# Ruthless Play

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## ABSTRACT

This Doctoral Consortium paper overviews the author's PhD thesis which aims to explore the phenomenon, affect and appeal of ruthless play through examining three ruthless games; *EVE Online* (2003), *DayZ* (2012) and *Warhammer 40,000* (1989).

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

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

## General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Theory.

## Keywords

*EVE Online*, MMOGs, Ruthless Play, *DayZ*, *Warhammer 40,000*, Ruthlessness, Games, Play, Design.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ruthless play is where a player unnecessarily disadvantages another player in a multiplayer game. Ruthless play acts are both ambiguous (uncertain) and bastardly (malicious or cruel in consequence). Like other forms of transgressive play, such as cheating, ruthless play can occur in all games and competitive sports. Consequently, this thesis focuses on their occurrence in *ruthless games*, in which ruthlessness is permitted and constitutes a key component of their appeal to players.

This doctoral consortium paper outlines the exploration of the phenomenon of ruthless play through examining three ruthless games; *EVE Online* (2003), *DayZ* (2012) and *Warhammer 40,000* (1989). I will outline the background and context for this research, provide a brief overview of prior work in this area before detailing the proposed project and methodology. I conclude with a brief discussion of current results and the contribution this thesis will make to Game Studies.

## 2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Several popular modern online games encourage a range of ruthless acts. These acts are inherently playful, and for these ruthless games, their ruthlessness constitutes an important part of their appeal and enjoyment to players.

*EVE Online* (EVE) is the most prominent and longstanding example of a *ruthless game*. *EVE* is a space-based massively multiplayer online role play game (MMOG) which encourages dishonest and morally ambiguous behavior such as spying, stealing, scamming and espionage. These behaviors are encouraged through being permitted by the game developer CCP Games, and examples are often publicly commended. Further, through implementing a truly one-world (rather than shard-based) virtual environment and avoiding clearly delineated team structures, *EVE* allows for ambiguous interactions between any of the 450,000 active subscribers. These interactions are ambiguous

in the sense that other players are not always clearly flagged as friend or foe.

A more recent example of a ruthless game is the 2012 modification (mod) to Arma II (2009), *DayZ*; a persistent world, multiplayer zombie survival first person shooter (FPS) game in which players are similarly afforded opportunity to engage in dishonest and ruthless behavior. Through disabling commonplace team-structures and enabling all-to-voice communication [see 1] all players are ambiguously available to either cooperate or compete. Further, by implementing consequential death (when a player dies, they lose all advancement), killing another player can become a bastardly act.

In order to examine ruthless play in a different play context, the non-digital tabletop war simulation game *Warhammer 40,000* (W40k) can be ruthless. W40k is frequently played at large tournaments involving over a hundred players. Some of these tournaments provide hard and soft coded rules to prevent players from playing ruthlessly (for example, providing sportsmanship scores). A small number of tournaments are held each year which purposefully omit these rules in order to hold a *ruthless* tournament where attendees pay ruthlessly.

These games are very popular; despite being an unfinished mod, *DayZ* has had over 1.3 million players in 2012. *EVE Online* recently celebrated its 9th anniversary and has resisted the recent anti-subscription trend in the MMOG market of 'free-to-play'. *Warhammer 40,000* is the market dominator of the tabletop genre. Therefore this thesis aims to investigate in what way, and to what extent, players find the ruthlessness of these games enjoyable.

This is important because a current trend in digital games is a move towards their 'casualisation' [5] and avoiding strong loss or feelings of failure [8]. The potential for playing ruthlessly is increasingly being 'designed out' of games which, I argue, represents a misunderstanding of its appeal to players.

## 3. PRIOR WORK

Play has traditionally been approached and understood as being both safe (without consequence) and pleasurable ("*normatively positive*" [13]). The concept of games being 'without consequence' has a strong (and false) relationship with the notion of games as bounded and separable from everyday life. Often, the victim of a ruthless act can lose virtual items with immense sentimental or intrinsic value. No existing research has studied the nature of these un-safe and un-pleasurable forms of play. Therefore, the manner in which the ruthlessness of these games impacts motivation and enjoyment is not understood. Consequently, our understanding of game enjoyment is possibly diminished.

There is a small number of existing research into 'un-safe' play. One example is Thomas Malaby's work on heavy gamblers, in which he discussed situations where the stakes are raised to the point where play is un-safe and un-pleasurable [12]. A similar example emerges in the work by anthropologist Clifford Geertz

who studied Balinese cockfighting [10], finding a phenomenon of 'deep play'; a game with stakes so high that no rational person would engage in it. This form of unsafe play similarly refutes the common conceptualization of play as a safe, inconsequential experience.

The phrase 'ruthless play' is coined and used here to separate the type of activity it describes from other negative and anti-social forms of play such as griefing and cheating that have previously been studied.

Mia Consalvo's work *Cheating* [6] is the seminal work on the phenomenon of cheating. Normally understood as transgressive and non-playful, Consalvo argues that cheating (loosely defined in multiplayer games as 'gaining an unfair advantage', such as hacking the client to make your character stronger) is inherently playful and reflects the nature of digital games as a spaces for experimentation. Consalvo's *Cheating* illustrated the values of studying these play-acts that exist on the boundary between playful and non-playful, acceptable and unacceptable. In *Cheating*, (and subsequent critique of the magic circle [7]) Consalvo argues for understanding the context of playful acts and the wider ethical and social implications that can be drawn from them, which this thesis also intends to do.

Ruthless play is also distinct from *griefing*, play which seeks to ruin the experience of others. Chesney et. al. [4] defines it loosely as 'unacceptable' behavior in online games, such as repeatedly killing new or weaker players. Chek Yang Foo and Elina Koivisto, who have conducted the most rigorous investigation of this behavior to date, avoid a single definition, suggesting that there are four categories of griefing; harassment, power imposition, scamming and greed play. [9]

They explain that these categories differ through explicit content, the kind of rules the play style breaks and the developer and player perceptions of the play style. Only harassment is distinguished by intent to cause emotional distress, whereas power imposition relates to demonstration of power (which can manifest in harassment like player killings). Foo and Koivisto argue that scamming exists within the grey area of griefing, as some players may desire to role-play as *"unsavoury characters"* [9, p. 5] and consequently abuse misplaced trust and scam, which would be called griefing. Based on their interviews with players of popular MMOs, they believe the distinction between grief and non-griefing lies in whether it exploits game mechanics, involves identity deception or promise breaking. What Foo & Koivisto fail to analyze is circumstances where these acts do not constitute a lack of rule recognition, where they occur within *ruthless games*, and where their intent is not to distress. This is the gap this research intends to fill.

## 4. PROJECT & METHODOLOGY

In order to fill this gap, this project will be principally informed by a holistic ethnographic methodology involving three case studies in order to explore ruthless play as a cultural phenomenon.

Each study identifies the affect of ruthless play on the play experience of one of the three stakeholders to a ruthless act; the ruthless player, the victim and the uninvolved player of the game.

The principal aim of this thesis is to understand the fun of ruthlessness; to what extent can we genuinely consider ruthlessness playful (and then design for it). Furthermore, who plays ruthlessly? What is the attraction of playing ruthlessly? However, a discussion of the broader implications of ruthless play (the social, ethical and psychological concerns) will be enabled through having an in-depth understanding of the act itself.

### 4.1 Study One – Ruthless Tournaments

The first case study, into the non-digital tabletop game *Warhammer 40,000*, investigates the appeal of attending ruthless tournaments to play ruthlessly, and the affect of ruthless play on the victim of a ruthless act. This study will observe and interview players at both ruthless (n=30) and non-ruthless (n=40) tournaments. Players will be asked to discuss the appeal of the tournament and the hobby of *Warhammer 40,000*. The tournament rules (which often contain sportsmanship scores in order to punish ruthlessness) will be used as a point of discussion. When acts categorized as ruthless are brought up, they will be focused on and discussed in detail in the interview. The appeal of attending certain tournaments over others will be discussed. Through attending and observing the tournament, ruthless players (and their victims) will be identified and sought for participation. The holistic ethnographic methodology will enable comparisons not necessarily drawn from interview data.

This study assists in understanding the affect of ruthless play on game experience through enabling a comparison between 'ruthless' and 'non-ruthless' tournaments, and consequently, the impact that the ruthlessness of a game has on ruthless play. Emerging themes regarding the appeal of the ruthlessness (or lack of) have also suggested grounds to investigate the digital ruthless experience, potentially gleaning insight into the mediating affect of the computer screen in play.

### 4.2 Study 2 – Survive (Ruthlessly)

The principal aim of study two is to further understand the appeal and choice of playing ruthlessly. This study will do so by reflecting on the concept of player types, testing the hypothesis that the ruthless player is distinct from the griefer.

Nick Yee [14] developed a highly cited and cross-culturally validated [15] metric for player types in order to develop a conceptual framework for online gaming motivations. This metric shows that the player-reported enjoyment of online game acts strongly correlates into 9 separate player types. These 9 player types also correlate into three categories; players who enjoy socialising also enjoy teamwork, etc.

Ruthless acts (such as scamming or stealing) have not been measured in this existing research; consequently, it is a contribution of this thesis to re-deploy Yee's survey with ruthless acts included. This will identify the ruthless player within this empirically validated framework for player types. I hypothesize that a ruthless player type will emerge as separate (but correlated to) the griefer, legitimizing the conceptual distinction I make between the two play acts.

This online survey will be advertised online on *DayZ* fan sites, discussion forums and twitter. The game developer has agreed to assist in publicising the survey. This will enable the broad range of *DayZ* players opportunity to participate.

As this quantitative data will be self-reported and anonymous (n=400), it is necessary to augment this data collection with qualitative semi-structured acts with players. As well as (n=15) interviews conducted online, a small number (n=10) will be conducted in the Interaction Design Lab at The University of Melbourne. These interviews, with users who have played *DayZ* before, will involve hour-long play sessions of *DayZ*, after which the player will be asked to reflect on specific (ideally, ruthless) instances of their play.

### 4.3 Study 3 – Ruthlessness Unbounded

Unlike Studies One and Two, *EVE Online* does not require ruthlessness. It is possible to play *EVE Online* without the

expectation of ruthlessness; something not possible in a ruthless *Warhammer 40,000* tournament or the harsh, survivor-focused *DayZ*. Consequently, study three enables data collection with regards to the affect of ruthlessness on the non-ruthless player, as well as data validation for the theories developed in studies one and two on the ruthless player and appeal of ruthless games.

This data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with (n=40) players. These interviews will principally be conducted online (through both voice chat and text), but some data collection will occur offline at both The University of Melbourne and *EVE Online*'s annual 'FanFest'. While some of the players interviewed for this study will be ruthless players, the majority will be those who do not necessarily engage in explicitly ruthless acts (such as scamming) in order to identify the affect of ruthlessness on their play experience.

A small number of players (n=5) will be asked to maintain player-diaries in which they will provide account for their play over a two week period. They will be asked to identify what they did in each play session. Interviews will then take place in which these diaries will be discussed. The focus points of these interviews will respond to the themes that emerged in the earlier studies.

Each of these studies will be complemented by a thorough reading of the varying forms of game paratexts [6] that inform the player experience of the game. This is essential because the game is not an isolated media, but experienced in conjunction with the materials available online on forums, game news websites, discussion boards, developer blogs and game trailers. Official materials will be focused on (such as official Wiki's and public comments from developers) but player created materials will also be reviewed.

## 5. RESULTS TO DATE
Data collection for study one, examining ruthlessness at W40k tournaments, is close to data saturation. The rich volume of interview data will be further complemented by my ongoing attendance (as a researcher) at the range of tournaments in Victoria, Australia. Through attending numerous tournaments this study further hopes to identify the role of the tournament setting in mediating play.

A quantitative survey has been developed for study two, undergoing a small pilot stage (n=8) in order to improve language and survey design. This survey, collecting data on player types and the appeal of *DayZ* to players will be put online following release of the standalone version of *DayZ* in late 2012.

A considerable volume of data has been collected (and published [see 2, 3]) from *EVE Online* players, but little of this is specific to this research. This earlier research has identified players and developed relationships which will be utilized in this research.

## 6. CONTRIBUTION
Ruthless play is distinct from other transgressive play acts such as cheating or griefing which have been studied in some depth. As ruthless play is poorly (if at all) understood in an academic context this thesis will contribute to the larger body of work seeking to map and understand these unusual play types which are an important part of the appeal of many popular games

Furthermore, approaching ruthlessness as a desirable quality of gameplay is counter to prevailing trends in game design where they are normally 'designed out'. Through highlighting the appeal and positive affects that ruthless acts have on gameplay, this research has the potential to contribute to the design and study of games. I believe that ruthless play represents an otherwise underutilized and unconsidered form of play, and through

studying it in depth, argue for it to be considered when developing systems for enjoyable social and player interactions.

Through doing this broad and comprehensive study, discussing the ethical, social and psychological implications of these forms of play will be possible. Without this in-depth understanding, it is difficult to begin to speculate on the possible negative consequences of ruthless play on players and society.

Finally, while there are a small number of nascent *EVE Online* projects, this thesis focuses on comparatively understudied games. While having heavily influenced the development of the real-time-strategy genre, the gameplay of W40k is understudied. Further, *DayZ* in particular is an exciting and current site for game studies research; PC Gamer called *DayZ* "*one of the most important things to happen in gaming*" in 2012 [11], and the standalone version of the game will only be released in beta mode in mid 2013.

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