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Temporary Break or Permanent Departure? Rethinking What It Means to Quit *EVE Online*

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Abstract

To date, much of the research about massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and the people who play them has focused on studies of current players. Comparatively, little is known about why players quit. Rather than assuming MMOG play begins and ends with personal interest, this article uses a leisure studies framework to account for barriers and participation to play. Drawing on survey responses from 133 former *EVE Online* players, this article demonstrates that quitting is not a strict binary where one moves from playing to not playing. Furthermore, quitting in the context of MMOGs is not always a definitive act as some players will leave and then return to a particular game numerous times. Ultimately, this article argues that the voices of former players are an underattended demographic that can add further insights allowing game scholars to better understand why players gravitate toward particular games and not others.

Keywords

EVE Online, MMOGs, nonparticipation, quitting, players

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Why Do Some People Quit Playing Particular Games?

A search for literature about "games" and words related to "quitting" (including disengagement, ceasing participation, etc.) infrequently leads to explanations for why players stop playing digital games. For example, the term "disengagement"—the act of withdrawing from a particular activity—when used in the context of games is primarily focused on anomie or moral disengagement (Greitemeyer & McLatchie, 2011; Greitemeyer & Mugge, 2014; Richmond & Wilson, 2008). Literature making specific reference to quitting is heavily steeped in questions of dependence—quitting games is like the need to quit drinking, smoking, drug use, or other addictive behaviors (Hellman, Schoenmakers, Nordstrom, & van Holst, 2013; Stetina, Kothgassner, Lehenbauer, & Kryspin-Exner, 2011; Turner, 2008; Van Rooij, Meerkerk, Schoenmakers, Griffiths, & van de Mheen, 2010) and is equally unhelpful to an investigation of why some players stop playing games.

It is perhaps unsurprising that former players are an underattended demographic, as it is difficult to locate potential informants after they have discontinued their participation in a game. And yet, Celia Pearce's (2009) investigation of *Uru* community members who found new places to congregate after their virtual world of choice was shuttered and Nathan Dutton's (2007) analysis of forum posts where players announced their intentions to quit *World of Warcraft* are evidence that tracking down former players is a difficult—but not impossible—task. Building on the work of Pearce and Dutton, in this article, I continue this line of exploration to better understand why players leave particular game communities.

The experiences of former players are a missing perspective from current research on massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), which to date has yet to substantially engage in questions about players who quit and their reasons for opting out. By investigating how former players describe their reason(s) for quitting a game they previously played, the goal of this article is to illustrate the necessity of moving past the unproductive assumption that nonparticipation can only be attributed to a lack of personal interest. Through an analysis of survey responses from former players describing their reason(s) for quitting *EVE Online* (EVE), this article makes the argument that financial, time, and other external constraints not related to disinterest act as barriers preventing one's play. Furthermore, quitting is not a strict binary where one moves from playing to not playing. Instead, quitting is not always a definitive act as some players will leave and then return to a specific game numerous times. After providing evidence that future discussions of quitting in the context of digital games requires additional nuance, this article concludes with a suggested way forward by pivoting away from the study of individual games and their surrounding communities. Instead, nonparticipation can be better understood by the reframing the study of digital gameplay to an activity that occurs within a broader, more ecological context.

Motivations for Playing MMOGs: A Review of the Literature

For quite some time now, games researchers have been interested in questions about what players get out of participating in an MMOG as well as cataloguing the variations of play styles that can be observed within a single gameworld. Frequently referenced by players and academics alike, Richard Bartle's "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players who suit MUDs" (1996) describes four primary motivations for playing multiuser domains (MUDs): achieving, exploring, socializing, and killing. This taxonomy has been descriptively applied to multiple MMOGs and virtual worlds including *City of Heroes/Villains* (Myers, 2007), *Second Life* (Chesney, Coyne, Logan, & Madden, 2009), *Lineage* (Lin & Sun, 2005), and *Ragnarok Online* (Lin & Sun, 2005). Bartle's taxonomy remains popular because it provides a straightforward model to explain the different types of behaviors that can be observed among players who are participating in the same gameworld. This model, however, was not empirically tested until Nick Yee (2006) conducted a large online survey based on Bartle's taxonomy. Yee's survey resulted in a reworking of Bartle's model to expand on the number of possible motivations and allow for additional variation when discussing what players do within gameworlds. Another key difference is that in Bartle's model, players could only be slotted into a single category at the exclusion of all other categories; Yee's updated version anticipates that players will be slotted into multiple categories according to their responses to his survey. This update specifically recognizes that players can be motivated by a variety of interests and reasons to participate in an MMOG.

Studies of MMOG participation not specifically interested in delineating "player types" have also found a diversity of motivations for playing this genre of games. For example, MMOGs can be a way of spending more time with people with whom you share a preexisting off-line relationship such as family members (Kallio, Mayra, & Kaipainen, 2010; Shen & Williams, 2011) or one's romantic partner (Bergstrom, 2010; De Schutter, Brown, & Vanden Abeele, 2015; Nardi, 2010; Williams et al., 2006). However, even an activity as seemingly straightforward as using *World of Warcraft* to spend time with one's romantic partner can take drastically different formats, such as Carr and Oliver's (2009) finding that this can range from sharing a single game account, to sitting side by side but doing different things in-game, to playing together and completing the same objectives simultaneously.

Research to date has illustrated that there is not a "one-size-fits-all" reason that can be applied to explain why people play, nor is there a single or standardized way to play an MMOG. And yet, this range of possibilities has yet to be thoroughly applied to the reasons for quitting an MMOG.

Barriers and Constraints to Participation

Rather than asking current players about their theories as to why others quit EVE, this article draws directly on the responses of former players and their reason(s) for canceling their accounts. While underexplored in game studies, talking to "quitters"

has been fruitful in other fields such Elaine Seymour and Nancy M. Hewitt's (1997) landmark investigation into why students drop out of science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM) majors. By including both students who stayed in the STEM fields and students who quit, Seymour and Hewitt were able to find that both groups were similar in terms of performance, attitude, and behavior. Only a small percentage ($\sim 10\%$) left because they felt a non-STEM major was better suited to their abilities, refuting the idea that students who drop out of STEM just couldn't "hack it."

A robust investigation of quitting can be found in the game studies adjacent field of leisure studies; leisure scholars have a long history of studying and theorizing about access, barriers, and nonparticipation in leisure spaces (see, e.g., Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991). These long established frameworks account for intrapersonal (e.g., stress), interpersonal (e.g., family commitments), and structural barriers (e.g., financial resources) that can act as constraints to participation and refute the idea that participation is exclusively a choice based on personal interest in a particular activity (Crawford & Godbey, 1987, pp. 122–124).

Before moving on to an investigation as to why former EVE players left this game, a review on the growing body of literature about women's nonparticipation serves as an example of how access to leisure is constrained by both external and internal forces. Furthermore, this research on barriers and access to leisure spaces experienced by women provide explanations for nonparticipation that move beyond "lack of interest" in particular activities.

The specific study of women's leisure has only existed for approximately 30 years, making it a relatively new area of focus for leisure studies (Henderson & Gibson, 2013, p. 116). Early investigations in this area found that women often did not feel entitled to a clearly delineated leisure-specific time (Deem, 1986; Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1989; Henderson & Dialeschki, 1991; Shank, 1986). Updates to this literature stress that it is not being *a woman* that leads to a lack of entitlement, but instead it is the externally imposed social expectations and gender-based stereotypes that lead to women to feel less entitled to leisure than men. Specifically:

> Gender may be said to be the 'cause' of some leisure constraints, not necessarily because of biological sex, but rather because of the social expectations (women are still primarily responsible for childcare in our society) and social controls (women make less money than men) associated with gender. (Jackson & Henderson, 1995, p. 48)

As this area of research inquiry advances, the literature about women's access to leisure has grown to reflect a more intersectional understanding of barriers to reflect where and how gender—in conjunction with other identity markers—can prevent access to leisure. This multifaceted approach to the study of women's access and barriers to leisure has investigated intersections between gender and race (Bialeschki

& Walbert, 1998; Russell & Stage, 1996), socioeconomic status (King, 2011; Tirone, 2003), and/or sexuality (Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997). This intersectional approach to the investigation are examples of what Karla Henderson (1996) characterized as a turn away from "one-size-fits-all" approaches to understanding women's lived experiences and are illustrative of the shift toward a much more nuanced and critical understanding of women's leisure and nonparticipation within this academic field of study.

Returning to the specific study of games and players, just as Jackson and Henderson (1995) argue that women's leisure participation is constrained by socially constructed expectations about what is and is not a proper "feminine" leisure activity, Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson (1998) argue that girls are socialized from a very young age about what is considered appropriately feminine (read: not digital games). Similarly, Shira Chess (2009, 2010) found that when women are targeted as potential players, advertisements assume their choice of games will be productive (e.g., personal development-oriented games such as the logic puzzles of the *BrainAge* series) rather than leisure for leisure's sake. Alison Harvey (2015) builds on this work, interviewing parents and children about gameplay in the family home, demonstrating that gendered assumptions about games and policing of who plays, what games they play, or even if a child is given the option to play a game, begin at an early age.

Taken together, investigations of motivations for MMOG play, combined with the investigations of constraints to leisure activities for women, provide further evidence that playing a specific game does not begin and end with personal choice. The growing body of literature about women's leisure and gameplay habits serves as examples of how women can be socialized away from particular activities, acting as a sort constraint to their participation that without additional probing can be misread as lack of interest. Ultimately, the goal of this article is to demonstrate that when approached with similar nuance, investigations of quitting similarly show that lack of interest is not the only explanation for nonparticipation in an MMOG.

Study Design

This article argues that the voices of former participants add insights to better understand why certain players gravitate toward particular games and not others. To support this argument, it draws from responses collected from 133 former EVE players who were surveyed about why they discontinued participation in this MMOG.

EVE Online

EVE is a game that has developed a reputation for being a difficult community for new players to access as well as a reputation for having an extremely homogeneous demographic (Bergstrom, 2016; Bergstrom, Carter, Woodford, & Paul, 2013; Leray,

2013; Paul, 2011). A space-themed MMOG that has been commercially available since 2003, EVE's player population slowly grew to peak of just over 500,000 active accounts in 2013 (MacDonald, 2013), more recently dipping to an estimated 396,000 active accounts (Royce, 2016). While this is fewer active accounts than other popular MMOGs such as *World of Warcraft* which peaked at 12 million (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010; Reilly, 2010) and has since declined to a still respectable 5.5 million subscribers (Kollar, 2015), EVE has smaller—yet fiercely loyal—playerbase (Paul, 2011, p. 262). In his investigations of the tutorial for first-time EVE players, Christopher Paul (2011, 2016) found that CCP Games, EVE's developer, left out key pieces of information that a new player would need to know in order to successfully learn how to play this game. Paul argues this is an intentional move on the part of CCP Games, as it "quickly weeds out those who 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" (Paul, 2011, p. 264). Furthermore, EVE serves as an illustrative case to investigate quitting, as it is an MMOG that experiences a large degree of subscription churn; Feng, Brandt, and Saha (2007) found that 70% of new players will abandon the game within a year after creating their account (p. 22). Recognizing that recruiting research participants can prove difficult once they cease participation in an activity, the next section details the methods used for finding former EVE players, as it will be of interest to other researchers interested in similar questions of nonparticipation and/or quitting games.

Data Collection

The data presented in this article come from a larger study that included current and nonplayers of EVE alongside the former players discussed herein. The overarching goal was to learn more about the reasons as to why EVE has a homogeneous playerbase (Bergstrom, 2012; Bergstrom et al., 2013; Leray, 2013; Paul, 2011), especially when compared with other popular MMOGs such as *World of Warcraft*. The inclusion of former and nonplayers in the investigation of this MMOG community addresses the oversights that can arise from only taking to current players. Other studies of this community have described the limitations of only interviewing current EVE players as being an "insider" leads to possible blind spots such as oversampling from players participating in particular in-game activities at the expense of those who participate in less visible forms of play (Carter, Bergstrom, Webber, & Milik, 2015; Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015). For example, in my experience researching this community, I have found that interviewing current players only led to discussions about player versus player combat, as it plays out in EVE unless I specifically probed and asked questions about other play styles. Largely missing from these conversations were discussions of the other in-game activities that are open to players, such as a variety of in-game activities such as resource acquisition, industry, role-playing, and so on (Bergstrom, 2016).

The specific study of former players was guided by the overarching research question: What reason(s) do former players give to explain discontinuing their participation in this game? The objective was to determine whether players leave because of a personal lack of interest or perhaps if EVE's "notorious" reputation as being harsh to newcomers (Bergstrom, 2013; Carter, 2015a; Paul, 2011, 2016) or if other explanations could be found for the amount of churn reported by Feng et al. (2007).

In order to recruit a variety of perspectives about playing (or not playing) EVE, an online survey was used as the primary tool for data collection. Participants were recruited via posts made to discussion forums (both EVE specific and forums devoted to other popular MMOGs), twitter messages using EVE-specific hashtags (e.g., #tweetfleet), non-EVE-specific twitter messages, and targeted ads on sites such as Reddit.com or Facebook directed toward users who have indicated an interest in gaming. Posters advertising the survey were also distributed throughout the author's university campus. Participation was open to anyone above the age of 18 and was not limited by demographics or gameplay experience.

To avoid preemptive opting out of the survey by former or nonplayers, the survey was framed as a more general study about MMOG participation. This decision was made for the following reasons: First, given that EVE has such a specific reputation (see Carter, 2015a), there is the possibility that some participants would self-select out of the study based on the assumption that a survey about EVE was not capturing the experiences of non- or former players. Second, I hypothesized that a more general approach would likely lead to a higher response rate from former and nonplayers. Third, labeling the survey generally would allow for the possibility of responses from MMOG players who had not yet encountered EVE.

All participants were asked the same questions to gauge their experiences with MMOGs before being asked to describe their level of familiarity with EVE. Based on their answers to this question about their familiarity with EVE, participants were funneled toward one of four branches of the survey. All branches of the survey concluded with the same demographic questions. Branches 1–3 were asked to describe what they know about EVE. As the survey was open to all, a fourth branch was specifically designed for participants unfamiliar with EVE. The four branches were as follows:

1. **Current EVE players:** Participants who indicated they currently have an active EVE account were asked to describe their preferences in regard to in-game activities as well as to describe the resources they consulted as they learned how to play EVE.
2. **Former EVE players:** Participants who indicated that they previously had an EVE account, but it is not currently active were asked the same questions as current EVE players, with additional questions about why they no longer play this game.
3. **Nonplayers familiar with EVE**: Participants who indicated they had heard of EVE previously but have never played it were asked to describe what they know about EVE and why they do not play this game.

4. **Nonplayers who had not previously encountered EVE**: After viewing a recent trailer for the game participants who indicated they were unfamiliar with EVE were asked to describe what they thought the objectives and target audience for the game might be.

Limitations and Scope

When studying the EVE community, there are particular considerations that researchers should be mindful of, especially if attempting to reach out to current players via the game client. Gaining access to tightly guarded communities requires time to build trust. Building this trust often requires the researcher to embed themselves in specific loyalty groups, such as the ethnographies conducted by Marcus Carter (2013, 2015b) and Oskar Milik (in press). However, access to one loyalty group in EVE often comes at the expense of another (lest one be accused of being a spy). While both Carter and Milik have gained access to players in one Alliance, by imbedding themselves in the group, they will have difficulties gaining the trust of those who are in conflict or "at war" with their informants. Also important to note is that recruiting within the game client can prove difficult as much of what constitutes EVE is part of a "metagame" that largely takes place outside the gameworld (Carter, Gibbs, & Harrop, 2012; Woodford, 2013).

It is for these reasons that recruitment of current players took place entirely outside the EVE game client. This means, of course, that this survey cannot be taken as a representative sample nor is it generalizable to the entire current (or former player, or nonplayer) player population. However, as former players are an underattended demographic in the games studies literature, this survey represents an important first step in identifying the diversity of voices that are excluded when studies focus on only the current players in a particular community.

Survey Results and Analysis

A total of 2,061 individuals answered at least one question of the survey. Of these 2,061 interactions, 1,009 were marked as complete by the survey software. From the 1,009 completed surveys, 28 were removed from the data set to comply with the informed consent protocols mandated by the author's university ethics review committee. A total of 981 survey responses were analyzed. The breakdowns of survey responses across the four branches are included in Table 1. For the remainder of this article, I narrow my focus to the 133 survey respondents who indicated they had played EVE previously but did not have an active account at the time they were asked to complete the survey.

The survey questions that make up the data for this article were all structured as open-ended text boxes. At the end of the recruitment period, the survey was closed to further responses and the data were imported into Nvivo version 11. Responses were coded by the author in two rounds: first using open coding and then a second time

Table 1. Summary of Responses Across the Four Branches of the MMOG Experiences Survey.

Response	Number	(%)
Yes. I currently play EVE Online	647	66.0
Yes. I have played EVE Online previously, but do not currently have an active account.	133	13.6
Yes. I am familiar with EVE Online but have not played the game.	145	14.8
I am not familiar with this game or I am unsure if I am familiar with this game	56	5.6
Total	981	100

Note. MMOG = massively multiplayer online game.

Table 2. Reasons for Quitting *EVE Online* as Provided by 133 Former Players.

Reason for No Longer Playing EVE Online	Number of Mentions
Lack of Internet and/or enjoyment	53
Time commitment (e.g., overall lack of free time and amount of time required to play EVE)	37
Learning curve	24
Financial reasons (e.g., inability to pay monthly subscription fee)	22
Social reasons (e.g., friends quitting EVE and inability to find a corporation to play with)	19
Left to play a different game	12
This is only a temporary break	12
Other (e.g., burnout and addiction)	13

where codes were collapsed into larger themes. The results of this thematic analysis make up the data from which this article draws upon.

Why Do Players Quit EVE?

If a participant indicated that they had previously played EVE but do not currently have an active account, they were presented with a series of questions to probe why they quit. The first question inquiring about their experiences with EVE asked, "Why are you *not* currently playing EVE?" formatted as an open-ended question with a large text box. All 133 former players provided an answer to this question. Many respondents provided a multisentence answer, multiple codes were applied to each response if more than one reason for not currently playing EVE were provided (Table 2).

The most frequent reason for no longer playing EVE was a lack of enjoyment or interest in this game. Take for example:

> The game was just not very interesting to me, I played for the trial and even I think part of the first 30 days but the game just didn't click for me. It just was not something I enjoyed.
>
> It's just not my kind of game. I found myself in love with the concept, and I still love the idea that there's currently an MMO with EVE's level of depth, but I just can't get into it.

Both of these responses indicate that the former player did not find what they were looking for in EVE that it was "not something I enjoyed" or "I just can't get into it." Participants who indicated they did not enjoy playing EVE tended to provide definitive answers, such as the quotes above. Responses coded for a lack of enjoyment sometimes also included additional statements explaining their reasons for quitting, such as the financial- and time-related reasons indicated in this response:

> I try to avoid spending money on video games I don't truly enjoy, and EVE requires a baseline investment in order to reach a level of consistent play that I find enjoyable.

Playing EVE (like all other games not played professionally or for profit) is a voluntary leisure activity, and for 53 participants, EVE was not an enjoyable activity to continue.

While the responses indicating a lack of enjoyment playing EVE seem to fall in line with the idea that nonplay is related to disinterest, other participants did not make statements to that effect. Instead, their reasons for no longer playing EVE made reference to external constraints such as money including "*Too expensive*" or "*The cost*," but also limited free time available to play, or a lack of a social circle to play with:

> I can have the same fun with games that do not need as much time.
>
> Too much time commitment, not enough of my friends are active users.
>
> I've played EVE for a few different stretches, and they were all defined by my failure to connect with a group. I either tended to play alone or got involved in a corporation that failed. When I did get into a 'good' corp, things changed in my life and I was unable to meet the time commitment. i.e. I'm a recruit with many short stays in many corporations who doesn't want the infamous 'part-time job' EVE provides.

These responses, while stating reasons for not playing EVE, do not necessarily provide statements that can be used to infer levels of enjoyment. Responses making reference to friends (or lack thereof) playing EVE are especially noteworthy, as they corroborate Paul's (2011, 2016) arguments that a social network is key to survival in this MMOG.

Unlike the reasons discussed thus far that either explicitly indicate or gesture toward permanently quitting, 12 respondents indicated they had only left the game temporarily. These responses indicated constraints to leisure time, sometimes citing school, for example, "*I'm having a break (school related) I will come back for sure*"

or "*I have finals*"; however, the reference to school and/or classes may be a result from recruiting via posters around the author's university campus. Other responses also described financial-related reasons for temporary breaks from the game: "Can't afford it! Resubbing this Christmas." These temporary breaks were always a result of external constraints usually indicated a time they intended to return (e.g., the end of an exam period) and never made reference to it being something about the EVE community that was preventing/discouraging them from playing at this point in time.

The existence of 12 participants who would otherwise be playing EVE if not for these temporary constraints necessitates an important methodological point. Those who want to be playing EVE but were taking a temporary break at the time of data collection have a very different relationship to this game and its community of players than others who have quit "for good." And yet, members from both groups would be considered under the same umbrella of former EVE players if the criterion for inclusion in this category remains "participants who once played EVE but currently do not." The nature of data collection requires a limited frame, acting as a snapshot in time. As a consequence of when this survey was conducted, players "taking a break" on the day they filled out their responses were filtered into the broader category of former players despite the remainder of their survey responses, indicating they have more in common with current EVE players than those who have quit permanently.

The responses from former players about why they do not currently play EVE for noninterest-related reasons or due to temporary constraints have illustrated the limitations of viewing MMOG participation as a strict binary where people who want to be playing a particular game will actively play it, and others who are not interested in it will be found playing something else. Financial constraints, amount of free time available to play MMOGs, or finding that their friends have quit EVE are all external constraints that are not necessarily indicators of a lack of interest in this activity. These responses serve as a reminder that play is never static, and that interests, amount of time spent playing, or even their opinions about EVE are likely to shift over time in ways players themselves cannot always anticipate. Take for example, this response from a former player about why they quit EVE:

> I tell myself I've quit but I'll probably end up coming back before long. 'People never quit EVE, they just take breaks'.

To further unpack this idea about quitting versus "breaks" and the fuzziness of the line dividing these two possible positions for MMOG players, results from a second survey question will now be discussed. Here, participants were queried about how many times they have deactivated and then reactivated their EVE account(s). Through a discussion of responses to this question, the category of "former player" becomes muddied further. Even within the group of players who participated in this survey indicating they shuttered their account(s) and explicitly stated that they do or

do not intend to resubscribe in the future, there were still respondents who were ambivalent as to whether this departure would actually be permanent—perhaps if something about the game and/or its community changed substantially they would consider resubscribing. Furthermore, this ambivalence on the part of players can be taken as additional evidence that a strict binary between player and nonplayer may be an inappropriate distinction when it comes to MMOG play.

Temporary Breaks and Permanent Departures

When building the survey used to conduct this research, one goal was to design questions to capture the experiences of players who stopped and started playing EVE on multiple occasions. However, some preplanning was required to ensure that the question was worded in such a way to avoid ambiguity, as unlike conducting a face-to-face interview or focus group, surveys do not necessarily allow for participants to ask clarification questions. Asking about duration of one's time spent playing a particular MMOG may seem like a straightforward question, but I will use my own history playing *World of Warcraft* to articulate where misunderstanding(s) can occur and highlight the importance of creating unambiguous survey questions: I first opened my *World of Warcraft* account a few months after the November 2004 launch (approximately February 2005). Since then I have taken numerous breaks from the game, stopping and starting my subscription throughout the end of my undergraduate and into my graduate studies. I have also taken multiple month-long breaks from the game, while paying for my subscription, but not logging into the game client. Answering what seems to be a straightforward question, "how long have you played *World of Warcraft*," becomes difficult. Do I simply add up the time between February 2005 and today's date? Or should I subtract approximately a year from the total (the estimated amount of time I have let my account lapse and did not paid a subscription fee)? And what about all the times where I have not logged into the account but I am still paying the subscription fee—do I count only the planned breaks? Or should I also subtract the time where I intended to play but am unable to log into the game client for weeks at a time? None of these metrics are any more correct than the other possible answers, but a problem arises when trying to compare/contrast answers of different players who calculate their total duration of play in an MMOG using differing criteria. Because of this possibility for multiple interpretations to the question, simply asking, "how long have you played EVE?" without further follow-up would not result in data that can be accurately compared and contrasted across an entire data set, nor does it explicitly invite a response that would indicate if this play has been consistent or if it was interrupted by breaks.

In an attempt to avoid the multiple ways to interpret how long have you played EVE that were outlined in the narrative above, the survey asked questions specifically about noncontinuous play. In addition to asking why the participant was not currently playing EVE, they were also asked how many times they had canceled and then resubscribed to this MMOG. Former players were almost evenly split between

those who had played and quit a single time ($n = 62$ or 46.6%) and those who have quit and reactivated their accounts multiple times ($n = 69$ or 51.9%); two respondents did not provide a response for this question. For the 69 respondents who indicated that they had quit and resubscribed multiple times, a follow-up question asked how many times they had reactivated their account; 67 respondents provided a reply to this question. Answers ranged from a single reactivation to a player who indicated they had resubscribed on at least 10 different occasions.

For the 69 participants who indicated they had quit and subsequently returned to EVE on more than one occasion, a follow-up question was included to further probe in regard to their *current* departure from the game, and whether it was permanent. This question was phrased as, "Is this another break or have you quit for good?" and it was formatted as an open-ended question. A first round of coding was done based on whether the respondent indicated they had permanently quit, taking a temporary break, or if they were unsure if they would be returning to EVE at some time in the future. Participants indicating they were taking a break or quitting tended to repeat back the question text indicating they were taking a break or "quitting for good." These were coded as either breaks ($n = 17$) or permanent departures ($n = 15$). Rather than formatting this as a yes or no question, by making this an open-ended question where participants were asked to write in a response, it allowed for the third group to emerge: those who did not know if this current deactivation of their EVE account was a temporary break or permanent departure.

The remaining 35 participants provided responses indicating they were unsure if they would be returning to EVE at some point in the future, such as:

1. Probably for good, but never say never.
2. Maybe. I don't have concrete plans to return, but I don't feel spurned or anything either. If the bug bites again I'll probably give it another shot.
3. The last time I said I quit for good I wound up with two accounts. I don't think I'll ever quit for good until the servers are shut down.
4. Probably for good. It would take significant changes in the skill system for me to try again.

In each of these answers, respondents use hedging words and are ambivalent about whether or not they will renew their subscription at a later date. These four responses represent the range of responses contained in the 35 responses coded as "unsure" in regard to their plans to return to EVE or not. Answer 1 exemplifies the brief and vague responses ("... never say never"). Answer 2's response indicates they did not leave because of a negative experience ("... I don't feel spurned ...") and makes reference to potentially resuming their subscription if their interest in EVE returns in the future. Answer 3 provides a bit more detail to their relationship with EVE, indicating they had previously quit, only to return and create a second account. Finally, Answer 4 can be read as the least likely to return to EVE of the four

examples provided, indicating that they would likely not return unless changes to the game are made by CCP.

One possible explanation for this subset of former players providing responses containing ambivalent answers in regard to further participation in EVE is that these respondents are suffering from burnout. Burnout is a three-stage phenomena:

1. *Emotional exhaustion* where a person's emotional resources are depleted with no immediate source of replenishment.
2. *Depersonalization* where the person suffering from burnout begins to have negative opinions about others and/or "expecting the worse" from them.
3. *Reduced sense of personal accomplishment* which is often linked to a feeling of hopelessness (Stanton-Rich & Iso-Ahola, 1998, pp. 1932–1933).

Previous research about MMOG players has illustrated how play can be highly instrumentialized, such as T. L. Taylor's (2003) investigations *EverQuest's* "power gamer" community. Such high-level MMOG play often requires long hours and/or a willingness to rearrange one's personal schedule to better suit the schedule of the larger group. An example of this comes from Malone's (2009) article about raiding in *World of Warcraft*, describing how her guild used a phone tree to wake up its members in the middle of the night to battle a rare dragon before their rivals could defeat it. Members of her guild were expected to make themselves available 24/7, blurring "the boundary between the game and the physical world by extending the obligations of guild membership into the everyday lives of the members" (p. 301). Similarly, Silverman and Simon's (2009) investigation of power gamers and their use of "dragon kill points" argues that instrumentalized play has become so much like work that positions in endgame raiding teams are advertised like jobs with applicants needing to provide a resume of relevant game experience (p. 362). It is difficult (if not impossible) to maintain high-level play in multiple games at the same time; Pearce (2009) found in her interviews with "hardcore players" that they "typically maintain only one subscription at a time, cancelling prior subscriptions in the process" (p. 267). Such findings, when put into conversation with the responses of EVE players discussed throughout this article, invite further probing of the concept of burnout or fatigue more explicitly in future research when asking players about their movement between games.

Moving Forward: How Do We Study a Moving Target?

The introduction of this article highlighted how little research has been done in regard to players who have quit MMOGs. By seeking out and asking former players for their reasons about why they are not currently playing EVE, this research has uncovered a diversity of responses beyond a lack of interest in this specific MMOG. For some former players, they did not enjoy EVE and/or its community, and therefore have made a permanent departure. Others would like to be current players, but

external constraints (e.g., educational obligations, finances) prevented them from playing at the time they completed this survey. Moving forward, the category of "former" players needs further nuance in order to differentiate between the experiences of players who have quit permanently and those who have taken a temporary break from EVE.

The leisure studies framework discussed in this article provides a starting point for game studies to begin to address the underexplored perspectives of former players. By explicitly acknowledging that intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints act as obstacles to participation, we can begin to move past the unproductive assumption that the decision to play a specific game (or even to play a game at all) begins and ends with personal choice. This article has illustrated that there are players who, if their personal circumstances were different, would gladly be playing EVE. Other findings include that multiple cancelations and subsequent reactivation of accounts makes how long have you played this game a difficult question to answer. Particular care must be taken when phrasing questions probing about subscription length and history to ensure participants are all answering the question in the same manner. Finally, these constraints to play may be impermanent (e.g., school or work schedules), which necessitate a more longitudinal approach to the study of players to allow these constraints to become more visible as they ebb and flow.

By way of a conclusion, I offer a suggestion for future research to address the gap in player research whereby quitting has yet to be thoroughly investigated from a game studies perspective. Very little is known about what fills a player's leisure time when they discontinue a time-intensive activity such as playing an MMOG. The research detailed in this article has elucidated the importance of longitudinal work where the changing preferences of game genre or play style, time spent playing, and evolving (or collapsing) social networks are examined over time and across multiple contexts. To date, longitudinal work often takes the form of ethnographies of player groups, such Nicholas Taylor's (2010) investigation of a *Halo* team moving from a local club to competing in an international tournament, Celia Pearce's (2009) exploration of what happens when the virtual world in which a community previously congregated was shuttered, or Mark Chen's (2012) documentation of the breakdown in communication that ultimately led to the dissolution of a *World of Warcraft* raiding group. In all of these examples, following a group of players is helpful to illustrate how play and play preferences can shift over time. However, in these cases, especially in the case of Taylor and Chen, these social networks and play preferences are directly anchored to play in specific games (*Halo* and *World of Warcraft*, respectively).

Building on these ethnographies, I argue for a break away from selecting participants based on a certain game they do (or do not) play, and instead take a more ecological approach to games and gameplay (Linderoth, 2011, 2012). Eszter Hargittai's (2015) critique of big data investigations that rely on data collected from only one site is also relevant here. In particular:

> If a study draws its participants, that is, its sample, from the users of a specific site, such as Twitter, then the sampling frame is that site, and anyone who does not use the site by definition is not part of the sampling frame and thus is not included in the study. That is, the characteristics, behavior, and perspectives of a person who does not use the site are excluded from the investigation by design. (p. 64)

Like Hargittai calling attention to the exclusion of nonusers, this article has argued that nonplayers—specifically former players—are overlooked by researchers interested in questions surrounding who plays what games and for what reason(s). A possible way forward then is to approach player studies from a different perspective, namely, identifying a group of players to follow across games and communities rather than identifying a game and compiling what can only be at best an incomplete snapshot of its players.

Gameplay does not happen in a vacuum and it is also short sighted to assume that our participants are only ever playing a single game at any point in time. Once again using my own play as an example, over the course of conducting this research I have picked up and then set down again multiple digital games depending on my workload, where I was in the world, and what games captured my interest at any specific point in time. I have also played alone and with friends, across multiple devices including on a console, on my laptop, and also on my phone. The choice to play a game at any particular time was context specific, and largely dependent on my surroundings, duration of time available for leisure, and availability of other (nongame) leisure activities. In sum, when player studies remain too tightly focused on a single title or even a single genre of game, it artificially limits the questions that can be asked about non/participation and non/play.

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