

Don't Play Me: EVE Online, New Players and Rhetoric

Christopher A. Paul
Seattle University
Seattle, WA, USA
paulc@seattleu.edu

ABSTRACT

Among successful MMOGs, *EVE Online* is an oddity, as it thrives in spite of a punishing learning curve. In *EVE* new players are assaulted with massive amounts of information and successfully making it through the first few days of play is an accomplishment. In effect, *EVE* instructs new players not to play it, to go back to other, easier games instead. Using rhetorical analysis, this paper analyzes the impacts of *EVE*'s design and the discussion surrounding the game to articulate how *EVE* demonstrates a counterintuitive route to developing a successful, long-lasting niche game with a vibrant, committed community of players.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences] and J.5 [Arts and Humanities]

General Terms

Design, Human Factors

Keywords

EVE Online, rhetoric, identification

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the world of *EVE* that a peculiar thing happens. Elements of *EVE*'s design function to push players away, as the early moments of the game effectively tell new people that they do not belong, that this is not a game they should be playing. In doing so, *EVE* presents a complex rhetorical message, one predicated on honing their community and ensuring that those who do make it through those frustrating early moments are far more committed than the average MMOG player. The impact of this approach is somewhat counterintuitive as it makes *EVE* what it is. By honing their player base in the first few hours of the game, *EVE* gathers a committed, unified player community upon which to sustain their game. From a rhetorical standpoint, telling new players 'not to play' is exactly what keeps *EVE* going, offering a counterintuitive pathway for the success of digital games.

Understanding the ramifications of *EVE*'s design and why it matters requires a brief exploration of rhetorical analysis. With that theoretical background established, it is appropriate to move to a discussion of *EVE* in general and then to the new player experience in *EVE*. Finally, the combination of a rhetorical perspective and knowledge of *EVE* articulates what *EVE*'s design

indicates about digital games more broadly.

2. Rhetoric, Briefly

Rhetoric "is the study of what is persuasive." [1] Influenced by the works of Kenneth Burke, rhetoric is about how elements of the ways in which we communicate influence people to act in particular ways. In the wake of Burke's work, the role of rhetoric expanded, as scholars connected rhetoric to ways of knowing, contending that "rhetoric may be viewed not as a matter of giving effectiveness to truth but of creating truth." [2] The end result of this articulation of rhetoric finds the discipline as offering "another perspective, one that accounts for the production, circulation, reception and interpretation of messages." [3]

Contemporary scholars in game studies have applied the ideological approach to address how, in video games "the main representational mode is procedural, rather than verbal," [4] which requires analyzing the procedural rhetoric of video games, with a focus on the "practice of using processes persuasively." [5] Game studies scholars have also examined rhetorical functions of games beyond the procedural elements contained in the code and programmatic design of games, like the ways in which rewards in games interact with player discourse surrounding games [6], how changes in game design impact a game's rhetorical environment [7], and how player discourse functions to define the terms on which games are played. [8] Rhetorical analysis is particularly well suited to examine how specific elements of communication seek to establish a message and impact behavior.

3. *EVE Online*: An Overview

EVE Online is certainly willing to let anyone try the game, developer CCP regularly offers free trails to give people a chance to do just that, but the most crucial element of defining *EVE* is an analysis of the new player experience, which hones the audience of the game and shapes the context of *EVE*'s player base through specific game design choices.

EVE Online is populated by about 330,000 players and still growing years after its debut, the game is played by relatively few people in comparison to many other MMOGs, but there are a number of reasons why this game is especially worthy of study. *EVE* features a single shard world, which means that if you know anyone playing *EVE*, you are going to be playing with them, eliminating any need to choose between servers and, possibly, friends. The game is also set in space, with a particularly dark motif to many of the graphics, giving the universe a dystopian feel. Game play is relatively slow and key activities, like mining, are tremendous time sinks and flights between systems can take an hour or more of flight time.

Character creation and execution is also distinctive, as players only design a face and torso to represent their character, not a complete avatar, and any character can pursue any and all skills for which they are qualified. Players in the game are represented

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

FDG'11, June 29-July 1, 2011, Bordeaux, France.

Copyright 2011 ACM 978-1-4503-0804-5/11/06...\$10.00.

through what is commonly known as a ‘passport photo,’ which looks very much like the offline equivalent.

Further differentiating *EVE* is the means by which players skill up in the game. Instead of picking a class, which dictates their abilities, any player in *EVE* can decide what they want to do and, if they subsequently change their mind, they can change their training to develop their newly desired skills. *EVE* does not have an analogue to the frequently found experience points that determine levels, instead the training system allows characters to level up around the clock, whether they are online or off.

Although these differences, and more, separate *EVE* from its competitors in its genre, the most notable difference is the brutal, harsh, cold and unfriendly learning curve that distinguishes the game. *EVE*’s learning curve is routinely summarized in similar ways, with notes that it is “mind-numbingly harsh for those who want a pick-up game, or a game that cares if you make it beyond your first 30 days—or even 30 hours.” [9] *EVE* has a virtually vertical learning curve, with a deep and complex world that has so many differences from other games that there is a veritable ton of information to learn. Even the game’s developers, CCP, note the difficulty of learning the game when beginning to play, stating that “you don’t have to learn everything at once and that some things you won’t ever need to learn” and “despite all our efforts to help players learn, most still gain the majority of their knowledge from other players which is the natural way of things in an MMORPG.” [10]

This last note is perhaps the most interesting, as it presents part of the reason why the developers do not necessarily have a problem with their reputation as the most difficult MMOG to learn. The difficulty encourages player interaction, as new players must interact with older players in order to ascertain how to play the game. Player interaction in the game is designed to create identification among players, developing a tighter knit community where those experienced in *EVE* are placed in a position to welcome those new to the game. This has led to the development of groups like EVE University (www.eveuniversity.org), a player-run entity dedicated to educating players new to the game, complete with classes about the finer points of life in New Eden, a mentorship program, and frequent placement into other groups throughout *EVE* upon successful graduation from the University.

4. Beginning *EVE*

Logging in to *EVE* means being greeted with a message about the number of other players sharing the server with you. An introductory cinematic introduces players to the world of New Eden, which was discovered when explorers left Earth and used the EVE gate to pass through a wormhole in space. The gate later collapsed, leaving “thousands of small colonies” in a state of “complete isolation to fend for themselves, cut off from the old world” and “clinging to the brink of extinction.” [11] Players are encouraged to forge their own fate in an emergent world where the bold are rewarded and the meek are punished. The narrative background for *EVE* is harsh and dark, depicting a galaxy where exceptional individuals shape the worlds they attempt to remake in their image. This setting perfectly suits *EVE*, as the early moments in the game are likely to make many gamers feel as if they are completely isolated and on the brink of extinction, just like those early settlers of New Eden. After choosing a race, bloodline, ancestry and biological sex players design their character’s appearance and select a name.

Players then move into the world of *EVE* where they are treated to a “crash course tutorial” about the basic mechanisms of *EVE*, including early lessons in piloting their ship, then end up in a space station where they can pursue a variety of different tutorial missions that are vaguely matched to potential careers within the game. Although the introductory process has been adapted throughout the development of *EVE* to make learning the game less frustrating and attempt to smooth elements of the learning curve, the current state of development can still be mind numbing. The user interface likely resembles little the player has ever seen in a game. Players are flying space ships, so there is no flat ground from which to orient. The choices to make and the menus to wade through are deep, complex, and rendered in small fonts, throwing players into information overload almost before they get started. Complicating matters even further are the frequently incomplete instructions that infuse the early game experience with a level of frustration that borders on keyboard throwing. Players are frequently told to do things, like add something to their overview, but they are infrequently told *how* to do those things. One mission warns players that it may lead them through dangerous space, unless they adjust their auto-pilot settings, but there is no guidance about how to make those adjustments. These events typify the early game experience in *EVE* and they are key to how the game socializes players, which becomes a huge part of what makes *EVE* what it is.

Moving into the game itself, players are faced with an array of options and bombarded with choices that seemingly have no answer within the game itself. Without turning to other players or resources outside of the game, they are likely to be so lost that they will never be found. The rewards for completing the tutorials missions are nice, but there is little guidance on how to sell or loot items and even less about what to train in order to excel in New Eden. The lack of training instruction is particularly mystifying, as part of the interface includes a system of certificates pilots can claim that could present players with potential training paths, but nothing is done to direct new pilots to this information.

Part of the result of the incomplete information within the game is a cottage industry of web sites and tools outside of the game that have emerged to supplement the material within *EVE*. The difference between these sites and companion sites for other MMOGs, is that tools like EVEMon and the EVE Fitting Tool (EFT) are compulsory for anyone seeking to make informed decisions about key components of the game, as opposed to optional resources designed to maximize play. Although external sites in many games aid in making better decisions and streamlining play within the game, a tool like EFT, which is designed to help players choose what components to install on their space ships, is necessary to weed through the hundreds of choices that may or may not fit the ship you seek to fly. EVEMon aids pilots in deciding on a training path, letting players select their end result and then backfilling what pieces they will need in order to get to fly a particular ship or possess a specific ability. Although all the information necessary to make those decisions is technically contained within the game, one would have to be fluent in dozens upon dozens of skills and all of their prerequisites in order to make even a basic training decision. EVEMon is so vital to pilots that “it really should be bundled with the game.” [12] However, by making these elements standalone additions to the *EVE* universe, CCP effectively hands ownership of certain elements of the game to players.

5. The Rhetorical Force of *EVE*

These elements hone the community of *EVE* players, much like a secretive club seeks to stay hip and trendy by staying under the radar of most people. The sheer fact that the game is relatively exclusive and hard to learn offers room for developing bonds, leading to identification with something greater than just another interesting game to play. To get through certain sections of *EVE* is a test, one that many do not pass, but just like many forms of hazing, those who do pass the unannounced exams share something in common that can prompt them to adhere to the greater group, even if you cannot trust them enough to loan them a beloved ship or in-game currency. *EVE* tells new people not to play it and, if those people keep coming back for abuse, they are likely to be a good fit for the community of pilots already ensconced in the universe of New Eden, as each new pilot can strengthen the community as a whole.

The tutorials that lack key pieces of information work as a lateral thinking exam, where players must turn to each other or find information on their own in order to complete the tasks they are given. *EVE* has built-in support personal to encourage the proper socialization of new players, from game masters who frequently greet new players with a welcome message, to an Interstellar Services Department, a group of volunteer players who spend part of their playtime answering questions for those new to the game. Accounts within their first thirty days of existence are enrolled in a rookie chat channel where senior players, GMs, and members of ISD are available to answer common questions and point players in the direction of useful resources. These pieces are built in to introduce players to the fact that *EVE* is a communal game, one where it is not practical to 'solo' and one that is not confined to the bounds of its computer program.

The rhetorical force of placing the role of primary positive socializing force on the players in the game, rather than building the elements into the procedures of the game itself, is that CCP quickly weeds out those that do not care or do not know to reach out to others, as one has to ask questions and find answers to survive and enjoy play in *EVE*. The real focus of the rhetorical dimensions of the early game in *EVE* is not necessarily about learning how to play the game, but learning how to reach out to the greater community of players to ensconce new players in what it means to play *EVE*, shaping the rhetorical environment of play for those who remain. By effectively forcing experienced players to help socialize new players into the game, it becomes quite difficult to play *EVE* past the tutorials and not find the beginnings of a means by which to identify with others or an initial push toward developing a connection that is greater than one's own play in the game. To thrive in *EVE* you must interact with other players, even if your interactions are solely limited to buying and selling materials on the public markets of *EVE*.

By producing a series of tutorials that cannot be completed without filling in the gaps, *EVE* persuades players into either quitting the game in frustration or reaching out to others. As CCP set out to design a game that would be made what it is by the players, the whole of the game needed to encourage interaction, rather than the ability to retreat into one's own 'solo' play. In providing what can be seen as a maddening introduction to *EVE*, CCP has created a game that features the emergent behaviors of

players as the crux of *EVE*, which enhances the opportunities for identification among those interested in a game where the players make it what it is. Should a new player fail to seek out other people or external resources for help, they are not likely to stay long in New Eden, a decision that decreases the size of the likely audience for *EVE*, while making the player base more homogenous and stickier for those who fit the narrowed target demographic.

In the case of *EVE*, rhetorical analysis indicates the substantial value of doing something different than other, competing games, as by pushing the masses away *EVE* attracts a committed sliver of the gaming populace and is able to succeed in the shadow of much larger, better funded MMOGs. *EVE* also indicates how the role of rhetoric in online games reaches far beyond the procedures of the game, as many of the distinctive features of the *EVE* are defined by the interactions between the procedures of the game, the community of players in the game, and the plentiful texts surrounding the game.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Campbell, K. K. and Huxman, S. S. *The Rhetorical Act: Thinking, Speaking and Writing Critically*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning, Belmont, CA, 2009.
- [2] Scott, R. L. On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic. *Central States Speech Journal*, 181967, 9-17.
- [3] Zarefsky, D. Knowledge Claims in Rhetorical Criticism. *Journal of Communication*, 582008, 629-640.
- [4] Bogost, I. Videogames and Ideological Frames. *Popular Communication*, 4, 3 2006, 165-183.
- [5] Bogost, I. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007.
- [6] Paul, C. A. Welfare Epics?: The Rhetoric of Rewards in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture*, 5, 2 2010, 158-176.
- [7] Paul, C. A. Process, Paratexts and Texts: Rhetorical Analysis and Virtual Worlds. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 3, 1 2010.
- [8] Moeller, R. M., Esplin, B. and Conway, S. Cheesers, Pullers, and Glitchers: The Rhetoric of Sportsmanship and the Discourse of Online Sports Gamers. *Game Studies*, 9, 2 2009.
- [9] Smith, C. 2010. If EVE and Battletech Got It On. *Levelcapped*. 10 November. <http://levelcapped.com/2010/11/if-eve-and-battletech-got-it-on/>.
- [10] CCP. 2010. EVE Online: F.A.Q. CCP. http://www.eveonline.com/faq/faq_01.asp.
- [11] CCP. 2010. EVE Online: Backstory. CCP. <http://www.eveonline.com/background/>.
- [12] Hammer. 2007. Eve: for experienced gamers. *Hammer's Eve*. <http://hammer-eve.blogspot.com/>.