or integrity of the performance. However, 'best effort' arguments are problematic, both in eSports and other professional sports.[1] Based on the results of our research, we believe that these efforts from the CCP team are misguided, and do not sufficiently align with ethos previously established in *EVE Online*; an ethos that gives *EVE* its distinctive flavor and an ethos that encourages, rather than discourages, under-handed play and competition. As this respondent alluded to, the skullduggery and malfeasance of *eveSports* makes an otherwise boring spectacle interesting. Consequently, concerted efforts should be made to retain it.

9. CONCLUSION

With only a third of a million people playing *EVE Online*, it is going to be difficult for *eveSport*s to attain the popularity of eSport bastions like *Starcraft* and *League of Legends* with their tens of millions of amateur players who support the professionalized tournaments and leagues. Some participants in this study speculated that the 2013 PS3 shooter *DUST 514*, which is linked to the *EVE Online* universe, will introduce new players to *EVE* and stimulate *eveSports* development, and possibly create a cross platform eSport format.

We've argued that one of the unique features of *EVE Online* is the manner in which its play has been unbounded by terms of service or codes of conduct. As a result, a wider range of 'ruthless' play styles have emerged that *EVE* players find attractive and suggested strongly, led to a richer experience compared to other games. As *EVE Online* develops its eSport, this unbounded attitude towards player conduct should be retained in order to preserve this appeal.

CCPs recent efforts to bound the tournament play with best effort rules is problematic; specifically responding to and outlawing types of conduct as they emerge will cause controversy, challenge the rights of players and discourage the involvement of sponsors and larger prizes that are necessary for eSport professionalization. The sport needs to be developed to a stable condition in which players, spectators and sponsors are aware of the type of conduct which are and are not acceptable. The unbounded nature of *EVE* –

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[1] In the 10th Alliance Tournament, TEST played a weaker team during the group stage as they knew they had already advanced to the elimination stage. This wasn't intended as a way to game the tournament, but as a way to give less experienced players the opportunity to compete when the stakes were lower. This is a common practice in professional sports, but could be interpreted under CCP's new hard-coded rules as throwing a match.

which aught be retained – means this stabilized status will take time. Mapping and understanding the process by which this happens will be an interesting future research project.

Through examining online discussions and interviews with players, spectators and commentators, it emerged that the existing distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable conduct in *eveSports* hinged on the interests of the spectator. The play acts which the spectator was included in, or privy to, were more widely considered acceptable. Rather than utilizing a 'best effort' argument, CCP should focus on the *affect* of conduct which they want to avoid; i.e., any play which diminishes the spectator's experience. One Alliance Tournament player, who wasn't participating in the own3D tournament, felt that CCP's new rules post "*really reads: "make sure that it looks good on TV.*"

This suggests a possible alternative to bounding the tournament for CCP as the eSport develops; to what extent can *eveSport*'s opaque metagame be made transparent to the spectator? The openness of the NOHO case made an otherwise dull match exciting, and few spectators in the broader community reacted negatively towards a team buying their way into the group stages *because* they were involved and made privy to it. Designing ways for *EVE's* unique unboundedness to add to the spectator experience will align with its appeal and assist in carving a persistent and engaging niche in the emerging eSports market.

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