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Destruction as Deviant Leisure in EVE Online

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Abstract

In this article, I argue for the inclusion of 'deviant leisure'—a concept borrowed from the neighboring field of Leisure Studies—to provide Game Studies with a more robust theoretical toolkit to examine negative player-to-player interactions within online gameworlds. As a means of adding additional vocabulary to describe norms violating behavior, this article uses the Massively Multiplayer Online Game EVE Online as a case study to demonstrate how deviant leisure can be an effective framework for unpacking some of the behaviors observed within gameworlds that don't quite fit into other commonly used categories such as dark play, griefing, trolling, or toxicity. Of particular value for Game Studies, deviant leisure has within it an embedded critique of the social order. In this article, I argue that what is happening in EVE is a rejection of games being coopted by society into becoming an activity that must be productive, and instead via the lens of deviant leisure we can recast these events as a struggle for gameplay to return to leisure for leisure's sake.

1.   Introduction

Throughout my academic career, I have been interested in the behavior on the outer boundary of social acceptability. At some point, I was introduced to the Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) *EVE Online* (EVE), which quickly became the focus of my research. Early in my Ph.D. studies I attended a conference and presented some of my preliminary research. After my presentation about non-consensual Player vs. Player (PVP) combat in EVE, a fellow scholar remarked to me that they were glad I was studying this particular community because they had absolutely no desire to engage with such an evil game. While it is rare to hear EVE referred to as evil outright, EVE does have a particular reputation. The laissez-faire approach to community management by its developer (CCP Games) has resulted in a gameworld where scamming, cheating, and theft is pervasive (Bergstrom & Carter, 2016). Indeed, EVE is a game with a reputation for being particularly brutal. One of my dissertation research participants succinctly summed it up as such:

> *EVE Online* is a sandbox and the real charm is that in the dark back corners of the sandbox the players are melting the sand into glass and stabbing each other in the eyes with it.

By way of offering up a context for this current investigation, I look back on my own history of writing about this game and the difficulties finding suitable language to discuss the range of player interactions in this gameworld. Throughout my years writing about EVE, I have struggled with selecting the appropriate words to describe the sorts of anti/sociality I observed within this particular community. Trolling, toxicity, griefing, and dark play—all terms used in games scholarship to describe anti-social play elsewhere in Game Studies—seem to only partially match up with the player-to-player interactions in this gameworld. In this article, I continue to assert the benefits of integrating of Game Studies and Leisure Studies. I argue that Leisure Studies offers a robust theoretical toolkit to unpack observations of player-to-player interaction within online gameworlds. As a means of adding additional vocabulary to describe norms violating behavior in gameworlds, this article uses EVE as a case study to demonstrate how deviant leisure can be a fruitful framework for understanding some of the behaviors observed within gameworlds that don't quite fit into other frameworks commonly used to date.

2.   EVE Online

EVE is a space-themed MMOG that was released in 2003 by CCP Games. At the height of its popularity, subscription numbers were around 500,000 accounts, but in the intervening years, this number has decreased. While EVE's peak subscription numbers may seem small, especially when compared with peak subscription numbers of MMOG juggernaut *World of Warcraft*, EVE has cultivated a fiercely loyal player base of dedicated fans of the game. I, along with other games researchers (Carter et al., 2016), have argued that EVE is a game at the edge of its genre because it breaks from a few common conventions and/or features present in many other popular MMOGs. CCP markets EVE as a 'sandbox' style game, meaning that it does not have a robust storyline that players play out over the course of their gameplay; players instead forge their own path and make their own decisions about what parts of the game to focus on. EVE does not feature avatar-based player interaction, and all players connect to the game's single shard server.[1]

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[1] The exception are players with a Chinese IP address who play on a separate server. For a detailed discussion of the Chinese EVE server see Richard Page's (2018) work on the subject.

Aside from the mechanics, EVE is often talked about as if it is an outlier due to the player-to-player interactions within New Eden (EVE's gameworld). Taking a laissez-faire approach, CCP rarely intervenes in player behavior. Lying, cheating, stealing, etc. are not against the terms of service and indeed are a regular part of the gameplay. This makes up a large portion of coverage about EVE by the gaming enthusiast press (Bergstrom, 2019e), but also informed the early scholarship about this game (Blodgett, 2009; Craft, 2007; White, 2008). The second generation of EVE scholarship took a more balanced approach to the game that were less focused on the outright anti-social elements of gameplay (Carter et al., 2016; Chia, 2018; Goodfellow, 2015; Milik, 2017; Warmelink, 2014; Webber & Milik, 2018). This is not to say that examinations of treachery and deceit in EVE have stopped, but rather that the earlier work which is more focused on one-off and/or scandalous events, this new work as exemplified by Marcus Carter (2015a, 2015b), Ian Gregory Brooks (2018), or my own collaborations (Bergstrom et al., 2013; N. Taylor et al., 2015) is grounded in longer, more sustained investigations of this player community.

Throughout the history of academic writing about EVE, there has been a consensus that this is not a gameworld for the faint of heart. In my dissertation research, I asked current players to describe the game to someone who had never played it before. I received responses as succinct as "Brutal," and more detailed responses such as:

> I wouldn't recommend this game unless you are willing to learn and seriously commit yourself with time, money and mental state. It is a game that calls for you to be open-minded. I say that because the world is you, the players. And you have to consider everything, and I mean everything, that a human can and will do to another human.

Such descriptions of EVE point towards player interactions that skew more anti- than pro-social, but current terms such as 'griefing,' 'toxicity,' or 'trolling' don't quite capture the essence of what is being described in this participant quote.

Matthew Payne and Nina Huntemann (2019) published *How to Play Video Games*, an edited collection to which I contributed a chapter about cheating and EVE (Bergstrom, 2019a). Rather than putting forward a definition about what is (or is not) cheating in EVE, my contribution built on the foundational work on cheating by Mia Consalvo (2009) and argued that cheating in EVE is context-dependent. What is cheating to one person in EVE would just be a regular day in New Eden to another. To illustrate the slipperiness of defining cheating in EVE, I turned to a case study of Hulkageddon, a coordinated attack on certain groups of players within this gameworld. Essentially, players who were more focused on mining and resource acquisition and less interested in engaging in PVP elements of EVE's gameplay were targeted for assassination. Because these assassinations took place in what was previously understood to be a secured part of the gameworld, any attacks on another player would trigger a response from CONCORD, the in-game NPC police. Because the attackers would not try to flee CONCORD and instead allow their own ships to be destroyed alongside their victims, this was not technically against the rules of the gameworld. In the response to the chapter, I have been asked the question, if Hulkageddon is not cheating, what is it? I now discuss the Leisure Studies concept of 'deviant leisure' to offer up a potential way forward to describe the type of play that emerged around Hulkageddon specifically, and the sorts of play more generally seen throughout New Eden.

3.   Deviant Leisure

Leisure Studies is an academic discipline concerned with the activities that fill our time outside of work and domestic responsibilities. These activities can include but are not limited to tourism, athletics, or a variety of indoor or outdoor recreational activities. Despite many similarities,

Leisure Studies and Game Studies largely exist in parallel to each other, rarely intersecting. In my previous work, I have argued that Leisure Studies has much to offer Game Studies, such as providing long-established frameworks for thinking about non-participation to account for former and non-participants in games, two perspectives that remain underexplored in Game Studies (Bergstrom, 2016, 2019b, 2019d). Specifically, I argue that the frameworks provided by Leisure Studies acknowledging the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural barriers constraining access to leisure spaces (Crawford et al., 1991; Crawford & Godbey, 1987) trouble the assumption that who plays, what games they play, and/or when they play begins and ends with personal choice. Leisure Studies has long recognized that leisure does not exist separately from the context in which it occurs; each person will have a different relationship to (or ability to access) a particular activity depending on their personal experiences, wealth, and access to resources (Rojek, 2010).

Leisure Studies offers up multiple frameworks for thinking about games and motivation for play to extend the player types frameworks popularized by Richard Bartle (1996) and Nick Yee (2006). For example, Robert Stebbins coined the term "serious leisure" to describe the turning point from where a participant moves from casual to someone deeply invested in their activity of choice. Specifically:

> Serious leisure is the systemic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience. (Stebbins, 2007, p. xii)

This concept transposes quite nicely onto the patterns of participation seen playing out in esports, where the line between 'playing for fun' and practicing for a pro career becomes blurred. For example, Nicholas Taylor (2010) observed that amateur *Halo* players in a local gaming club began to practice exclusively on maps used in competitive international tournaments. While many of the youths participating in the club would never play Halo professionally, the fact that some club members were able to compete at the international level was inspiration enough that they too, should practice just in case the opportunity to 'turn pro' presented itself. Applying serious leisure to collegiate esports, Nyle Sky Kauweloa and Jenifer Sunrise Winter (2019) examine how the line between amateur and professional becomes particularly fuzzy, especially amongst students competing for scholarship money on their university's esports team. At the other end of the spectrum is the dabbler, "a person whose active involvement, technique, and knowledge are so meagre as to be barely distinguishable from others in the public at large" (Crawford et al., 1991, p. 317). While the specific term 'dabbling' is not typically used by game scholars, similar ideas of who considers themselves an insider verses outsider in gaming cultures are mirrored in research into who self-identifies as a 'gamer' (Shaw, 2012). Also relevant are the ways that women's play in casual games is often not seen as being 'real' or a legitimate form of gaming, as evidenced by the ongoing work of Shira Chess (2016, 2017). At either end of the spectrum—the aspirational labor of amateur esports players and the ways women are targeted with self-improvement style games—serious leisure makes clear the ways that capitalism co-opts everything, including digital gameplay.

I now turn my attention to deviant leisure, another concept from Leisure Studies that will be of interest to game scholars, especially those interested in the actions undertaken by players at the very edges of social acceptability. A relatively new addition to the field of leisure studies, DJ Williams (2009) explains, "deviant leisure is typically viewed as behavior that violates criminal and noncriminal moral norms" (p. 208). This distinction is important because early leisure studies literature was guided by the definition set out by Max Kaplan (1960) where a criterion of defining what is or is not leisure is that leisure is carried out in harmony with society's generally accepted values. However, starting in the 1980s, leisure scholars began to acknowledge that while framing

leisure as a reward for labor allows social order (and the status quo) to be maintained (Rojek, 1984) there was much to be learned by examining leisure at the margins of social acceptability or otherwise seen as 'deviant.' But how does one determine if an activity is deviant or not? From a scholarly perspective, Williams (2009) argues that deciding what is or is not deviant is highly dependent on disciplinary background informing one's theoretical paradigms, and goes on to acknowledge that psychiatry, criminology, anthropology, sociology, and social psychology all have interest in deviance, but the specific definitions may overlap or outright conflict with each other. To Williams, recognizing that deviance is complex and often context-dependent is key to broadening definitions to better acknowledge leisure in unconventional spaces within society.

Since then, scholars have taken up the study of sadomasochism (Franklin-Reible, 2006), serial killers (Gunn & Caissie, 2006), or even human vampirism (Williams, 2008). Violence is a theme that runs throughout deviant leisure literature, but to date violence and video games remained underexplored. Other than work by Fern Delamere and Susan Shaw (2006) who examined the social construction of violence as a form of tolerable deviant play when experienced or enacted through digital gameplay, the deviant leisure literature has engaged very little with digital games or their players.

3.1. Deviant Leisure as Resistance

Returning to the idea above that leisure can turn into a career, digital games are particularly susceptible to serious leisure thinking patterns due to the ways games are intertwined with software, IT, and STEM fields more generally. Some educational researchers have argued that the inclusion of games (both MMOGs and games broadly defined) as part of curriculum design is an ideal way to motivate students who do not find traditional classroom learning engaging (Gee, 2003, 2007; Prensky, 2001, 2006; Squire, 2011; Steinkuehler et al., 2012, 2011). Outside of formal education and games being a pathway into a lucrative career, other research has investigated the degree to which for some players to be hailed into gaming, games must still be tied to some sort of tangible goal or objective, in order for them to be 'worth' spending precious leisure time on. For example, Shira Chess found that when women were explicitly marketed to by game developers, they were implored to 'do something with their nothing' that is, spend their interstitial time playing a productive game that will help with cognitive function and memory rather than being invited to play for play's sake (Chess, 2010).

In our late capitalist society, free time is now an opportunity to fill it with a gig-style piecemeal employment. Now, not only do games offer up the possibility to 'play' at accumulation and spending of virtual goods and currency (Giddings, 2018), the act of playing can be monetized too. The rise of streaming and live broadcasting now allows players to invite an audience to follow their in-game activities (T. L. Taylor, 2018), which may, in turn, lead to tips, subscriptions, or lucrative advertising contracts. When statistics like teens who play digital games being 70% more likely to major in a STEM when they attend college (Turner, 2014), and STEM being held up as a gateway to a high paying job, games become a means to an end, rather than leisure for leisure's sake.

The term currently in use in game studies that is closest to deviant leisure is arguably the concept of 'dark play.' In the opening chapter of *The Dark Side of Game Play*, Jonas Linderoth and Torill Elvira Mortensen (2015) review the numerous ways that scholars have attempted to address play that does not exhibit pro-social values. Positioning dark play as similar to Sutton-Smith's concept of 'cruel play,' Linderoth and Mortensen define dark play as "…content, themes, or actions that occur within games that in some contexts would be problematic, subversive, controversial, deviant, or tasteless" (Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015, p. 5). However, deviant leisure has embedded in it a critique of the social order, which is not as readily apparent in the dark play literature. I argue that at least part of what is happening in EVE is a rejection of games being coopted by society into

something productive, and instead, via the lens of deviant leisure, we can see it as a Sisyphean struggle for gameplay to return to leisure for leisure's sake.

3.2. Deviant Leisure and Hulkageddon

Earlier in this article, I discussed the shortcomings of framing Hulkageddon in terms of cheating. Indeed, the events were not necessarily cheating, but they were a sort of norms violation—at least for some players. EVE is a game known for its high-stakes PVP, but at its very core, it is an economic simulator. All material in EVE must be mined or otherwise generated by players. Players who focus on mining in EVE have reported that they enjoy it because it does not require their full attention and they can have it running on auto-pilot in the background while attending to other things (other EVE accounts, or other activities outside of the game client) (Carter et al., 2014). Others may focus on the in-game economy, manufacturing, and selling goods at an optimal price to earn the highest profits possible. Manufacturing and mining are essential to EVE's gameplay, and this fact is not lost on the players who undertake these activities. For example, one avid EVE player who tended to focus his play on resource acquisition relayed to me in an interview:

> I think the true power in the universe lies in the hands of people like me and the industrialists and the miners, because without our supplies, all those PVPers and mercs are going to run out of ships within the space of a couple of months, and then have nothing to replace them with. And I guarantee you none of them have industrial or mining skills, because it's all about pew, pew, pew.

> But without us the whole system collapses, and it's that way in any industrial society. Without the workers, the people on the top or the business tycoons, the Vanderbilt's and, you know, all those guys, there's going to be nobody building shit for them. You know, what are you going to do? You know? There's nobody to refine the gas, there's nobody to dig the coal, there's nobody to mine the ore.

Contained in this quote is a clear argument about the importance of needing someone to extract the raw resources and refine them into the materials needed to make the ships that will eventually be destroyed in EVE. Yet, at the same time, it makes clear that the relations of production and exploitation are built right into the games that are, apparently, meant to be a leisurely break from our labor.

Heidi Franklin-Reible offers up the possibility that deviant leisure is a means by which some players refute the pressure to turn one's hobby into a career. Specifically, they ask,

> …could the motive for choosing deviant leisure be an effort to escape the homogeneity inherent in participants of consumerist culture in an attempt to combat the alienation of impersonal, dehumanizing, futile labour in the postmodern condition? (2006, p. 63)

This, I argue, is a key contribution that deviant leisure can make to game studies. The types of players that ended up with targets on their backs during Hulkageddon were largely those that Marcus Carter, Bjorn Nansen and Martin Gibbs (2014) identified: players who were seeking to optimize their time by setting their ship to mine an asteroid while they focused their attention elsewhere in order to maximize their efficiency. It did not matter that disrupting their activities would disrupt the EVE supply chain, and indeed my informants relayed to me that Hulkageddon resulted in the cost of certain raw materials to skyrocket.

The destruction of in-game items by Hulkageddon participants—which I note due to the setup of the gameworld have real-world value (Bergstrom & Carter, 2016)—are, in many ways, a rejection of EVE as productive play. One PVP enthusiast discussed her philosophy towards ships in EVE as disposable and not something to be precious about. Indeed, she summarized her position as such:

> if you're going to undock with it you've already decided that you're willing to lose it, hopefully. Or else you're, in my opinion, doing it wrong.

This idea of correcting a 'wrong' way of playing EVE is a key tenant of the Hulkageddon event. At the time of writing, the original Hulkageddon website is still online, with comments still visible ten years later. In response to a comment asking the organizers to stop the second iteration of the event as they pay a monthly fee in order to play the game in the way that they prefer, the organizer wrote back:

> You don't understand, your monthly fee /entitles you/ to log in and play the game, under the rules and mechanics CCP has provided. It does not entitle you to -anything- beyond that. EVE is a game that has non-consensual PVP, the only place that is truly safe is the inside of a station.

> The sooner you learn and embrace this, the sooner EVE becomes the most amazing sandbox game you will ever play.

Through acts of antagonism, the miners were being goaded into putting down their mining lasers and picking up their weapons. Some did, by organizing a counter-event entitled "Griefergeddon," where the hunters were to be the hunted. Others relayed to me that they simply logged out of the game for a period of time, returning to the game when it was, once again, safe to mine. But for a brief period of time, mining was no longer a simulation of the drudgery of offline work. Through the lens of deviant leisure, this momentary disruption became an escape from the futile labor of the postmodern condition where a group of players could live out the fantasy of what it would be like to not seize, but outright destroy the means of production.

4.   Concluding Thoughts

The goal of this article has not been to supplant the terminology currently in use to describe anti-social elements of digital gameplay. Trolling, toxicity, griefing, and dark play are all important concepts. My argument here has been for the addition of an additional framework—deviant leisure— to supplement and enhance this existing toolkit. By using EVE and Hulkageddon as a case study, my goal has been to offer up an alternative explanation to the events that unfolded in New Eden. Rather than griefing or creating a toxic play environment, the players targeting and assassinating other players were violating the moral norms that we have taken from our 'real' world and applied to EVE. Deviant leisure offers up the possibility to see these norms violations as critique: both of the players who have allowed their free time to be consumed by work-like activities, but also of our society which seems insistent on seeking out each moment of free time and turning it into a possibility of maximizing economic production.

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