

December 2022

The Caretaking of EVE Online: Institutional Ethics and Enactments at CCP Games

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THE CARETAKING OF *EVE ONLINE*: INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS AND ENACTMENTS
AT CCP GAMES

by

Joshua William Rivers

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Anthropology

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

December 2022

ABSTRACT

THE CARETAKING OF *EVE ONLINE*: INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS AND ENACTMENTS AT CCP GAMES

by

Joshua William Rivers

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2022
Under the Supervision of Professor Thomas Malaby

This ethnography examines the Icelandic video game developer CCP Games, the makers of *EVE Online*—a massively-multiplayer online game (MMO) that takes place in a star cluster far, far away. Through my exploration of CCP Games as an institution over the span of fourteen months, I highlight how corporations are culturally-situated, enacted entities. Simultaneously, I demonstrate that these culturally-located actors who serve as the architects of our digital infrastructures undertake such efforts from their situated vantage points, thereby embedding particular ethical commitments into the digital landscapes they craft and within which we live our social lives. Created with the intent to be a ‘virtual world more meaningful than real life,’ *EVE Online* serves as the focal point of my observations of the quotidian practices of CCP Games’s employees as they enact multiple versions of the company and, in doing so, show that it, like any corporation, is not a singular being, but rather a composite of social actors and commitments. Simultaneously, I uncover how the Icelandic context of the company informed the company’s creation and the original development of *EVE Online* while also showing how the evocation of said Icelandic context impacts the company’s development practices to this day. In doing so, I highlight how this “Icelandic” approach to game development impacts the way in which ethical commitments are made and thereby architected into the game. While my ethnographic focus is that of an Icelandic video game maker, this ethnography demonstrates the impact of cultural situatedness on the architecting of digital infrastructures and the importance of further research at the intersection of technology, ethics, and culture.

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To Sam, for never giving up

To the Cabin Crew, for filling the journey with boardgames and laughter

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Crafting an ethnography, especially during a pandemic, is no small task. While I grew as both a scholar and researcher throughout my time at CCP Games, I would never have accomplished this alone. I would like to start by thanking my advisor, Thomas Malaby, who helped me navigate the entire process of ethnographic fieldwork at a video game developer with patience and kindness. His guidance saw this dissertation completed. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Trudy Turner, Paul Brodwin, Stuart Moulthrop, and Kristín Loftsdóttir for their advice and support during this process. To Kristín I send my deepest thanks for her advice, office space, endless patience to listen about the latest observation I had made at CCP, and most importantly for opening her home to me on countless Sundays, welcoming me into what was always a warm and comforting space on a cold island I had yet to see as my home.

Next, I would like to thank everyone at CCP Games. To the ‘Q’ go my thanks for approving this project and allowing me unheard-of access to the company, internal archives, and the daily goings-on of a video game developer. Such transparency to a researcher under only the lightest of NDAs is unprecedented in the industry and shows how truly open to learning CCP’s leadership both was and is today. While I would love to thank every CCP employee who aided my research, I fear that this would then quickly become the largest section of the dissertation if I did so. Accordingly, I must omit many of you, but know that I am grateful. That said, special thanks go to CCP Mimic, who welcomed me into her team and taught me what being a good manager looks like, to CCP Mischief, who created opportunities for me without me even knowing, to CCP Eagle for offering me my first job in the games industry, to my tea-loving friend for always listening to me vent my frustrations, to my opossum-loving friend for our walks to work, to CCP Frenchie who taught me that lifting weights is part of writing, and finally to CCP Antiquarian for becoming a cornerstone of my fieldwork and my closest friend in Iceland, still to this day.

I must also thank my friends outside of CCP Games for their part in aiding me along my dissertation journey. To my friends from the Árni Magnússon summer language school program, thank you. My life has forever been changed by you all and my time in Iceland was irreversibly altered by the bonds forged with people in the program. Similar thanks to the Fulbright cohort of 2019-2020, who each shaped this work in their own way, but a particular acknowledgement is owed Adam Zimmer, my writing retreat partner.

This project would also never have been possible without the financial support of the Fulbright Commission of Iceland, the American Scandinavian Foundation, and the Leifur Eiríksson Foundation. My thanks to each organization for their belief in this project as well as in the importance of exploring the intersection of Icelandic culture, technology, and ethics.

While there are many people to thank in Iceland, I must also thank those elsewhere in the world. To Laya Liebeseller and Krista-Lee Malone, thank you for being like family in Milwaukee. Both of you have helped me in countless ways, from how to approach both research problems and personal problems, you have both changed me as a person and my work since meeting you.

To my parents, Kevin and Melissa Rivers, thank you for keeping me grounded to the world outside of Iceland. To Kelsey and Lindsey Rivers, thank you for asking the oddest of questions, thereby sparking entire trains of thought that now comprise the foundation of my argument. To all of you, thank you for family game time during the pandemic. I would not have made it through May and June of 2020 without our Sunday online meetings.

Finally, to the most important person in my life, my husband, Sam Rivers. Thank you for everything and more. Words cannot describe how much I love and rely on you, as well as how much of a rock you have been throughout this process. From letting me go to the field in the first place, to leading us in finding our way back to one another during the pandemic, to watching me write until all hours of the night in order to finish this work. Thank you, my little prince.

Chapter One: Introduction

Kick-Off 2019

The skies above Reykjavík are particularly grey this morning. It is 8:30 AM, a time I do not like seeing, in late August of 2019. As I slowly make my way across the University of Iceland's campus, I see my destination in the distance: the concrete shell of a building named *Gróska*, an Icelandic word that carries the meaning of both growth and fertility. This skeleton of a building sits between the headquarters of the genetics research company deCode¹ and the University of Iceland's campus. I am alone on the path, accompanied only by the high-synth euro-pop waves of what would become my commute song² but as I draw closer to the yet active construction site, I begin to notice other groggy commuters slowly headed towards a stack of shipping reclaimed shipping containers now serving as a construction site office and the entrance to today's event. A group of three of us enter the former shipping container that now serves as a makeshift safety office, Icelandic warnings about construction debris included, and I am greeted by a team of women exuding an almost unbelievable amount of energy and enthusiasm for a Friday morning: CCP Skerpla, CCP Asa, CCP Isafold, and CCP Horsewhisperer³. Three of the women work in CCP's Human Resources department and the other as a receptionist, but all are heavily involved in the process of enacting CCP as a professional institution. Noting the seeming gender disparity between the employees of the HR department and reception as compared to those in line with me, I briefly note to myself the stark contrast in attitude and demeanor before looking at the multi-colored palette of safety helmets.

¹ deCode are a scientific research company headed by a particularly surly looking Icelander named Kari Stefansson, who is known to meddle in government affairs and voice strong opinions while also wielding deCode's formidable scientific strengths to the benefit of broader Icelandic society. More on this in Chapter Four.

² "Hourglass" by Alice Charter became my anthem for my walk to and from my fieldsite every day.

³ Welcome to the first of many lists of CCP names. Each employee of CCP is required to choose a 'CCP Name' for themselves when they join the company. It can be anything, so long as the name has not been chosen before. Mine, for instance, was CCP Augustine. These names will be used to provide pseudo anonymity for my interlocutors.

Seeing my eyes take focus on a green helmet, CCP Skerpla chimes a cheerful, “Good morning, Josh, what color would you like?” to which I answer, “Hey, green please, thanks.” She hands me both a neon-yellow vest and the green helmet I requested and I don both articles of safety clothing, neither of them fitting me particularly well (See Figure 1). Disgruntled at my appearance, but eager to start the day, I make my way into the courtyard of CCP’s future home.



Figure 1. The author in safety gear at *Gróska*

The air is bitingly cold within the concrete walls of the courtyard and I see none of the four people I know. With a coffee in one hand and my notebook in the other, I take a seat on the cold concrete of the future auditorium as I wait for the beginning of today’s ceremonial event, one that drew all two-hundred and eighty-two employees of CCP Games’ Reykjavík and London offices to a construction site on the outskirts of Reykjavík’s downtown: Kick-Off 2019. Every year, CCP Games gathers its employees at its headquarters in Iceland to *kick off* the year at a festival of sorts wherein senior leadership and producers from across different teams impress upon the employees gathered the significance of the work they have undertaken, while also speaking to what lays ahead for the coming year. Intriguingly, CCP Games has always held its Kick-Off in late August, reminiscent of a

university's orientation seminars for new students. 2019 was to be no different from years past and at roughly 9:30 AM, the CEO of CCP Games, Hilmar Pétursson, moves to the front of the auditorium as a hush falls over the crowd of employees, each sitting on an outdoor seating cushion that nevertheless lets the icy cold of the concrete seep into one's bones.

Wearing a blue polo and sporting what appears to be a relatively fresh haircut, the smile that this nearly two-meter tall, red-haired man evidences while taking to the front of the room instantly vanishes as he utters into the microphone he holds a seemingly dramatic and dire phrase, "We are in the bad scenario." Following a flurry of charts projected onto a screen behind him, Hilmar talks about the need for a rebirth of *EVE Online*, noting ultimately that, "Our goal as a company is to create EVE Forever, a world that exists beyond us for look at the good this world has done and the meaning it produces in the 'real world'." For having uttered such a dire phrase, none of the employees around me look at all concerned. In fact, most look quite thoroughly bored. As my time at CCP Games would develop, I would come to understand one explanation why: Hilmar was enacting CCP Games as the caretaker of New Eden,⁴ one that needed to be deeply concerned with the unhealthy ecosystem currently brewing in its virtual world. In contrast, the employees were enacting CCP Games as the institutional body that dragged them to a cold auditorium to tell them something they had already heard earlier in the summer of 2019.

What follows Hilmar's grim prediction of the current state of *EVE Online* is a call to action in the selfsame speech, a rally to focus on improving the experience for not only current players, but a "new generation of capsuleers⁵." As he closes his opening with an introduction of various producers, marketing leads, and technical directors, I think to myself about the motivation

⁴ New Eden is the name of the stellar cluster setting of *EVE Online*. The two will be used interchangeably throughout as they are in the halls of CCP Games.

⁵ Capsuleers are the player characters of *EVE Online* and the term is used interchangeably for 'our game's players'.

behind keeping *EVE Online* alive. Despite calls to consider corporations not as singular entities, but rather as multiplicitous enactments of social relationships wherein ethical commitments and stances vary based on the enactment (cf. Welker 2014), Benson and Kirsch's position that all corporate entities are "to some extent implicated in harm," is an increasingly popular one in social discourse and academic literature on institutions (2010: 467). How then, did Hilmar's call to keep *EVE Online* alive forever because of the social benefit it has had for its players belie the purportedly malevolent motivations of CCP Games as a corporate entity? This question tugs at me as a presentation on the latest changes to the game's tutorial by a strongly confident woman with piercing eyes yet a bright smile, CCP Mischief, concludes. Two more presentations follow and the assembled crowd is ushered into a small courtyard outside of the auditorium for some coffee and sunlight.

I am not given long to wallow in my choice of a sub-arctic fieldsite as Bergur Finnbogason, Creative Director and my only active contact at CCP at present, greets me and begins hurriedly introducing me to various people standing outside of the shell of a building in the already muted rays of sunlight that Iceland offers its inhabitants in late August. While I quickly forget most of the flurry of Icelandic names being tossed my way in brief introductions, I latch onto one introduction in particular. Standing in some gravel while trying to warm ourselves in the sunlight, Bergur introduces me to Árni, a relatively gruff-looking, tattoo-covered UI Designer who Bergur knows from his early university days. Previously a graffiti artist, Árni has been with CCP for 11 years and has traveled the world with them. Smiling a gold-toothed smile, he warmly greets me and we three begin talking about what I am doing at CCP following Bergur's gleeful exclamation, "This is Josh, he's an anthropologist and he's here to study us." The willingness and seemingly eager approach Bergur has as he quite candidly explains my new role at CCP takes me a bit aback. I smile and chat

to Árni⁶ about his tattoos and history in art school nevertheless as a small chime rings and we are summoned back to the auditorium.

Following more presentations on current initiatives and a brief mention by then Vice President of Product, James, on a restructure that's currently underway, lunch is called. Waiting once more in the courtyard of CCP's new home, Bergur introduces me to EVE's Game Design Director, CCP Muppet Hunter. Again with a smile on his face, Bergur proclaims, "This is Josh, our new anthropologist. He's not a designer but with his background and skills he has a lot to contribute and we both know he won't really be accepted as a CCPer unless he brings something to the table." CCP Muppet Hunter nods in the affirmative and discussion begins about a major ship loss in *EVE Online* that is tied to an epic war raging in New Eden currently.

A few moments later, the CEO himself joins us in a small pocket of sunlight we've claimed to eat our burgers in. Walking up to us, Hilmar looks directly at me and states in a calm yet firm voice, "Hi Josh, nice to meet the anthropologist who is here to figure us out." He extends a hand and I shake it before a discussion breaks out on 'puffin hunting' on the small archipelago of islands in the southern part of Iceland known as the Westman Islands. It takes me several months to realize that 'puffin hunting' is actually 'puffin rescuing' and that the children of the Westman Islands are encouraged to help lost puffins return to sea, not gather them for food.

Notions of puffins swirling in my head, I think on the words of both Bergur and Hilmar. There are somewhat vague expectations on CCP's behalf as to why I am present in Reykjavík, yet there are clear expectations on how I am to 'become a CCPer,' namely that I am meant to give back in some form or fashion. I am not given long to lose myself in these thoughts as a small chime rings

⁶ As the reader has no doubt noticed, CCP employees all have a CCP name, one chosen by themselves at the start of their employment to be used at public events and, in this circumstance, to depict them in publications. Given he has since left the company, Árni no longer has a CCP name.

again from near the auditorium's entrance and I am whisked back inside for presentations from the company's London and Shanghai offices, including *EVE Online*'s eminent approval for publishing in the People's Republic of China.

The presentations end with muted applause as the crowd is both chilled and slightly unfocused following an entire morning of presentations. As Hilmar closes the session with a call to realize "EVE Forever," the audience stands up. Legs stretched and arms moving, the group of dull-eyed employees is herded, moving almost as a pack, into a separate portion of the yet-construction site. I have lost sight of Bergur and Árni and the isolation of being in a new environment strikes me. I do not know anyone and have only just been introduced to a handful of clearly senior-level employees. Daunted by thoughts of perhaps never fitting in, or worse, being the weird guy at the company-wide event, I think back to Bergur's comment about needing to bring something to the table in order to be considered a CCPer. Before I can lose myself in the anxiety of the moment, I hear what sounds like an incredibly loud drum beat echo through the hallway where we had previously sipped on coffee. "Surely there are no drums involved in my first day at CCP," I think to myself. I turn the corner of the room and immediately realize that yes, there are not only to be drums involved on my first day, but an entire drum circle.

As the room opens up in front of me and the rest of the gathered crowd, I notice two long tables with paper bags on them and behind these tables a large ring of chairs. CCP Skinner, a member of the HR team, stands in front of the tables, ushering the group onwards to the chairs and the circle. In the middle of the giant ring of chairs at the center of an empty concrete hall that will one day become a fitness center, a platinum platinum-blond man is scurrying around and banging on a huge drum in the middle. The huddled group no longer looks slightly bored.

While some of the group eagerly take a seat, there are a number of CCPers who stand far away from the circle, back near the tables. Not wanting to intrude and slightly confused by the sudden appearance of a drum circle at this corporate event, I move to the right of the circle, near a glass wall where I see CCP Skerpla and CCP Horsewhisperer standing. They wave at me as I approach and the platinum-blond man begins handing out percussion instruments of all shapes and sizes. Those eager enough to take part begin strumming along to various beats as the instruments all coalesce in a cacophonous, yet unified, pattern (See Figure 2).



Figure 2. The drum circle at CCP's 2019 Kick-Off

A few minutes into this opening and the platinum-blond man begins making what is clearly the crescendo of the performance. He hammers out a few large beats on the giant drum in the center of the circle before he hushes the crowd. What follows is a speech about the need to work in unison and synchronously as a group, however messy that might be, to create a CCP that creates and makes in harmony. The drum circle goes on and while I hesitate to participate, eventually I am led to a middling drum by CCP Horsewhisperer, the Vice President of People at CCP Games and one of my other primary contacts at the company. Throughout the hour or so that follows I discover that I

have no talent for percussion, but a serious talent for making awkward eye contact with everyone else in the circle. The drum circle eventually concludes and while I feel as if I have connected with some of the company in participating, I also note the not-insignificant number of employees who stood off to the side the entire time, clearly finding the notion of a drum circle unappealing. Well into 2022, the afternoon of drum circling remained a topic of conversation in the halls of the now finished *Gróska*.

With a few shouts from the HR team, the mass of employees all grab one of the previously jealously-guarded paper bags, each with two beers and some snacks in it. I take one as well as soon as Bergur, who is already sipping on one of the beers. We chat briefly about the day so far, having also toured the building earlier in the day's events, before the group proceeds to walk back towards the University building. Walking the ten minutes to the university cafeteria, I am surrounded by the leadership team of CCP Games, all of whom are joking about an apparent exploit by Bergur and Hilmar in Finland at a 'Fanfest Home' event, wherein both ended up naked in a sauna with a player. The apparent closeness of CEO and Creative Director to a seemingly randomly-chosen player is not lost on me and I wonder if this lack of power divide truly is the norm between CCP and its players.

Arriving at the *Litla Torg*,⁷ or 'little plaza' where we are split into small groups of five to six and given the task to solve small games in order to gain points. I search for my name on a table and fail to find it. Somewhat disheartened that I have not been included in the list of employees despite being told I would be, I return to Bergur's side and he welcomes me to his table where I meet CCP Semiotics and two other employees. Notably, we are not told that there is a prize for winning, just that we are meant to accrue points and that each table represents a team at a company. The event unfolds and competition inherently breaks loose. At the end, we are told politely, yet firmly, that we

⁷ The verb version of 'Torg,' ad torga, does however mean to eat and so it seems the little plaza is also a play on words

have all failed in accruing the needed points as none of the teams chose to work together to solve the puzzles. The lived metaphor of teams competing against one another for success in lieu of collaborating with one another to succeed is clear and I wonder how this might play out in the fieldwork to come.

Following the games, an event at which every beer in a brown bag was consumed, I excuse myself from the night somewhat early as I struggle to work through both having just landed on a somewhat chilly and inhospitable rock in the North Atlantic, as well as the self-imposed weight of working to “bridge the divide [between anthropology and corporations] with more engaged, collaborative, activist, and public practices of anthropology, (Low and Merry in Welker, Partridge, and Hardin 2011: S5).

In the fourteen months following Kick-Off 2019, I undertake an ethnographic investigation of CCP Games, an Icelandic game-making company responsible for architecting and maintaining the virtual world of *EVE Online*. Intrigued initially by CCP’s purported transparency with their playerbase through a democratically and playerbase elected institution known as the Council of Stellar Management (CSM), I found myself in Iceland at the end of a period of tumult within the world of *EVE Online*, through a period of tumult as the COVID-19 pandemic radically altered global patterns of travel and living, and ultimately into a period of seeming respite for the company in 2020 and into 2021. Throughout my fieldwork, I sought to unravel questions surrounding the ethics that are embedded into the architecture of our virtual lives through a better understanding of one of the companies that craft a part of at least 2 million people’s virtual landscape. It was my hope then, and is my hope now, to unpack and explore the question: What ethics underly the virtual architecting of *EVE Online* and how might this gilded architecting grant insight into broader questions of the multifaceted nature of technology-focused companies and the spaces they maintain? But first, I knew that I had to become a CCPer, whatever that means.

Grandagarður 8

A gust of wind catches my black jacket and rips it open as I cross Lækjargata, one of the busier streets of downtown Reykjavík with a steady flow of at least ten cars a minute. I look to my right and to the bay from where the gust originated as I notice Harpa, the glistening concert hall that shimmers in the early morning sun of 9:00 AM in early September 2019. The air is biting cold for a month that often still sees me wearing shorts and tank-tops in the United States and I zip my jacket up as I continue walking towards my destination: CCP Games' harborside office at Grandagarður 8. On my way, I pass the building that hosts the city's singular flea market and notice a cruise ship docked in the harbor near the bustling stalls of various ocean-based tours. My walk continues and as I near the office, I take in a breath of salty air as I observe tourists heading towards their own boats, each destined for one of the many 'Exotic Iceland' tours involving whales, puffins, or fish that serve to exoticize and "nation-brand" Iceland as exceptional and apart (cf. Loftsdóttir 2015).

Thoughts of Iceland's exceptionalism in mind, I approach the four-story building on the corner of the harbor that houses CCP Games. Looking a bit worse for wear, I pass by a peculiarly shaped monument that, when looked at in a particular manner, conveys the image of a human sitting in front of a screen with a larger image of the self behind the screen. This is the *EVE Online* monument, a piece of CCP Games' history wherein they sought to bridge the gap between virtual and actual worlds in the form of an actual world art piece. I take note to ask about the instantiation of this monument in the future as I near the front door, noticing several other people nearing the door at the same time as me. One employee, a woman with auburn hair, sporting a light hiking jacket, boots, and jeans looks at me before entering the door. Roughly six feet away, she makes a point to close it behind her. A bit dismayed at the clear signal that she was not sure I belonged in this building, I cannot help but feel a tinge of disappointment. "Definitely not a CCPer yet," I think to myself as I pull out the badge I received shortly after Kick-Off from CCP Isafold, the office

administrator, and try to remember the six-digit code I need to enter in order to enter the front door. As I hold up the badge, lacking a name and only labeled 'Employee,' I tap six digits into a PIN pad. It turns green and I escape the windy air outside before climbing three somewhat precarious sets of stairs and tapping my badge on a PIN pad once more to enter the third floor of the building.

Stepping through the door from a tiled stairwell onto a hardwood floor, I take in the game room I see in front of me. Filled with a billiards table, several pinball machines, a gaming corner with a PlayStation 4, this alcove is clearly meant to be a social place. So far, I have not noticed many people making use of it. Behind the billiards table and the gaming corner is a coffee machine with some cookies jars on an island. Here, I see Áрни waiting for coffee and chattering hurried Icelandic. He smiles at me and I turn to the right, walking past what was once, for a few months at least, Europe's largest salt-water fish tank. Passing through another doorway I see two meeting rooms in front of me, each meeting room named after an *EVE Online* 'release,' that is, a major update to the game's content. The first one I see, and arguably the most comfortable of the meeting rooms, is named Second Genesis, after *EVE Online*'s launch release name. I smile slightly, thinking about how I sat in that room almost exactly a year ago in October 2018 as I worked to convince Bergur Finnbogason that my project could be valuable not just to me, but also to CCP.

These thoughts of my preliminary fieldwork in my mind, I make my way down a thin hallway, past a toilet with no gender label on its door, and further on past a small nook that currently houses a rather lively-looking fiddlehead plant and some chairs. I walk further down the small hallway, passing meeting rooms on my left and two team alcoves on my right. I note that for 9:00 AM, it is oddly quiet in the building and oddly empty as well. Roughly five meters down the hallway, I arrive in front of a square glass room that Bergur affectionately calls "his fishbowl." Being his office and being located in the middle of a development floor, that is to say, the area where most of

the game's content teams are located, it is an apt description. To the right of this fishbowl in a somewhat dark square alcove is my assigned desk, set-up to look directly into Bergur's office.

I toss my coat up onto the back of my desk chair, an oddly fancy contraption that I never quite mastered using, and put my backpack down before opening my CCP laptop: a humble Lenovo ThinkPad. Opening my email, I am hopeful about hearing back from some of the community team members about the possibility of me joining them for a Berlin-based Fanfest event. Sadly, I have only the Daily Key Performance Indicator (KPI) email waiting for me. I proceed to open Slack and am disheartened to see a total lack of notifications there as well. Eager to proceed in my ethnographic exploration of CCP Games, I open up the internal Wiki and begin delving into pages I can find, histories I am interested in and, perhaps selfishly, some of the lore of the virtual world I had once lived in that I had always wondered about.

Sitting at my desk in an alcove with only one dim light, I am struck suddenly by the reality of my position as an anthropologist at a relatively major video game development studio. Long interested in video game communities and having played a plethora of massively-multiplayer online games since I was roughly twelve years old, I take a moment to take in having truly made it inside the doors of a video game creator. The path here was by no means simple, but neither was it particularly difficult. I stare into the blue abyss of the CCP Wiki as thoughts of my journey to becoming 'the anthropologist' swim in my mind.

Landing in Reykjavík

Gaining access to any fieldsite is a delicate and oftentimes prolonged process. Be it a virtual world community (cf. Boellstorff 2008), a community of professional video game streamers (cf. Taylor 2018), or a rag-tag group of drag queens (cf. Rivers 2021), negotiating the ethical quandaries of access, anonymization, data security, and rightful depiction of one's research participants is a

demanding process. As Gusterson (1996) notes, these difficulties are often equally as, if not more so, true for any attempt to ethnographically study institutions and corporations. It is worth mentioning, then, how exactly I came to find myself in a dark alcove behind a glass cube on the third floor of a well-worn building located in the harbor of Reykjavík.

The path to Reykjavík begins on yet another cloudy and grey Icelandic day in June of 2008, where nine proud yet simultaneously nervous figures are assembled at Þingvellir, the exposed meeting place of two tectonic plates northeast of Reykjavík and the “cultural heart of Iceland,” (Loftsdóttir & Lund 2016: 124). Here they are overlooking the original location of the world’s oldest parliament: the Alþingi. Recently elected by tens of thousands of spaceship pilots in a galaxy made of code and pixels, these nine representatives are given a charge: to serve as the actual world goðar, chieftain representatives to the historical Icelandic parliament, of a virtual world’s citizenry: the players of *EVE Online*. This “Council of Stellar Management” will come to be a unique and defining characteristic of one Icelandic institution’s commitment to transparency with regards to its role in caretaking of cyberspace.

As online gaming and digital platforms have solidified their place within broader social life, questions surrounding the role of the institutions that oversee said platforms loom large. Widespread public attention to issues of privacy, ethics, as well as the political influence of Facebook and other social media platforms has made the question of governance for the private companies that architect our mediated lives an urgent one. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, these questions of virtually mediated lives have proven even more pressing.

Setting itself apart from other virtual world creators and technological institutions, Reykjavík-based CCP Games has always had a unique relationship with its users, one marked by a self-described “organic readiness” to adapt and reevaluate its role vis-à-vis the players of its major product, the virtual world of *EVE Online* (Carter et al. 2016). When I initially reached out to Bergur

at the end of 2018, he described CCP's role as that of "caretakers" of their virtual platform, an ethically charged term and one which resonates with recent work in anthropology and related fields on care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011; Robbins 2013).

Long-fascinated by games, which have slowly crept from niche-hobby to major global industry, and intrigued by Bergur's description of CCP Games as the "caretaker" of *EVE Online*, I appealed to Bergur and the senior leadership of CCP to allow me to study their company from within for, as Sally Falk Moore reminds us, "To read a constitution is not to understand how the ... system works" (1978/2000: 36). Using Malaby's study of Linden Lab (2009) as an example of what my work could provide to the company, as well as to our understanding of the ethical nature of technology, I worked with Bergur to craft a plan mutually beneficial for both my dissertation project and CCP. Following a week of preliminary fieldwork in October of 2018 where I undertook a relatively superficial but nevertheless ethnographically-informed exploration of CCP Games' quotidian practices and major development philosophies, Bergur and I agreed to move forward with the project and apply for grant funding for the 2019-2020 cycle. A number of grueling slow months later and I received word of successfully receiving funding from the Fulbright Commission of Iceland, the American-Scandinavian Foundation, and the Leifur-Eiriksson Foundation.

Having secured the means by which to remain financially independent from CCP Games, and thereby presumably ethically less intertwined with my fieldsite as a potential employer I somewhat naively thought, I contacted Bergur about the project and we solidified a start date. In a brief series of two meetings that followed the initial email exchange, we crafted a plan for my ethnographic embeddedness at the company: We agreed to start with me shadowing Bergur for the first week, making connections internally through him in order to cycle between development teams, publishing teams, and art teams at different intervals based on the most pressing initiatives at CCP.

My Five Desks

Throughout my time at CCP Games, I moved desks with marked frequency. While accustomed to moving workspaces with regularity given my history of working as a relatively precarious graduate student lecturer with no firmly-secured office space, I found myself shocked at how often not only my desk, but the desks of CCP's employees, were moved back and forth across the two offices I experienced. So, as to best convey my journey from observer to my ultimate role as a Player Researcher at CCP Games, I have located each of my chapters at one of my five desks.

In one of the first slippages between academia and video game development, my initial plan to shadow Bergur for a week before joining a development team as a Researcher was abandoned with relative swiftness once I arrived at CCP Games. This was because of a radical shift in their development priorities that came about in the months between my funding being secured and my actual ethnographic fieldwork's start. This disconnect between my plan and my lived reality as an ethnographer is expounded upon in my second chapter, situated from the vantage point of my first desk, 'The Island of Misfit Toys' behind Bergur's glass office. In this chapter, I also speak to my first observations of CCP Games as a multiplicitous institution.

Alongside my crafting of a research plan with Bergur, I also contacted Dr. Kristín Loftsdóttir, a renowned Icelandic anthropologist whose work on 'nation-branding' served as a theoretical cornerstone for my preliminary fieldwork and whose theoretical elucidation of 'Exotic Iceland' will also serve as a theoretical pillar of this monograph. Through her guidance, I was able to orient myself better towards what was 'Icelandic' about my fieldsite and what was more a phenomenon of video game development. This orientation and the related theoretical underpinnings of my project, as well as the methodological orientation I intended to bring to the field, will be discussed in my third and fourth chapters. The third chapter is situated at my second assigned desk at CCP Games, The Table at Team Psycho Sisters, a place where I worked primarily as an academic

researcher for myself and the senior leadership team of CCP. The fourth chapter is located at The Viking Ship on the shoreline of Reykjavík, where I often mulled over the Icelandic world around me.

Ultimately, this divide between myself as an academically oriented researcher and CCP Games as a pragmatic video game developer blossomed into a beautiful collaboration. The shift from observer to participant observer comprises the bulk of my fifth chapter, which takes place primarily at my third desk, The Vestibule. At the Vestibule, I worked closely with a team known as Team Five-0, seeking to inform them from a data-perspective how they might craft a more robust new player experience before ultimately being transitioned to a new team, but using the same desk, during an internal re-organization, the team I stayed with the longest: Team Aurora. This chapter highlights how CCP Games is ‘enacted’ as an institution multiple, drawing on the theoretical foundation of my second chapter to highlight how the various enactments of CCP speak to the ethical commitments of different actors within the company as a whole. This chapter ends with a transition to what become my reality for the bulk of my fieldwork: working for a company as the COVID-19 pandemic raged.

As the world fell into chaos at the start of the pandemic, CCP Games remained calm and committed to the safety of its employees. Well before cases began spreading in Iceland, the company sent everyone home to work remotely. What began as ‘likely a month of remote work’ quickly turned into a situation that would not end until the end of 2021. This surreal shift from ‘normality’ to ‘abnormality’ and the blurring of boundaries of labor in the move from working at the CCP office to working at my fourth desk, The Bedroom, located in my apartment at Þórsgata 27. This sixth chapter also speaks to the ethically-charged development of CCP’s response to the pandemic: its citizen science mini-game Project Discovery: COVID-19, which I worked on firsthand as a user experience researcher and designer. Exploring how senior leadership at CCP Games made a popular,

albeit financially questionable decision rooted in an ethical commitment to “doing [their] part,” this chapter reinforces the notion of CCP as multiplicitous in its enactment. Simultaneously profit-driven in some of its initiatives and ‘public good’-driven in others, the company was enacted as a beneficiary of a world in lockdown and champion of contributing to unlocking the world.

This multiplicitous enactment of CCP Games is the focus of my final chapter, located at my new desk, The Alcove, in Team Aurora’s area of CCP’s then-recently-opened new headquarters, *Gróska*. Here, I speak to my transition into being hired as CCP’s first Player Researcher. In highlighting how I obtained my final desk and a full-time position working for CCP Games as a Player Researcher, I reveal how the enacted nature of CCP Games as an institution serves to belie the multiplicitous nature of the ethical commitments that its employees, teams, managers, and leadership make, ones that ultimately impact the architecture of the virtual world of *EVE Online*. That is to say, this chapter highlights how my own decision to ‘become a CCPer’ was made in light of the realization that corporations, though perhaps “all... to some extent implicated in harm,” (Benson & Kirsch 2010: 467), are not inherently malevolent (cf. Welker 2014). In this elucidation, I close the work with a call to study the ways in which institutions such as CCP Games are themselves culturally-located enactments of a network of actors that in turn architect and imbue ethics into the digital infrastructures that serve as the foundation of our increasingly digital lives.

As the reader will have noticed, none of my desks are located within *EVE Online*, nor does the content of these chapters describe or speak to its gameplay. Throughout this dissertation I have opted to forego detailed descriptions of the gameplay of *EVE Online* or the game itself so as to firmly center my analysis and discussion on the game’s digital architect, CCP Games.

Despite its modest playerbase relative to other MMOs, *EVE Online* has been written about at length within the existing academic literature by authors such as Bergstrom, Carter, Milik, and Woodford, to name only a few. For a time, one could hardly attend a conference related to video

games without hearing mention of EVE Online, its gameplay, and its playerbase. Accordingly, in an effort to focus on the architect of the game, not the game itself, I have chosen not to describe EVE Online, its gameplay, or its playerbase beyond where such descriptions serve to highlight CCP Games's role as a digital architect. That said, I would encourage anyone curious about the gameplay of *EVE Online* to begin with either Andrew Groen's monograph *Empires of EVE* or the 2016 edited volume of Carter, Bergstrom, and Woodford, *Internet Spaceships Are Serious Business*.

Chapter Two: The Island of Misfit Toys

CSM Week

It is the morning of September 2nd, 2019 and I am cold. Briskly walking through downtown Reykjavík from my apartment on Þórsgata near the church that marks the center of town, Hallsgrímskirkja, I wrap my scarf tight around my neck as a frigid wind blows. Passing by quaint aluminum-sided houses and a café called Stofan that will come to be my fieldnotes-writing sanctuary, I eventually arrive at CCP's headquarters in the harbor area known as "Grandi." I approach the office from the southeast, where it appears some of the construction that marked Iceland's pre-2008 crash boom remains frozen in time, at least for now (cf. Loftsdóttir 2019). As I walk towards the front door, I hold up my employee badge towards the keypad, type in my access code, and ascend the stairs.

Making my way up to the fourth floor, I notice the door to reception open and walk in, headed towards the communal dining room just down the hall and to the left that is referred to as "The Cantina" by everyone I talk to at CCP. CCP Games serves its employees, and the occasional guest, two meals a day⁸. Breakfast is served from 8:00 AM until 9:30 AM and lunch is generally served from 12:00 PM until 1:00 PM. In an effort to observe what exactly 'breakfast' would entail in such an environment, and also in an effort to save money given the absurd increase in the cost of living I experienced by moving from Milwaukee to Reykjavík, I arrived at 9:00 AM sharp to the cantina, eager to see who might be there.

⁸ Prior to March 1st, 2018 CCP also offered its staff dinner twice weekly on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Following the announced changes to the cantina schedule on January 25th, there was uproar that remains documented in the internal wiki to this day. Despite loud and data-rooted protests to this change, the deciding parties at that time chose to move forward with the plan to cancel dinner and it is no longer a benefit provided to the company. Nonetheless, it is still talked about to this day. It is also worth noting that at the time of this change, breakfast was also altered to begin and end earlier, at 9:30AM instead of 10AM.

Walking through the archway directly past the wall of six monitors displaying all sorts of various ‘Key Performance Indicators,’ active player numbers, revenue, and more, I enter the cantina where smells of eggs with salmon waft through the air. There’s a pitcher of smoothie, as well as some bread items, but the breakfast buffet looks little touched. That’s likely due to the fact that as I peek into the seating area of the cantina itself, I notice that there are, in total, twelve people at breakfast out of a company of nearly three-hundred.

The stark contrast of twelve people present at a free breakfast as compared to the raucous events of the Friday night prior is striking. Whereas on Friday CCP Games as an institution was clearly the host of a wild party, today CCP Games appears to be a droll employer whose free breakfast does not even entice people to the cantina. Pondering this seeming enigma, I notice two familiar faces sitting in chairs facing one another at the table nearest to the buffet room. One is Creative Director CCP Burger and Executive Producer of *EVE Online*, CCP Mannbjorn. The two are chatting to one another in Icelandic about a school of some sort. After issuing an awkward, “Hello,” to the same auburn-haired woman who just minutes ago shut the door behind her after noticing me approaching the office, I take a seat next to Bergur who asks me, “Were you out late Friday?” I shrug the question off with a polite answer about being slightly jet-lagged, all the while anxious to admit that the idea of spending so much time in a crowd I knew no one in was socially paralyzing. He smiles and then talks about having ongoing renovation work at his new home before CCP Mannbjorn excuses himself and the discussion shifts into my plans for the upcoming week.

“So Josh,” CCP Burger begins, “this week the CSM is here. I’ll actually be in meetings with them all morning.” Remembering chatter of the CSM’s arrival happening at the Kick-Off the week before, I ask if I am able to sit in on these meetings as I seek to understand better the view of CCP through the eyes of the Council of Stellar Management, the democratically elected player committee that CCP consults about upcoming features, general health of the virtual world of *EVE Online*, and

more. He smiles and mentions that the first meeting is closed to everyone at CCP except for himself, CCP Mannbjorn, and CCP Orca, the Vice President of Publishing. “We really want to start with a good conversation, but after that meeting everything is open. You should just ask [CCP Dopamine]⁹ for the schedule if you don’t have it in an email already.” I don’t remember a schedule being sent my way, so nod in the positive then ask CCP Burger about the EVE World Tour he’d mentioned in a pre-fieldwork organizational meeting, then again at Kick-Off, and if it would still be possible to attend. “Yes, I can organize that, but go talk to our travel team,” he states as he gets up to leave. He runs into another employee on the way out of the cantina and they briefly chat about the Kick-Off before he loudly proclaims, “Drum Circle Guy is a LEGEND!” and departs the cantina for the first CSM meeting of the day.

I smile in a bemused manner at memories of the drum circle before heading off to organize my week, thinking about the lull I can feel in the hallways of the company as the CSM arrived and various presentations begin. In just a few short days, CCP is already becoming more than just a ‘simple fieldsite’ for me. Indeed, at the Fulbright orientation I attend later that day, I introduce myself and my project and am immediately told by the Fulbright Director that she’s excited to learn more about CCP Games and what ‘goes on behind its doors.’ This comment evokes an image of CCP Games as a ‘mysterious large tech company’ to at least one individual. The longer I stay in Reykjavík and the more people I meet outside of the company, the more I come to realize that not only does CCP Games have more than one image for those directly connected to its work, but it also has multiple reputations outside of its actual world office and virtual world solar systems.

⁹ Here CCP Burger referred to CCP Dopamine by his actual name. This was the common practice during my time at CCP Games. As the year went on and the pandemic ultimately hit, it became less and less common for CCPers to refer to one another by a CCP name unless making a pointed comment. In fact, knowing each other’s CCP names became relatively rare and at the time I worked there, I was one of the few CCP employees who knew most other employees’ CCP names, largely due to my ethnographic fieldwork.

Everywhere I go in Iceland, but especially within the first week, I am bombarded with opinions about my project and the company I am ‘working for’ through the project. Ranging from benevolent technology overseers to questionably unethical domineers of cyberspace, it is clear that CCP is an institution multiple.

“Chaosbringer CCP”

I wake up the next morning to a bright and sunny day. Although brisk, I am too distracted by thoughts of my first opportunity to observe the CSM ‘in action’ to notice the wind that is attempting to rip through my jacket. My feet trod along the mix of gravel and asphalt near the construction sites that dot the harbor, frozen in time since seemingly 2008, and I think briefly on Iceland as a sight of opportunity brought to a crushing standstill following the banking crisis of the early 2000’s (cf. Loftsdóttir 2019). So far, especially when compared to other Iceland-based institutions such as the Fulbright Commission or Icelandic actors such as the three tour-guides I’ve talked to, mention of the crash is nowhere to be seen at CCP Games. I ponder this and brazenly assume that the crash must not have impacted them greatly as I reach the office door.

Tapping my card on the keypad and entering my code, the door clicks as the keypad lights up with a neon green light. I ascend the stairs of the building to the cantina once again, where I am surprised to see that it is a fair bit fuller today than it was yesterday. Instead of a few faces, the cantina is somewhat bustling, with at least thirty or so people eating breakfast. Glancing at the crowd and taking in the words I am hearing, I notice that CCP Mannbjorn is nowhere to be found, but that CCP Burger is sitting at the same table as he was seated yesterday. Today, CCP Burger sports a raucous voice with the trilled r’s that are typical of an Icelandic accent, along with grey Nike’s and a strikingly bright red flannel. Seated next to him is a man I don’t recognize. Given the flow of his English and the slightly Eastern European accent he sports, he does not appear to be Icelandic.

I sit down across from Bergur and murmur, “Good morning,” to which he answers, “Ah Josh, good morning. This is [CCP Dopamine], he’s our CSM organizer and he came from [big video game company].” Briefly, I am a bit taken aback. Having dreamed for so long about gaining access to a major video game maker for my fieldwork, the realization that I have entered a world where people flow between these institutions in an effort to forward their careers crashes down around me. In front of me is a person who has worked at one of the biggest names in gaming and now he is sitting across from me and I am sitting across from him. At this moment, he says, “Hi Josh, nice to meet you, what do you do?” I realize how much I have, perhaps unknowingly, idolized those who work in video games. I hurriedly compose myself and begin explaining my role as a titular ‘Researcher’ at CCP Games,¹⁰ wherein I note that I’m at CCP to study the flows and processes that make it the game-making institution that it is. CCP Dopamine’s eyes glint somewhat positively as he goes on to speak about his own history at CCP and in the industry.

We chat briefly, the three of us, on the ‘taboo’ nature of using the term “virtual world” (cf. Bartle 2003; cf. Castronova 2004, cf. Boellstorff 2008) and how CCP worked over the past fifteen years to ensure that their usage of the term does not conflate meaning with the so-called ‘real world’ but rather emphasizes that it is important to create “virtual worlds more meaningful than real life,” to quote CCP Burger, the company’s CEO, Hilmar Pétursson, and several posters strewn across the office itself. Shortly before 10:00 AM, both CCP Burger and CCP Dopamine excuse themselves to a so-called “War Meeting” where the middle management layer is syncing daily on “mission critical” efforts and endeavors—at least that’s what I gather from the brief sentence CCP Burger tells me about the meeting while he stands up to leave.

¹⁰ This title is given to me by Bergur shortly before I join in order to fold me into the organizational structure of CCP Games. I will speak more on this ‘folding in’ of myself in a later chapter.

As they depart, I make sure to ask about access to the CSM sessions and CCP Dopamine notes that there's a schedule posted on the meeting room door. He reiterates that the sessions are open to everyone, "except when it says otherwise," and rushes out of the cantina to his meeting. I sit for a moment and think about how my own perception of CCP is already beginning to shift, how the fieldsite is becoming a place of patterns and familiar architecture. Even more, people now have begun to start to smile when they see me. This image of a place of warmth and approachable 'nerd culture' is reaffirmed when I take a brief trip to my assigned desk to grab a pen and drop my coat off. Along the way, I notice three people huddled near the coffee machine next to what was once Europe's largest private indoor saltwater aquarium. They're excitedly chatting about World of Warcraft Classic. I smile, wondering if I'll have time to play given my fieldwork, and quickly reach my desk, dropping my coat off before hurrying upstairs to make the first of what will be multiple tense CSM sessions.

As I walk through the 'front door' of reception, I notice the large desk is empty, CCP Isafold, the receptionist, is nowhere to be seen. In front of me is the largest meeting room at the office, Trinity, named after the game's eighth expansion, one that pushed its graphics into 'the modern era.' I walk past the glass façade that points directly towards the mountain Esja that protects Reykjavík from the Arctic's iciest winds and open the large glass door that leads into Trinity. Walking into the room, I am buffeted by a wave of cold air, the windows to the room seemingly being open.

Trinity is laid out in such a way that those entering the meeting room do not 'disturb' the

meeting as they enter given the primary screen in the room and the table meeting attendees sit at are located on the other side of this oddly shaped rectangular room (See Figure 3).

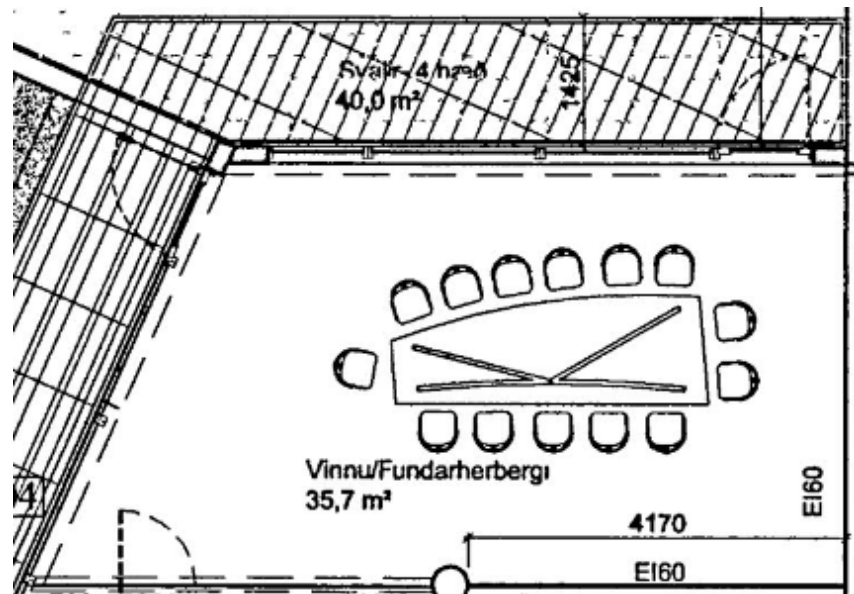


Figure 3. Architectural Plans of Trinity, showing the room's layout

Despite arriving exactly on time, it appears as I enter that the meeting is well underway. I am a bit confused about this but take a seat quietly at the side of the door and pull out my notebook to begin taking notes¹¹. Next to me is CCP Muppethunter, the Game Design Director for *EVE Online* and a person I met briefly at Kick-Off. To my right is CCP Fozzie, wearing a bright smile on his face as always. Around the oval-esque table in front of me are nine CSM representatives, a paper cutout of a CSM member who apparently cannot attend the summit, and CCP Dopamine, as well as a young-looking Icelandic man who I believe I saw dancing at Kick-Off the Friday before. Each of the CSM members is dressed slightly differently, but almost all of them are white and all of them are

¹¹ Throughout my entire fieldwork experience, I would begin my taking handwritten field jottings, capturing the most important sensations, quotes, and memories of experiences, before turning those into detailed field notes once I left CCP Games for the day. As my fieldwork continued, I would eventually switch to taking most field notes on my laptop, storing them in a secure cloud server hosted by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Occasionally, though, I would store field jottings on post-it notes dumped into my backpack, that I kept with me at nearly all times. In short, while the notebook served as a space of memory-keeping, it turns out that no one method of fieldnote writing worked better than any other for me.

men. The homogeneity of their appearance strikes me, but it later becomes clear that each presents their own unique view of *EVE Online*. At the head of the table sits CCP Dopamine, calm and collected with a faint smile on his face.

The first session, still underway, sees a team led by a Senior Game Designer known as Erica¹² present relatively mundane content. Erica's softer voice and the content's seemingly universal approval by both the design team and CSM leave the atmosphere in the room feeling collegial and friendly. The CSM applauds Erica as the presentation concludes and a handful of questions are asked before the team says a round of thanks and shuttles out of the room.

The next session begins. Despite no words being uttered, as CCP Mannbjorn enters the room and CCP Rise, a communally well-known Senior Game Designer, takes a seat at the table, the atmosphere of friendly collegiality instantly dissipates. I glance at my phone to see what this session is meant to cover: 'Balance Changes,' I read. I instantly brace for what I imagine will be a contentious discussion. The reason for this contention is a so-called "Era of Chaos" that the Game Design team at CCP Games unleashed on the game's playerbase over the summer of 2019. Shortly before my arrival and during what is often a period of increased in-game activity for *EVE Online*, the face of New Eden was altered in several meaningful ways. Prior to 2019, non-player characters (NPCs) were dangerous in certain contexts but were never actively aggressive and never attacked player-made in-space structures, which serve as the foundation for the "Great Empires of New Eden" (cf. Groen 2016). Additionally, local chat, which can be thought of as text-based chat for the 'zone' one is in within *EVE Online*, was always available and utilized heavily by the playerbase to learn who was in their territory at a given time.

¹² Erica no longer works at CCP Games and has opted not to utilize her CCP name as a pseudonym accordingly.

In the summer of 2019, both of these presumably (at least by the playerbase) fundamental principles of *EVE Online*'s gameplay were temporarily changed. A subset of NPCs began to aggressively attack players, hunting them down and endangering their most expensive structures. Simultaneously, or rather shortly after this began, the local chat was shut off within 'nullsec,' the area of space owned by various player alliances and a virtual free-for-all with regard to combat. Suddenly, the large and small player alliances of this region of space had to defend not only against other players, but also NPCs, while having little visibility on who might be in the solar system with them. These changes were received with extremely mixed responses and were some of the most divisive changes to the game made within its history. They were also not the only changes proposed. In addition to the changes that were already implemented, the design team also intended to change how so-called "cynosural" ships functioned. These ships can be understood as the 'beacons' for the alliances' major fleets. The way these ships function plays a fundamental role in how the alliances counter both player and NPC attacks within their space. Before the meeting began, the fact that changes were to be made soon had been announced. What those changes were to be remained a mystery, even to most people with CCP Games at the time.

With all of these changes in mind, it suddenly clicked that this simple chat about potential ship balance changes was always destined to be more contentious than its mere title implied. The conversation begins with an announcement about the changes being made to cynosural ships by some of the designers in the room. Immediately, a CSM member quite aggressively yells out, "Are there measurements for the changes?" To this question, he receives the answer, "Yes, but we're not going to share those." A look of anger passes across several of the CSM representatives' faces, despite some obvious attempts to hide their disdain. This statement of non-transparency strikes me as standing in stark contrast with the senior leadership's self-purported policy of 'openness' with the playerbase. As if to answer this thought, CCP Muppethunter chimes in to say, "This is partially

because we're not very good at communicating within the company." Based on the now blatantly visible anger strewn across some of the CSM members' faces, this was not a welcome answer.

One of the members, wearing a polo and a bit red in the face raises his voice ever-so-slightly as he interjects that he is deeply upset and alarmed because "the trifecta of attacks on nullsec is increasing the speed at which people leave ... There is no benefit of the doubt left to give CCP." His voice, though slightly raised, is mostly impassioned. CCP Muppethunter answers, "We are not dragging our feet on this." Questions are raised by the designers about what a middle ground on the cynosural ship changes would look like to the CSM and sit neutrally as the CSM answers. There is ongoing back and forth between the team assembled and three of the CSM members at the table—none of the back and forth is friendly, but rather it carries the tone of two forces at a treaty table. As the discussion of cynosural ships comes to a close and the CSM and designers both agree to table the chat for now, I think naively to myself that the next discussion is unlikely to be so heated. I am incorrect.

As general discussion begins, another CSM member than the one from before begins what can only be described as a tirade about the overall changes that have been made. He describes the changes as an affront to the players of *EVE Online* and notes that "closing umbrellas" are causing people to leave the game. There is a core disagreement about the nature of *EVE Online* that happens in this exchange. When the CSM member notes that their space is difficult to guard and unsafe, a designer answers, "You've just described the core of *EVE Online*." Almost in unison, six of the CSM members present retort, "No it isn't!" The discussion peters out as one of the developers in the room plays a mobile game, seemingly accustomed to these kinds of discussions but as the session ends, the polo-wearing CSMer makes a bold claim, namely, "These guys outside of the room need to be reminded [of who their players are and what they want]." The relationship of trust that was alleged to exist between the CSM and CCP before I arrived is clearly not as strong, or

rather not as collegial, as I expected. Having been called a “Chaosbringer” by at least one CSM member in the ‘Balance’ session, it is evident that their view of CCP Games is that of an aggressor, an attacker on “[their] way of life.” Nevertheless, even as the session ends with red faces and clearly irritable developers, everyone shuffles out of the room to grab coffee together in the Cantina.

Later that night I am back in my apartment at Þórsgata 27, a quaint two-bedroom that I share with a French university student. The apartment came furnished and has a light yet modern interior with a view of Hallsgrímskirkja from its small balcony. Sitting at my rather small desk in my rather small apartment, I am nonetheless overwhelmed by the size of the endeavor I have embarked on. Still processing the events of the day as I hurriedly eat some carryout Thai food, I am almost reeling from the amount of information I am attempting to process. What precisely is the relationship between the Council of Stellar Management? Why is there a seeming hostility between CCP Games and its player council?

Outside of the questions tied directly to the CSM session from earlier in the day, I am also left wondering where I fit in within the institutional framework of the company. Neither full employee, nor pure guest, how do I as an ethnographer engage in participant observation at a game-maker like CCP Games? What am I even doing on this cold rock in the North Atlantic thousands of miles away from my husband, family, and friends? These questions and more race through my mind as I finish my Thai food and proceed to log into the virtual world of Final Fantasy XIV in order to calm my thoughts and hang out with some of my closest friends

“Employer CCP”

The following morning, still well within my first week of being ‘in the field’ at CCP Games, I again arrive at the office around 9:00 o’clock in the morning. A bit exhausted from the day before and the unusually cold weather outside, I tap my card on the card reader outside, enter the code I

have been assigned and open the door. Stepping into the small vestibule that leads into the office, I opt to take the elevator today. As I press the up button, the glass doors slide to the side and I step in. I hit the number four on the panel, in an attempt to head up to the Cantina for a brief bite to eat. The doors close and the elevator slowly ascends as I notice the landscape around the office: mountains, water, and a wall of grey clouds. A bell dings as I reach the top floor and make my way through an odd chamber of sorts that appears to also serve as an employee entrance into the fourth floor. A card tap later and I am in the cantina.

After grabbing a quick bowl of yogurt, I head down towards my assigned desk on the third floor and notice CCP Burger sitting in his glass cube of an office. I knock on the door and he waves his hand in a movement that suggests ‘please enter.’ I do so and am greeted with silence as he continues to type. After what feels like an eternity, but is certainly only ten to twenty seconds CCP Burger booms, “Good morning, Josh!” and I answer with a somewhat muted, “Morning [CCP Burger],” before I ask, “I was just wondering if there’s anything I should know about the World Tour before I head to Berlin next week?” He smiles faintly and then tells me that each event is slightly different, or at least he feels so. The World Tour event in Finland that he just attended in August was clearly personal given it was *EVE Online* leadership, members of the community team, and a single player who had won a contest. In contrast, he tells me that Berlin is likely to be somewhat less personal, given the presence of players who are a bit more shy and certainly “EVE Vegas players are the most rowdy.” This discussion piques my interest, but CCP Burger quickly changes the subject to what many at CCP refer to as onboarding.

As CCP Burger describes it, and as I have gleaned from talking to a couple of employees at the coffee machine, the process of onboarding involves an employee joining the company officially, being introduced to the team to which they have been assigned to work or to the team they were hired into, and going through several orientation sessions with Human Resources before beginning

their assigned set of work tasks. When I joined CCP as a Researcher, I was placed under CCP Burger's watch, but was not assigned a manager, a team, or anyone to report to within internal systems. As explained to me by CCP Horsewhisperer, the Vice President of People and accordingly head of Human Resources, this is in part because of a technical limitation of the company's internal reporting tools system, Nexus. Unlike a 'standard employee,' I was not given a Nexus profile since I was not being paid by CCP. Because this system was a complex interweaving of hierarchies of management, holiday leave, and ultimately income, I was left out of it and accordingly was left without much of an onboarding process.

When my path as a Researcher ultimately led me to join the company as a Player Researcher over a year later, I would finally experience the convoluted technological mess that was this HR platform. Back in August of 2019, however, I am sat in a glass cube with CCP Burger who describes to me his idea for my own onboarding process, one that he had already discussed with the development managers and producers of *EVE Online*. Instead of having a "rigid and normal" onboarding process, CCP Burger suggests we employ a "more organic than forced process" because he wants me to integrate into the team well and knows that "forcing someone onto a team often does not end well." With this vague statement in mind, CCP Burger notes that he'd asked the producers to have individual one-on-one discussions with me over the next week where they would ask me about my strengths and consider how I might fit into their teams. Excited by the prospect, I ask him if I should book these meetings. He told me that it should be on the producers to do that and so, relieved that I would possibly be joining an actual team, I say, "Thanks! I'll see you later then," to which CCP Burger replies, "Oh and think up of a 'dev name' for [CCP Goodfella] so that he can get your badge and everything ready for Berlin." A wave of shock and excitement rushes through me as he utters this statement.

At CCP Games, every employee chooses a “CCP Name.” I would come to find out that this name is chosen simply at the point when it is needed. For me, this was in my first week. For a colleague who would join a few months later, they would end up choosing their CCP name nearly a month after starting to work at the company. These names are monikers of any sort prefaced by ‘CCP.’ As the reader has undoubtedly noticed simply by their appearance in this text so far, there are a number of CCP names at the company that range widely from proper names, plays on the inability of non-Icelandic speakers to pronounce Icelandic names¹³, to nearly nonsensical references. Choosing a name is instant for some employees, who opt not to give the task much thought. For me, and a handful of other CCPers, it would be a nearly arduous task. More importantly, it was also a sign to me that CCP Burger, at least, saw me as a CCPer, even if I had yet to join a team or give back to the company in any meaningful way.

Excited and nervous at having been tasked to pick my own CCP Name and already rushing through the shortlist of names I had prepared for exactly this moment, if it were to arrive, I drop off my water bottle at my desk behind the glass cube as CCP Burger turned back to his monitor and a look of slight consternation crossed his face. Seeing a familiar face at the desk located across from mine, I say, “Hello” to the woman responsible for running CCP’s online store catalogue, one of the other people seated in my area, before noting that CCP Muppethunter’s desk is oddly empty, despite his monitors being left on. Paying this no real mind, I make my way back out to the hallway between desk ‘corrals’ and headed up towards the fourth floor to attend what CCP Asa had stated was to be a ‘Local Orientation.’

¹³ Bergur Finnbogason, for example, is known as CCP Burger because the slightly unique ‘e’ sound is difficult for many to pronounce. Similarly, the CEO of CCP Games, Hilmar, is known as CCP Hellmar, although this is more a play on words than a nod to pronunciation difficulties.

Entering the reception area, I notice that CCP Isafold is noticeably absent from her standard post at the front desk. I wonder what other roles she fills at the company and where she might be before walking behind the usually open, but now closed, door that leads to the cantina. With a tap of my card, I am in the hallway to the cantina and instead of turning left to enter what I playfully think of as the ‘Great Hall’ for now, I walk past the wall of six “KPI¹⁴” monitors and head towards the large room to its right where HR is located. I stare briefly at the KPI monitors, a bit perturbed that the graphs are still unintelligible to me, and remind myself to look at these in-depth later on.

As I look into the HR office, I see that CCP Asa is not at her desk. From behind me I hear, “Ah Josh!” I spin around and see a small meeting room with warm orange lights on and light-beige leather couches. At the center of the room is a small coffee table and on the wall across from the couches is a giant monitor where CCP Asa has a presentation pulled up. I make my way inside and say, “Good morning [CCP Asa]. How are you?” She responds with a smile and a voice that can only be described as being a tone of pure joy as she says, “I’m doing splendid. Let’s walk through the local orientation now.”

I take a seat on one of the couches, with CCP Asa on the couch perpendicular to me and she begins by telling me that this orientation is usually given to new employees either on their first, second, or third day of working at CCP Games, but always within the first week. She has handcrafted the presentation I am about to be shown and this is her 40th iteration of it throughout her “nearly five years of working at the company.”

One of the first slides of the presentation introduces me to the HR team I already know, namely CCP Horsewhisperer and CCP Asa, who are labeled as “HR Business Partners.” CCP Asa

¹⁴ I will speak to KPIs in more detail later, but it is worth noting that at the start of my time at CCP, I did not know what KPI stood for. It stands for Key Performance Indicators, that is, any metric the indicates to the company how healthy it is doing at a glance. These indicators were placed front and center for all employees to see as they went to lunch every day.

chimes in on this slide after stating their titles to say that she actually left CCP Games for a time a year or so before I joined. She describes in an almost melancholic manner how she went to try and find a new experience elsewhere because of her “midlife crisis.” As the melancholy turns to the slightest hint of anger, she states that she “absolutely hated it” and wanted to come back to CCP in a short period of time. Only six months after leaving, she returned in a temporary role as one of the other HR employees was out on maternity leave. During that time, her old position “opened back up” and she rejoined permanently. To this day, she considers that period of time as a career misstep for her and speaks of her tenure at CCP Games as one that includes the time before she left. Interestingly, CCP Games as an institution also views CCP Asa’s departure as a temporary break of tenure and she is referred to as an employee who has been around for over five years.

“But enough about my story, although I have quite a few of them,” she remarks as the next slide introduces me to several people who are labeled as “Other Important People.” This includes [CCP Solveig], a chef who has been with the company since it was a group of six guys in an apartment trying to make an impossibly complex video game. It also includes [CCP Viggo], the current head chef of the company, as well as [CCP Einar] and [CCP Robert], the two IT experts. CCP Asa talks through how each of these people is able to help new employees, and me, with finding our way in the company’s technological and gastronomical finesses. I make a mental note, however, that this section notably leaves out any mention of senior leadership such as CEO Hilmar Petursson or then CFO Sigurður Stefánsson. In fact, the only director-level person mentioned was CCP Horsewhisperer, the Vice President of People. Throughout, CCP Asa’s voice remains light, airy, and full of joy as she speaks to how helpful each of these individuals can be. I smile at her delivery, realizing that her joy is nearly infectious and certainly a welcome reprieve from the cold, grey September to which I am still acclimating.

What follows is an in-depth description of various HR and personnel policies at CCP Games. To an employee coming from an Icelandic company, none of these policies will ring as odd or unusual, nor would they come across as particularly generous. Abiding by Icelandic law, CCP gives employees a certain amount of ‘probation time’ before the employee is issued “full status,” including the right to a three-month notice period. CCP Asa does note, though, that the Icelandic office has taken to sending employees their employment contracts early, that is before their first day of work, for the sake of making the immigration process easier. “Wait, contracts aren’t signed until the first day of work?” I ask, almost astounded. “No, that’s pretty typical in Iceland actually,” she answers, still cheery, before remarking, “But of course if someone wanted their contract earlier, they would be given it.” I doubt this statement, still wary of corporate entities in general and mistrusting of any employer that does not provide the legal security of an employment contract well before an employee’s start date.

Aside from this intriguing detail, the presentation also covers how Icelandic paid-time-off (PTO) days are calculated differently than they are in most European companies, that is they are accrued in a model more similar to American corporate PTO, albeit in a far greater amount. Similarly, CCP Asa points out that sick days are also ‘earned,’ in the amount of two days per month. I find this odd for a company I think of as existing in a progressive socialist society, especially given my own experience in Germany where sick leave is nearly unlimited. CCP Asa does remark, however, that sick days are calculated in retrospect and that “I don’t know anyone who has not been able to take a sick day when they are sick.”

As the presentation concludes with talk of an onboarding buddy, as well as perks of the company such as an onsite fitness studio that is free of charge, as well as access to therapy and counseling as needed, CCP Asa reiterates that these benefits are all “quite nice.” She also speaks to her own history at the company and I take note of the fact that, for her, CCP Games is a generous

employer. Hearing her describe both her start at CCP and then her return, the company was magnanimous in both giving her employment and then returning her to her former job when she decided she wanted to return and work for the company once more. To CCP Asa, CCP Games is a video game maker, certainly, but the institution is, above all, an employer who had seen to her own personal success both in life and in her career. Here, in contrast to the events of yesterday, I observe a different façade of CCP Games as an institution.

That night I am staring at the wall of Reykjavík's only bouldering gym, and one that apparently underestimates the difficulty of its routes, trying to unravel the puzzle of the alleged V3¹⁵ route in front of me. Pondering the physical and mental puzzle in front of me, I am also working through the puzzle of my place at CCP Games. The meeting with CCP Asa earlier, in contrast to the events of the CSM summit that has been ongoing paints a picture of an institution that is generally generous, caring, and understanding. How does a company exist that, on the one hand is spoken about as a Chaosbringer and from another angle praised to no end for its employee benefits? On top of this, how am I meant to understand the work that the development teams are doing? What is that man who sits across from me through the glass doing all day as he types and stares at his screen? These questions are buried as my hands take to the wall, but they are present nonetheless.

Taking a fall onto the padding of the bouldering halls floor as I yet again fail the V3 I have now attempted four times, I think to myself that I can process the absolute whirlwind of activity of the first two weeks later, but now I need to accomplish two things. I need to send¹⁶ this bouldering route, that is climb it without a fall, and I also need to choose a 'dev name,' if I am even going to take on a 'dev name.' Hands and feet back on the wall, I quickly decide that I will definitely take on a

¹⁵ In theory, a bouldering route graded V3 should be rather mundane for someone with four years of climbing experience such as myself. This route was not easy.

¹⁶ This is a climbing term for successfully climbing a route without falling or resting on the gear.

CCP name, for my goal is to become as much a CCPer as possible in order to dive into my fieldsite. That leaves me with deciding on a name. I have given it some thought since CCP Burger mentioned it and have narrowed it down to two options. The first is CCP Felix, a name that is playful, short, Germanic, and most importantly a nod to my godson's name. The second is CCP Augustine, which is more austere, serious, scholarly, and a bit Victorian. I ask my husband via WhatsApp what his thoughts are and, as I finally send the V3 that was almost definitely a significantly harder V5, I decide. I will be CCP Augustine, scholar and Victorian. That is the image I want to exude and this name will help me to do so. Just as CCP Games was shaping up to be multiple entities, so too would I wear different masks and personas.

Having decided on a name, I finish at the gym and head home where I sleep soundly for the first time in three weeks. I have a path forward and the name of a CCPer, I am a bit more confident now that I will survive the whorl of my onboarding and start to uncover how it is that “Chaosbringer CCP” and “Employer CCP” coexist as the same institution, albeit with markedly different reputations and images.

“Komischer Kumpel CCP”

My alarm clock bleats out an absurdly cheery tone as I force my eyes open. Slightly disoriented and still overwhelmed by the last three weeks of adjusting to fieldwork in the sub-Arctic. I glance at my phone and see that it is four forty-five in the morning on September 12th, 2019. As I roll out of bed, I am both exhausted and ecstatic. Today I head to Berlin with an entire team of *EVE Online* developers in order to attend “G-Fleet.” Today I am one of those developers for the sake of the event and for the players meeting us in Berlin. At five eighteen, my phone rings. The taxi is outside. In the dark, I step into the taxi, mumble a “Morning” to the rest of the crew who look just as tired as I am and the company-supplied taxi takes off for the country's primary airport in

Keflavík, located almost forty-five minutes away from downtown Reykjavík. Knowing no one in the taxi, I briefly introduce myself and a flurry of names is tossed my way. In the van with me are CCP Convict, CCP Cognac, CCP Tara, and the de-facto leader of this entourage, CCP Falcon, who is a Senior Community Developer and well-known figure in the *EVE Online* community.

After brief introductions, the ride is quiet and the taxi is relatively full, but as we head towards Berlin I think back on the past week and of how I ended up in this van, as well as what I can expect in Germany. When CCP Burger first introduced me to people at CCP, he made sure to specifically take time to be present for one of the introductions, the one to CCP Goodfella, the Brand Director of *EVE Online*. At this introduction, he asked Goodfella if I would be welcome at the ‘World Tour’ events that were ongoing. Goodfella replied in the positive and a few days later, notably only one day before departing for Berlin, I had a briefing sheet in my inbox with “do’s and don’t’s” of attending an event from Herman¹⁷, the Event Director.

Reading through the email I notice that it is explicitly stated that CCP’s attendance at this event was primarily intended to enable the team to interact with players, announce an important change to an unpopular game design decision the team had made during the summer, as well as simply to be present to show investment in the player community. Alongside this opening statement about our purpose is a long list of information about the pragmatic and organizational details of the event, namely where the CCP entourage would be staying, as well as the schedule for the weekend. There are also two notable statements tucked away into the email. The first is a request for CCPers not to hangout in giant groups, keeping to no more than two CCP employees in a group at a time. The second is an instruction for everyone to help set the event up on Friday morning, as well as to help out generally. This philosophy of helping out where one can echoes through my mind as I sit in

¹⁷ Herman was known as CCP Curtis but left the company shortly after the events of the World Tour concluded, accordingly he will be referred to by an Icelandic pseudonym.

the taxi on the way to the airport. I wonder when and how I could possibly help out. At the very least I will carry some tables and chairs, I tell myself.

The next morning I arrive at the CCP hotel, the Mondrian Suites, promptly at 10 o'clock in the morning. Last night, after everyone settled into the various hotel rooms, or in my case a nearby AirBnB, CCP Falcon told the team via a Slack¹⁸ channel to meet at 10 in the hotel lobby to head to the venue for set up. A bit warm in the unusually warm 24-degree Celsius heat¹⁹ and my newly acquired t-shirt with 'EVE Online Invasion World Tour' printed on the front and 'Staff' printed on the back, I am the only person in the lobby. Roughly fifteen minutes later and there are five of the thirteen teammates present. Herman and CCP Falcon determine that this will have to be enough and the meager group and I head to the event venue: The Forum Factory.

On our way to the venue, there is brief chatter about the heat and I begin a conversation with the newly hired CCP Convict, an Australian man who tells me that he started this World Tour as a player and is excited to be ending it as a Community Developer and CCP employee. We arrive at the venue as his story concludes and it is clear that venue setup is not a strength of the team in charge. With piles of equipment scattered about and the heat of the day beginning to set in what follows are an odd two hours wherein I attempt to be helpful by moving equipment, but mostly feel as if I am in the way. Nevertheless, I move speakers, benches, and more around the venue in an effort to prove myself to the team.

Following the setup, I am given a nametag with my CCP name handwritten on it. Despite not being printed, in large part due to the short notice from CCP Burger that I would be attending

¹⁸ Slack is a communication tool in software and app form that was widely used across CCP and many other tech companies, as well as various office-type groups during the time of my fieldwork. I will speak more to this tool in a later chapter as its use during my fieldwork increased substantially once the pandemic struck.

¹⁹ For the sake of describing temperatures, I will use Celsius, which is more widely spread than Fahrenheit in that it is used in nearly every country except for America. It is also how I personally measure temperatures and is how I took note of temperatures in my fieldnotes.

this event, I am overjoyed to see my own CCP name on a name tag. CCP Augustine it reads. It had been a close race between this name and CCP Felix, but I am excited to see it realized in the actual world.

Despite my joy, I am a bit sweaty and eager to cool down, so I leave to take a break, explore the city a bit, and shower before returning as the rest of the team also returns to their hotel rooms for an afternoon nap or beer in some cases. When I return later that evening to the venue, I store my bag in the staff room adjacent to the meeting hall and notice that there are at least twenty to thirty people assembled outside of the Forum Factory, all eagerly talking to one another as a security guard is standing outside of the front door, seemingly keeping players from entering the hall just yet. I show the guard my badge and walk into the venue where I see CCP Oracle. She smiles and shortly afterwards the Welcome Ceremony begins, hosted by CCP Falcon and the G-Fleet lead, a man named Holger.

The ceremony opens with some minor applause as Holger speaks in a thickly German-accented English about past G-Fleet events, noting that last year's event was held in a renovated sex dungeon, but that this year they had to upgrade in order to account for the nearly 300 people in attendance. As his speech continues, I notice CCP Falcon standing next to him with a smile. Holger mentions that, though this event has CCP attendance every year, this year it is particularly special to "have so many CCP friends and guests with us." The audience claps in response to this and I observe that, unlike my encounter with the CSM last week, this group of people seems to love the presence of the game's developers. To be referred to as friends by a group of players is a staunchly different enactment of CCP Games as an institution than the image of "Chaosbringer CCP."

The ceremony concludes and I am ushered to a buffet of food where I grab a plate and sit next to CCP Oracle at a table some distance away from a group of players who are excitedly talking with one another. She is deeply intrigued by my project and we speak about it at length before she

comments, “Yea I noticed you at Kick-Off. You seemed a bit introverted, but you were in the drum circle! So I just sort of assumed you wanted to do your own thing.” I ask her if it’s normal for CCP to open its doors to researchers such as myself and she answers that she isn’t surprised by my presence, mostly because it was approved by Bergur and through him Hilmar.

As the conversation takes another turn, a man approaches the table. Wearing a black t-shirt and khaki pants, he’s accompanied by a seeming friend. He asks if he can take a seat and both CCP Oracle and I nod in the affirmative. As he sits down, he asks if I could answer a question for him. He asks about the cynosural changes, noting that these changes are incredibly negative to ‘Wormholers,’ a group of players who play primarily in a type of space known as “J-Space” that one can only access and travel through via wormholes. A bit at a loss as to what to say, but remembering the info sheet I had been given, I answer with a somewhat canned answer, but also chime in to note that, “I’m pretty new here, sorry. I think there will be more answers later tonight though.” He sighs a bit, but says, “Well thank you,” before he leaves and the events of the night continue, although I am nearly in a daze throughout them.

The clock nears 10:30 PM and a screening of the award-winning documentary *Even Asteroids Are Not Alone* by filmmaker Jón Bjarki Magnússon has just concluded. The event staff, myself included, begin setting up for the so-called “Glorious CCP AMA,” where the CCPers in attendance will be introduced and the audience will be allowed to ask us any question they can think of. It is noted in the event program that no question is off-limits. I ponder this caveat, wondering if that really holds true, but thinking about the familiarity such an event presupposes between question-asker and answer-giver. The set-up is rushed and I am ushered backstage with the other CCPers before I wait to walk on stage for the first time as a CCP developer.

“This guy has just joined our team as a Researcher, please welcome CCP Augustine,” CCP Falcon chimes out as I walk on stage, wave to the crowd and smile, before promptly walking straight

into the edge of the couch on stage. Embarrassed and in a bit of pain, I take my seat on the far side of the stage next to CCP Oracle and the event begins after every CCPer is seated and introduced, the crowd applauding for each of us. Unlike the CSM summit, this event is jovial and there is a full crowd seated in front of me. CCP Falcon briefly talks about how we're in attendance for the players and has those of us who speak German fluently raise our hands so that the players will know who they can speak to in what languages. I smile faintly, thinking I may just be helpful yet and the AMA properly begins as Holger brings a tray of shots to the stage for the "traditional Brause shot," a shot of vodka that one takes with a packet of sugar-powder meant to make a sickly sweet kids drink. CCP Falcon laughs and the team all takes a Brause shot as it is agreed upon to the crowd that each time "Blackout" is mentioned, the team will take a shot.

The questions begin and they are all related to the game. They are all friendly, none of them are overtly aggressive and the team and players both seem to be enjoying each others' company. At least four Brause shots later, the AMA concludes and the CCPers disperse into the crowd. I chat briefly with CCP Oracle and CCP Cognac before the night continues with chatter between the team and players, as well as a DJ set. Several times throughout the night and the next day, I observe a sort of familiarity and friendship between CCP employees and event attendees. One player goes so far as to use the words "ihr Kumpels" when greeting a group of CCPers, which translates roughly to "you buddies," in English. The response from someone else in the group is, "Naja komischer Kumpel aber stimmt," a phrase that roughly translates to, "Well, an odd buddy, but sure." This interaction and the events of G-Fleet Berlin capture my attention as yet another enactment of CCP Games. To be called an odd friend or buddy by players is a strikingly different framing of the company than the other two I had already experienced.

Sitting in the airplane on the way back to Berlin on Monday, September 16th, having opted to stay an extra day in the city to meet some old friends and experience temperatures above the low

teens²⁰, I stare out of the window and lose my gaze in the clouds as I think about the events of the G-Fleet weekend. Being approached by a player so casually was novel in many regards for me. It was novel to be considered the game-maker, especially having just joined CCP a few weeks earlier as an ethnographer. More significantly to the enactment of CCP Games I witnessed in Berlin, however, it was novel to see players so brazenly, or perhaps courageously, approach an employee of a game development studio to ask them questions about the game's balance. At the AMA on the first evening, a similar attitude and demeanor ruled the crowd, with players asking multiple times about the existence of the "Blackout," as well as the cynosural changes that had been introduced. While polite in their tone, these players were also direct, noting that they did not think highly of the changes made, but respected CCP Games as a game maker and institution.

This interaction of challenging CCP, but referring to the developers and company as a "komischer Kumpel" was a markedly different depiction of the institution than that of the CSM's "Chaosbringer CCP" or CCP Asa's "Generous Employer" CCP. Seeing players approach developers so casually and chat with those same developers both seriously and amicably at the same time was remarkable. Here was yet another image and version of CCP on display, one I had seen from both sides. The flight is suddenly over as these thoughts race through my head and the next week at my fieldsite begins.

Enacted Institutions & Getting To Know Them

During my first two weeks "in the field" at CCP Games, I saw three clearly distinct images of the institution of CCP Games ehf²¹. Starting my time at the company, CCP Burger presented me

²⁰ In Iceland, the average temperature at the time was 13 degrees Celsius, or roughly mid-fifties Fahrenheit.

²¹ Ehf. stands for einkahlutafélag and is the equivalent of an American limited liability private company (LLC).

with a view of CCP Games as a relaxed start-up-like environment where I could have doors opened to events by simply asking the right person about them. In many instances, this was an accurate depiction of the institutional environment of CCP Games, but it was not the only enactment. Indeed, as CSM week continued and I observed the meetings, then proceeded to talk to some of the CSM members directly, I heard tale of a CCP Games that cared little for the opinion of its playerbase, in many ways this ‘Chaosbringer CCP’ was an antagonistic and malevolent one, out not to see its virtual world thrive, but to deprive those who played its game of satisfaction. Finally, by players in Berlin, I came to know a more benevolent CCP Games, one that was seen as a bit quirky at times, but ultimately a true hero and pioneer of game-making.

Each of these depictions of CCP Games was and is real. CCP Games was a somewhat relaxed start-up-like corporate environment, it was also at times a pile of bureaucratic red-tape, as I’ll speak to later in this dissertation. From the view of its playerbase, the company did make several changes that threatened the gameplay styles and gameplay enjoyment of many of its most engaged players. Simultaneously, some of these changes were welcomed as ‘pioneering’ and ‘brave’ by players I spoke to in Berlin.

Through the lens of Marina Welker, who draws on Annemarie Mol’s *Body Multiple* to highlight that even corporations are multiplicitous in nature, what many would see as a monolithic and singular institutional entity known as CCP Games instead is revealed as many things simultaneously. For Welker, corporations are “unstable and indeterminate, multiply authored, in flux, and comprising both material and immaterial parts,” (2014: 4). Just as her ethnographic focus, Newmont Mining Corporation was seen simultaneously as “Goodmont” and “Newmonster,” so too was CCP understood to be both a benevolent and a malevolent actor simultaneously, at times by the same network of actors at once (Welker 2014: 7).

Welker highlights that corporations “hang together” in a manner that creates a “composite singularity,” that is to say that they are enacted entities that come to exist through the social relations and networked actions of those that craft an image of the corporation (2014: 5). While corporations are spoken of in the singular manner, corporations do not exist as agentic actors with wills of their own. Instead, they are brought into being by those that interact with the various facades of that corporation. In essence, CCP Games is “more than one, but less than two” in its essence (cf. de la Cadena 2015). While it is viewed, spoken of, and interacted with in ways that at times seem at odds with one another, each ‘enactment’ of CCP Games is as real as the others through its perception. To quote the CEO of CCP Games directly, albeit decontextualizing the quote somewhat, “Perception is reality, it makes things real.” Similarly, the various understandings of CCP Games were all simultaneously true and they came to coalesce into what was monolithically referred to as ‘CCP’ by many that talked about the company directly.

Throughout my time at CCP Games, the notion of the ‘corporation multiple’ was key to understanding how my interlocutors, be they employees, *EVE Online* players, the company’s “Senior Leadership,” or random Icelandic residents, could all hold distinct and divergent views of the company and that all things could be true. It also aided in understanding how the corporate entity known as CCP was itself comprised of multiple actors internally and externally. Just as the developers of my first team, Team Five-0, were taken up in the enacting of CCP Games as game-maker, so too were the players who engaged with the game that said team contributed to making.

To see CCP as an enacted institution, created through its perceived actions, is to understand that CCP is not singular, but rather a network of enacted perceptions. This dissertation will strive to show that the multiplicity of these enactments also leads to multiplicitous ethical commitments.

Just as CCP is multiple, so too are the ethical commitments embedded in the game of *EVE Online*. Various actors perceived their role as creators in myriad ways. Accordingly, there was no

singular view of what *EVE Online* ought to be, nor was there a singular view of what kind of ethical stances should be imbued into the game design of the world.

Chapter Three: The Table at Team Psycho Sisters

Moving Desks

It is the beginning of October and the sun has begun to set earlier and earlier each day. In muted daylight, I am grumpily clearing off my laptop and a couple of books from what has just become my former desk in the ‘Island of Misfit Toys’ so that I can move to a spare desk in the next corral over. Having finally found a team who agreed to let me join them and work with them two weeks ago – the long-standing Team Five-0 – I was at first excited by what the month of October was to bring and the idea of moving from my desk near CCP Burger’s glass box to one near my team. Unfortunately for me, that move is not the one I am currently undertaking. While I am moving slightly closer to the team area, I am not doing so of my own volition. Instead, I have been told in no uncertain terms by CCP Eagle, a former Producer and now Operations Manager, that he will be taking over my desk because he ‘needs to be closer to the people there and to the development teams.’ I place my laptop and my few books on my new desk and take stock of the area around me.

Unlike the rather subdued and quiet group of employees seated in my previous area, several of the team members here are chattering amongst themselves. These desks are also arranged facing ‘outwards’ so that the employee sitting at them is looking at a wall and everyone who walks by is able to see that employee’s screen (See Figure 4). This organizational pattern strikes me as directly inspired by Bentham’s Panopticon (cf. Foucault 1975). Nevertheless, the team is cheery in their demeanor. The man sitting two desks down from me smiles and says ‘Hello.’ He does not ask what my name is, I notice. The other three who are present appear to ignore my presence. The two men seated directly behind me, who I would later come to know as CCP ‘The Funk’ and CCP Possum, seem to be deep into the weeds of discussing quality assurance testing regulations. Instead of introducing myself, I look around the corral once and decide to open my laptop to at least pretend

to be doing something of import. As I open the internal wiki, I realize I do have some work to do: I need to continue my investigation of CCP Games's history, as well as research the existing literature interrogating the very notion of institutions and corporations.

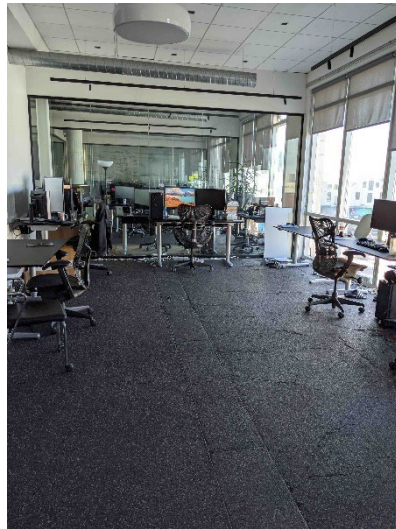


Figure 4. A team corral at CCP's former offices on Grandagarður reminiscent of Bentham's Panopticon

“Moving sucks,” I mumble to myself, even more upset now that I see that not only has my desk changed, but so too has my lock screen. Still, cute pudgy tiger on my lock screen or no, it is time to foray into the world of theory and history that will help frame the insights I am sure to gain in this new team area.

The History of CCP Games

One of the first things I set out to discover both on CCP's internal wiki pages and across its various archives was the company's history. To understand how CCP Games was enacted contemporarily, I figured I would need to understand how it had been enacted historically. While internal documentation was severely lacking in strict details of the company's past, there are a few stories that were not only documented but remain active in the memory of present-day CCPers.

The first piece of information that I readily knew about the company's past, in part because it is mentioned in nearly every major company meeting, is that CCP Games was founded by a 'group

of friends' in 1997. These friends set out to make a massively-multiplayer online game. Although their names had never been mentioned around me, with minimal effort I was able to uncover who those friends were, namely Reynir Harðarson, Þorolfur Beck, and Ívar Kristjánsson. Of the three, I had heard Reynir's name before. None of the three remain connected to the company at present except for their friendships with some of the employees with a longer tenure at the company.

Seeking to fund the production of a prototype for their digital game, these three friends and a small team they built up around them worked on and released a wildly popular board game about addiction, death, and the cycles of life known as *Hættuspil*, or 'The Danger Game'²². Officially released in 1998, this game saw massive sales and successfully funded the small team of creators through 2000, when the game makers sought out other funding. This is when Hilmar Pétursson, the current CEO, joined the company as its Chief Technical Officer. Hilmar still recounts these times as 'crazy but fun' and talks about how he himself worked on the code of the game's marketplace.

Following Hilmar's hiring, CCP Games saw great success in the launch of their MMO *EVE Online* as it publicly opened as a digitally distributed game on May 6, 2003. Most notably for a game of its type at the time, *EVE Online* had, and still has, only one server for its entire playerbase, an unusual choice given that most other MMO publishers often opt for multiple servers across several different regions and time zones, each server its own instance of the MMO's entire world (Carter et al. 2016). The exception to these are those players located in the People's Republic of China, which has strict laws on content and gameplay that often lead game developers and publishers to host Chinese players on entirely separate servers so as to support what is oftentimes a vastly different game at its core, even if it shares the same name (cf. Nardi 2010).

²² An English copy of this game is given out to every new CCP employee, including myself, and the original game was re-released with CCP's permission at Christmas of 2020.

In the years that followed, *EVE Online* grew massively and experienced several universe-altering in-game wars in the early 2000s that saw tens of thousands of dollars' worth of virtual spaceships lost (cf. Groen 2016). Such events, though occurring somewhat seldomly, became widely publicized and remain a distinguished part of *EVE Online*'s reputation to this very day (ibid.). According to Hilmar and CCP Burger at the time of my fieldwork, "as the game grew back then, so did the hubris of CCP Games." Instead of focusing on the game, the developers "embraced a celebrity culture and focused on their personal fame, not on what made the game fun and what mattered," CCP Burger once recounted to me. An excellent example demonstrating this hubris and its pitfalls are the events that led to the aforementioned "Council of Stellar Management," the democratically elected player council of representatives that serves as a "consultative committee with no formal democratic power or accountability by CCP to their requests," (deZwart & Humphreys 2014: 84).

Four years after the launch of *EVE Online*, CCP Games faced a major controversy: a CCP developer known as T20 was accused of unfairly assisting a particular player group. In response to this highly dramatic reveal of T20's virtual crimes via the game's official forums, CCP's CEO, Hilmar Pétursson, responded by saying, "*EVE Online* is not a computer game. It is an emerging nation, and we have to address [this controversy] like a nation being accused of corruption," (Pétursson in Ireland 2013:ix). Following this statement, CCP made public an investigation that declared T20 guilty of his virtual crimes. Notably, the company had held this investigation months prior to news of T20's actions becoming public. Subsequently, in the spirit of transparency Pétursson announced the foundation of an *EVE Online* player-elected oversight and input committee, to be called the Council of Stellar Management (CSM). A year later, nine representatives from *EVE Online* – the first CSM – were instated, taking up the mantle as so-called 'goðars,' or chieftain representatives, of *EVE Online*.

The CSM was widely acknowledged as another successful yet ‘uniquely CCP’ facet of the company’s approach to MMO development at the time of its announcement (de Zwart & Humphreys 2014:78). It is also worth noting that the success of CCP’s response to publicly revealed corruption stood in stark contrast to the failure of the Icelandic government and its banking system that occurred around the same time. This success in an economy and environment of marked failure likely contributed to CCP’s ongoing growing pains for the establishment of player oversight and seven players’ involvement in biannual week-long seminars failed to prevent another public faux-pax as the company neared its second decade of operation in 2011.

As 2010 ended, CCP Games had grown extensively from a group of three friends to a large game developer with approximately 600 employees across four studio locations in Newcastle, Atlanta, Shanghai, and Reykjavík. Their playerbase had also grown from a few thousand at its outset to almost 400,000 subscribed players. Internally, morale was high as the company had not only weathered the 2008 banking crisis that had seen Iceland’s markets and reputation utterly destroyed, but had actually grown more successful during the time and even been consulted by the Icelandic government on how to best rebuild. The company was also busy at work on two new video games: *Dust 514*, a presently-shuttered online first-person shooter, and an untitled MMO based in the vampire-addled setting of the *World of Darkness*²³ universe. In light of their success at the time and the stability the company provided while working in a relatively novel industry for the early 2000s, CCP Games grew to be seen as a pillar of Icelandic society according to many of the people I talked to both at the company and outside of it. This special role in Icelandic society became increasingly obvious the more often I talked to non-CCPers about why I was in Iceland. Mentioning that I was ‘working on a research project with and at CCP Games’ often elicited smiles, knowing nods, and in

²³ For further insights into *World of Darkness* see Liebeseller 2017.

one case, “Oh wow, you’ve landed at the best company in Iceland.” The company’s reputation grew exponentially in the late 2000s and early 2010s, not the least because of the success they saw during the otherwise catastrophic banking crisis.

Still, the company’s leadership had noted, on the internal state of the company reports at least, the need for a “shift to a hybrid revenue model,” that being one that relied on sources of income beyond subscription revenue from *EVE Online*. They sought to do this through character-based “microtransactions,” or purchases made in addition to the cost of the initial game and on top of the monthly subscription players paid to CCP Games in order to access its servers. While now common across MMOs and video games generally (cf. Nieborg 2016; cf. Švelch 2017), in 2011, microtransactions were anything but standard for subscription-based online games. To implement them as was planned, in the form of items for character models that were barely a part of the game, was a bold move. According to those still at the company now, it was also a mistake.

Released in June of 2011, the *Incarna* expansion of *EVE Online* was the culmination of the company’s efforts to ‘hybridize’ their revenue model for *EVE Online*. Having promised character-based gameplay in a virtual world bereft of character models, CCP delivered a small ‘Captain’s Quarters’ that the player could slowly walk back and forth in. They also delivered expensive character clothing items, including a \$25 set of virtual boots, a \$40 shirt, and a \$70 monocle. Given the limited use of these items in a limited portion of the game, players viewed this release as “a blatant cashgrab” (Groen 2020). On June 22nd, an internal newsletter from May 2011 was leaked to the public. On its bright red background in big, bold letters hanging over top of the image of Gordon Gekko was his catchphrase: “Greed Is Good.” The newsletter itself focused on monetization and was remarkably similar in content to the 2010 Annual Report, mostly pointing out that the subscription-based model of *EVE Online* needed to be augmented for the company’s vision to be realized. Following the disappointing realization of characters in *EVE Online* after it had been

talked about and promised since 2007, players were furious (ibid.). Then, an internal email from Hilmar praising the expansion and the company's 'greedy' efforts also leaked. Players went from furious to utterly enraged.

Riding this rage, players began to assemble in the virtual world of New Eden in protest, putting extreme strain on the servers that ran the game. Many also began canceling their accounts and *EVE Online* saw an 8% drop in its subscriptions in 2011 (ibid.). CCP's senior leadership ultimately reached an agreement with the CSM, having debated with them for a number of days about appropriate next steps both regarding game design and publicity, and together they agreed that the company would need to reorient its efforts. Hilmar made this announcement alongside a public apology for his email and earlier stance, but the damage was done. Revenue sank and, in 2011, CCP Games fired 20% of its staff. Most of those let go were located at the Atlanta, Georgia office and they were focused on developing the World of Darkness MMO. Among those retained were several Icelandic citizens who were relocated back to Reykjavik to focus their efforts on *EVE Online*.

Humbled at their missteps, CCP entered an era of relative stagnation. Instead of growing, the game simply kept on, its playerbase gradually shrinking as the world of video games became increasingly popular, the playerbase grew older, and development on the game, though stable, was "nothing particularly remarkable" according to one CCP'er present at the time.

In 2014, the company announced the cancellation of the World of Darkness MMO, attracting the ire of a devoted fanbase who had been eagerly looking forward to a game set outside of the EVE universe. In 2016, the company made a major announcement: *EVE Online* was leaving the subscription model behind and moving into a "Free-To-Play" model where users could freely play the game in a limited capacity without spending any money at all. Those who opted into a subscription, known as Omega clones, would have benefits that 'free' players, known as Alpha

clones, would not. This announcement and its subsequent realization ushered in an era of increased player counts and revenue for CCP Games.

Between 2016 and 2018, CCP saw some growth, although its employee count remained relatively low compared to the nearly 600 it employed in 2010. In 2017, the company faced another round of massive layoffs as it shuttered its Newcastle office, where the company's virtual reality games were produced. Simultaneously, senior leadership decided to also let go of several members of the publishing and office management team in Reykjavík. The company was sold in 2018 to South-Korean publisher Pearl Abyss. Shortly after the sale, I joined the company as an ethnographer and so history became lived reality.

Throughout its existence, the institution of CCP Games has proved itself to be capable of unique achievements within the sphere of virtual worlds and MMOs. From great successes to great failures, CCP grew from an Icelandic startup to a notorious international company with an impressive video game portfolio, including *EVE Online*.

In the years since its founding, the company has grown from a 'group of friends' to one of Iceland's largest corporate institutions, presently at nearly three-hundred and fifty employees, the majority of whom are located in Reykjavík, Iceland. Even more could be said of CCP's twenty-five-year history and of *EVE Online's* nineteen-year past, but what is most relevant to understand is this: the notion of CCP Games as a 'small group of friends' is still occasionally enacted by several of its employees, including Hilmar himself, as well as several members of the development team who have been working at the company since the early 2000s. Simultaneously, several of the company's current employees regularly ignore this enactment of the company's past to instead focus on its missteps in 2011 and the massive layoffs that occurred accordingly when the company failed to increase its revenue following *Incarna*. Others yet also speak to the CCP Games of the "halcyon days of the Alpha and Omega clone shift."

These ideas of CCP Games as a group of friends making games, or as a cold corporate entity willing to lay off hundreds of employees in the wake of senior leadership's missteps, but also as a place of success and growth in the era of free-to-play games were all additional depictions of CCP Games that I discovered as I dug into the company's past from my new desk. Each depiction further troubled any attempt to depict the corporation itself as somehow singular. From one conversation to another, when discussing the company's present, its myriad pasts were evoked. CCP Games was multiple both in its present-day existence, as well as in how its current employees evoked its past, as well as its geographical and cultural location on the rocky, North Atlantic island of Iceland.

Enacted Institutions

Key to understanding the multiplicitous nature of CCP Games is understanding that corporations are institutions. CCP Games and video game developers like it are often referred to in a singular form and are understood as singular entities when they are in fact comprised of multiple social actors. As evidenced even in the company's history, institutions are often spoken about as if they are somehow an entirely different organization depending on which context they are discussed in. In short, just as Lambek observes that society is keen to create "discontinuous selves" with statements such as, "I'll be a different man once this project is over," so too are we eager to speak of institutions in phrases such as, "CCP Games was ruthless," directly followed by a contradictory statement, "CCP Games is such a good employer." I was equally as likely to hear, "CCP is so Icelandic," within minutes of the same person stating, "CCP Games truly is a culturally diverse workplace." These seemingly contradictory statements exist because of the nature of institutions. Pieced together and enacted, corporate entities are never purely singular wholes but they often appear as such in popular discourse and at a superficial glance. Not only are such entities discontinuous across spatial contexts, but they are also discontinuous across temporal contexts as

CCP's history highlights. No corporate entity remains perfectly consistent with its stated values across and through time. Accordingly, to understand CCP Games as a corporate entity, one must understand the nature of institutions both spatially and temporally in order to grasp why they wield such power as to make the multiple singular across and through space and time, as Lambek suggests social actors do (cf. 2010).

At the heart of this conundrum is some of the original ethnographic and theoretical research on institutions by Erving Goffman, who defined 'total institutions' as enclosed spaces of formally administered life (1961). This definition, however, is limited in its perspective and scope, as was Goffman's intent. It has, however, served to inform broader views of institutions and the notion of corporations as institutions has led to a "den[ial] of the complexity of corporate histories" and thereby their multiplicitous nature (Ho 2009: 171). While useful when looking to understand how certain institutional actors are capable of shaping social life within particular spaces – such as prison systems, boarding schools, and monasteries – to consider all institutions as somehow singular and entirely closed off from the outside world is to ignore the nuance of social life and its impact on the social actors that comprise an institution. Even with Goffman's definition, there is a lack of nuance as regards the actors who are able to leave the institution and how their presence outside of the total institution impacts the nature of the total institution itself. Instead of understanding all institutions to be singular, one must look to more contemporary research that grapples with the absolutist implications of Goffman's definition.

There are several authors who challenge the idea that institutional life is absolute, espousing instead that no institution is truly enclosed or sealed from the rest of cultural life, even in institutions as purportedly controlling as prison systems (cf. Biondi 2016). Indeed, as Biondi notes in her work on Brazilian prison system life, each prisoner she worked with spoke to their own unique "walk" within the prison system, highlighting that while they were a part of the same system, they each

experienced the prison system in a unique manner, as did those overseeing their incarceration itself (2016: 10). Similarly, in his study of bureaucratic institutions in India, Akhil Gupta observes that it is critical methodologically to “allow the state to be disaggregated by focusing on different bureaucracies without prejudicing their unity or coherence...” so as to undertake a properly postcolonial ethnographic exploration of the institution that is the Indian state (2012: 77). Even within institutions themselves, employees cannot be understood to be interchangeable, as Ho notes when she observes in her ethnography of Wall Street that there is “no singular, homogenous, Wall Street employee” (2009: 79). Each of these authors points to the nature of corporations and institutions broadly as multiple, but it is in Marina Welker’s work that we begin to see how we might understand these multiplicitous entities through a methodological and theoretical lens informed by actor-network theory (cf. Callon 1986; cf. Latour 2007; cf. Mol 2002).

Welker proposes that instead of analyzing and understanding corporations as singular entities, one is better served by understanding that all institutions, and thereby corporations, are “semi-bounded, multiplicitous, and nuanced processual entities that are themselves ‘enacted’ by other actors,” (Welker 2014:2). In short, corporations and all institutions come to exist as patchwork entities pieced together through the processes in which they are involved. As Welker notes in her research on a mining company with its headquarters in Denver, there are multiple enactments of the company she researches, all of which are valid and coexist. Inspired by Annemarie Mol’s ‘body multiple’ (2002), Welker suggests that we understand corporations to be multiple. We can conclude, then, that one is best served by understanding corporate entities to exist as “more than one but less than many” in their nature (cf. de la Cadena 2015: 251). While multiple in their depictions and in how other social actors come to understand them, all enactments of a corporation are still bound up and entangled in the same network of social processes. Corporations are multiple, but CCP Games as a ‘Chaosbringer’ is still connected to CCP Games as an ‘Employer.’

To demonstrate this multiplicity in her own ethnographic work, Welker reveals that the Denver-based mining company she studied, Newmont, was simultaneously ‘Newmonster,’ an environmentally destructive and irresponsibly ignorant mining corporation, as well as ‘Goodmont,’ a generous employer and environmentally considerate entity. With mines located in Indonesia, Newmont was often criticized for its mining practices on the grounds that mining is environmentally destructive and thereby harmful not only to the planet, but also to those near the mines. This depiction of the company as an entity acting on unbridled avarice with no care for those it harms was given the name ‘Newmonster.’ Constructed primarily by Project Underground, “a Berkeley-based social and environmental advocacy NGO,” the depiction of Newmont as ‘Newmonster’ appears most clearly in a comic book the NGO produced, “ostensibly... for community members affected by the Newmont mines,” wherein the company is shown to be an ancient evil that destroys the environment (Welker 2014: 213). Welker does not expand much beyond this depiction of the company as environmentally destructive, except to note that she only saw a copy of the comic book in NGO headquarters and online, never in circulation in the villages that were the comic book’s ostensible target. In this way, the enactment of ‘Newmonster’ was limited to those contexts.

The limitations of the comic book’s circulation notwithstanding, the idea that Newmont was criticized as environmentally destructive was nevertheless well-known in the Indonesian communities in which its presence was most felt. In fact, it was in response to these well-known critiques that Newmont mine managers often attempted to depict the Newmont mine as an environmentally friendly one that provided support for its local communities, not the harm it was accused of (Welker 2014: 214). Speaking to the mine’s state-of-the-art water management system while downplaying the environmentally destructive practice of submarine tailings disposal, through which many bottom-dwelling sea life creatures are undeniably killed, managers focused on how Newmont practiced state-of-the-art environmentally considerate mining. They also repeatedly

focused on how local Sumbabwan practices were actually more environmentally destructive and that most of these practices were rooted in poverty (Welker 2014: 219). They argued that economically developing the area through such entities as the Newmont mine was, therefore, the best way to protect the environment, and in existing, Newmont was in fact ‘Goodmont.’

Both enactments of Newmont existed at the same time and within similar spaces, albeit they were enacted by distinct networks of people. Still, both understandings of the company and its orientation towards environmental policy are a part of the corporation’s existence. Brought into existence through its doing, Newmont is more than a legally recognized Denver-based mining company, but rather a pervasive part of the social life of those who are entangled in the network of actors that come to make up the company as such.

Similarly, no corporation can be said to be neatly bounded or delineated. Given their enacted and processual nature, they are inherently messy nexuses of social life. That is to say that corporations are not as neatly defined as we might hope, but rather exist as nuanced, complicated, and intermingled entities that come to exist as more than the legal entity that they are on paper. In the case of CCP Games, even in my first week I had seen the corporate veil come undone and the unified image of CCP Games as ‘the Reykjavik-based creators and wardens of *EVE Online*’s fall to the side as the company was instead revealed to be more complicated than just the makers of *EVE Online*, but in fact many unique enactments, some of which appeared to contradict one another. We can conclude then that corporations are multiple and that they exist as processually-created entities comprised of multiple enactments that give them a ‘more than one but less than two’ nature. In understanding this, we are better able to acknowledge, investigate, and analyze the fact that “Games are never created in a vacuum. Instead, they are shaped by networks of human and non-human actors...” (Sotamaa & Švelch 2021: 14).

The Importance of Technology Makers & Games

Accepting that corporations are multiplicitous and enacted institutions that are both shaped by and also shape the social lives of others, one is perhaps left asking, “But why study CCP Games, a video game developer.” Malaby answers this question, arguably before it became popular to ask, by noting that there is a desperate need to engage with “the institutions acting as digital architects...” because they “raise important ethical questions about how governance is changing, right now” (2009: 134). While certainly true in 2009, the omnipresence of digital technologies in our everyday lives is presently undeniable.

As social technologies have increased and proliferated, so too have the institutions that craft and curate said technologies, which I define and label as digital architects. Though architects in name, I opt to label the virtual worlds and platforms such architects create as “infrastructures” given the rightful suggestion by media anthropologists such as Larkin (2013) that this term more readily acknowledges how such digital systems are in fact “matter that enable the movement of other matter,” thereby acknowledging their broad reach and the implicit, but not invisible, nature of digital infrastructures such as New Eden. As Larkin notes, “they are things and also the relation between things” (2013: 329). Digital infrastructures such as *World of Warcraft* and *EVE Online* are both ontological objects unto themselves, but also the relationship between actors that are enmeshed within their systems. How one might measure these enmeshments’ breadth is critical in understanding how digital infrastructures impact our social lives.

Such questions of infrastructural success are at the forefront of game development companies’ thoughts, and efforts. Indeed, it was in part the aim of better understanding *EVE Online*’s place within the life of the game’s players that ultimately led to CCP Games hiring me as their very first User Researcher, a role specifically focused on tackling questions such as the relationship between a game and its playerbase. Accordingly, although there remains a notable gap in

the academic literature on how digital architects define success for the infrastructures they have created, understanding and evaluating how a video game developer or publisher succeeds or fails is, for somewhat obvious reasons, a major focus of the video game industry at large and is often spoken about in terms of ‘Key Performance Indicators’ or KPIs. Chief among these KPIs for MMOs, which depend on multiple players engaging in the game at once, is the metric of ‘Daily Active Users’ (DAU) or occasionally ‘Monthly Active Users’ (MAU). Understanding how to improve this metric is one of the key goals of the growing discipline of Games User Research, or GUR (cf. Hodent 2017; cf. Drachen, Mirza-Babael, and Nacke 2018), which urges video game makers to center the ‘user’ or video game player and their experience of a game at the heart of game development practices (ibid.).

The influence and impact of GUR has grown extensively in the past decade (cf. Drachen, Mirza-Babel, and Nacke 2018: 510). As a discipline, GUR emphasizes both the difficulty and financial reward of measuring player experience through qualitative metrics, while noting that qualitative data are also often critical to sway senior leadership and other key figures of a game’s development (often referred to as stakeholders) to greenlight changes to a game’s design or to maintain status quo (ibid). In turn, GUR as a field has come to embrace measuring player experiences through mixed methods, albeit drawing more heavily on observational methodologies such as contextual inquiry and participant observation (Sangin in Drachen et al. 2018). After measuring player experiences in a manner none too dissimilar from anthropologists’ tried and true workhorse of ethnographic fieldwork, games user researchers embark on the task of suggesting specific alterations to games’ ‘user experiences’ in order to bolster the holistic game’s experience and thereby improve the aforementioned metrics of corporate success, those often being DAU and MAU for MMOs (Zammitto in Drachen et al. 2018).

Online game makers have generally taken to employing several user researchers and it was noted internally at CCP Games that they were, “really very late to the game in embarking on the user research journey,” when they ultimately hired me as their first User Researcher at the end of my fieldwork. Where the academic scholarship has lagged behind understanding how to measure players’ engagement with a platform and manipulate it accordingly, the industry has taken to grappling with this question with marked, and perhaps foolhardy, temerity in the form of not only GUR, but research and user experience design more broadly.

Even beyond the world of video games, other digital infrastructure creators such as Twitch, Twitter, and TikTok employ similar principles to GUR in the form of User Research, as seen by the existence of User Researchers who work for these companies. Just as in games, such researchers regularly measure user experiences and suggest infrastructural changes that might improve said experiences and ultimately lead to improved platform metrics. Beyond User Research, these platforms all deploy the notion of playfulness to manipulate ‘user experiences’²⁴ to match pre-defined metrics of corporate success through increased engagement and time spent on the platform while frequently citing video game industry research on the matter directly to support such efforts (cf. Huang, Jasin, and Machanda 2019; cf. Montag, Yang, and Elhai 2021). In order to increase time on a platform or within a game, institutions are increasingly turning to methods of digital architecting that incorporate playfulness and games into these online spaces of sociality (cf. Dow Schüll 2014). While some efforts are focused on quantifying and improving players’ satisfaction with games (cf. Keebler et al. 2020), as Dow Schüll notes, a great deal of effort is placed into what has been labeled in the games industry as “Dark UX,” whereby designers create situations that

²⁴ User experience design and research are entire fields of practice and study. More will be said on this later, but it is important to note that user experience is applied outside of game development while drawing heavily on games for inspiration.

encourage players of games, or casino slots, to behave in a way that is perhaps counter to their own interests, but provides a form of gratification that is in many ways addictive (2014; cf. Brignull 2011). Such patterns of design and implementation exist across many games and social media platforms as questions surrounding revenue push game-makers to sacrifice benevolence towards their game's players in place of revenue for company shareholders. It is with this in mind, as well as digital infrastructures' omnipresence, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, that it becomes clear that understanding these social spaces through the lens of their creators is critical. Games are a major realm of contemporary sociality and economic power (cf. Lehdonvirta 2005). They matter accordingly.

While a great deal of research has been done on institutional forms such as the state (cf. Biondi 2016; cf. Gupta 2012), on corporate investment banking (cf. Ho 2009), as well as on resource-extracting corporations (cf. Welker 2014), it is only recently that research into the architects of our digital lives has begun to flourish. From research on how social media platforms curate content according to purportedly value-neutral standards that, upon deeper analysis, are clearly informed by Western technoliberal ideals (Gillespie 2018) to investigations of the type of content permitted on live-streaming platform Twitch (Taylor 2018), recent investigations into the digital realms of our social lives reveal how opaquely, yet purposefully, the digital architects of our lives manipulate users. Unfortunately, even within anthropology, such work has been missing, with notable exceptions (cf. Malaby 2009; cf. Sotamaa & Švelch 2021).

Included among these platforms of digital social life are massively-multiplayer online games. Given that the virtual worlds they allow their players to connect to are arenas of contrived contingency that generate meaningful outcomes, MMOs are a potent cultural form that generates deeply significant interactions for players and designers alike (cf. O'Donnell 2014; cf. Pearce 2009).

It is important, then, to understand that I would argue à la Lehdonvirta (2010) that virtual worlds do not exist.

That is to say that while MMOs are arenas of transformative social life, they are not separate from the lived realities of our world offline. Understanding how and why their architects make the decisions they do matters precisely because virtual worlds are not places created without rules and laws, but are in fact artificial realms of digital code crafted by designers, programmers, and engineers. Unlike our offline lives, because online games and virtual worlds are governed through code, they are imbued with affordances that conventional infrastructural governance has yet to fully obtain (cf. Dibbell 1998; cf. Lessig 2000). Because these digital social spaces are governed ultimately by the code that creates them, anyone with access to said code can affect vast structural changes through the simple act of altering a few lines of deceptively simple phrases and symbols, often in a near instantaneous manner, although CCP Games purposefully implemented processes that completely prevented the ability of anyone to instantly alter the code of *EVE Online*'s live version.

Dibbell observed this then idiosyncrasy of digital governance nearly twenty years ago, but such questions grow ever more important as digital infrastructures become increasingly ubiquitous and enmeshed in our everyday lives. Given the stakes, how online games are crafted matters, and investigating the cultural context of their crafting is key to understanding how the decisions made from within a video game corporation impact the ethical lives of said game's players.

A clear example of such an impact is seen when, in late 2019, CCP Ghost, a Senior Strategist and general researcher at CCP Games, began to investigate what it was that motivated so many players to rally behind the mantra, "The best ship in EVE is friendship," and various similarly phrased statements. After extensive qualitative research in the form of player interviews and surveys, CCP Ghost came to the conclusion that *EVE Online* was no exception to the general finding that friendships forged in MMOs greatly impact players' lives outside of the video games they play (cf.

Boellstorff 2008; cf. Pearce 2009; cf. Taylor 2006). What he did find that was novel within the context of *EVE Online* was that friendship was likely the number one reason long-time players continued to keep playing *EVE Online* decades after starting the game (CCP Games 2020a). This finding and the details of its implications as to why certain players continued to play despite loudly decrying the lack of fun they had in actually playing *EVE Online* came to be termed the “Friendship Machine,” and these findings were presented widely both internally and externally to the playerbase, as well as to online gaming media platforms and even led to a course being created in conjunction with the University of Iceland on the particulars of how CCP Games created the “Friendship Machine,” despite the company only recently realizing it was one of the game’s major strengths.

University courses aside, these findings also led to significant changes to development priorities within CCP Games’ *EVE Online* team and ultimately to the game itself. Shortly after the study was widely circulated internally, teams were re-organized in order to facilitate the development of tools that could best connect new players to existing player organizations and other groups in-game. An entire in-game tool was redesigned and reimplemented so that players could more easily find *EVE Online*’s version of player groups such as “guilds,” better known as “corporations” within New Eden. To this day, CCP Games has an entire development team devoted to improving players’ access to the “Friendship Machine” through various systems that have yet to be released or were already shelved. None of these teams would have been instructed to shift their priorities had the research on the “Friendship Machine” not come out. Simultaneously, in my role as a User Researcher, I heard firsthand from at least a dozen new players how the tools that teams had implemented had aided them in finding player groups within the game. From research to presentation, to development practice, to lived experiences, the decision to refocus some of the company’s development efforts on the “Friendship Machine” was a significant one and, ultimately, an ethically-charged one, with implications for players’ lives beyond the game. Indeed, the

deceptively simple decision to ‘focus on connecting players more easily in game’ has wide-reaching implications for players’ lives beyond *EVE Online*.

Ethics

As Gillespie (2018) observes in his research on Twitter and Taylor (2018) confirms with her ethnographic exploration of the streaming platform Twitch, the smallest of decisions on the part of a digital architect can radically alter the landscape of their platform and the social lives of their platform’s participants. Taylor explores this at length in her ethnographic exploration of Twitch, noting in particular the case of Twitch moderators choosing to implement a ‘no pornography’ policy in 2012 that was vaguely defined, but ultimately excluded streaming games such as *Second Life* due to the potential exposure to nudity that viewers might experience given the emergent nature of *Second Life*’s gameplay (2018: 230). More contemporarily, the platform still prohibits any streaming of Robert Yang’s sexually explicit, yet poignantly critical, games that are focused on challenging heteronormativity while pointing to broader issues of gender, sexuality, and social norms (ibid.). In choosing to select what games are ‘decent enough’ to be streamed on their platform, Twitch is choosing to take a stance on what kind of content its viewers should have access to. Pornography is not allowed, but neither are artful critiques of normative ways of thinking about sexuality, apparently. Well within their legal rights to prevent such content from appearing on their site, the moderation team at Twitch has nevertheless made a seemingly minute decision on what kind of content to allow that has a marked impact on the social and ethical lives of the platform’s users.

Beyond Twitch, it is increasingly obvious that the absence of a decision or action is also an ethical action on the part of digital architects. By allowing certain social media posts and certain sources of social media content to go uncensored, for example, Facebook contributes to a massive proliferation of false information on the efficacy of public health regulations and vaccinations

amidst an ongoing pandemic (Sharma et al. 2017; Raamkumar, Tan, and Wee 2020). Unlike Twitch actively stating and disallowing certain content to exist on its platform, Facebook opted not to remove disinformation about vaccines, leading to a wider spread of disinformation at a time when said spread put countless lives at stake (Raamkumar, Tan, and Wee 2020). Such decisions to not take action have real consequences for people's lives outside of the digital infrastructure. An infrastructural decision that either explicitly disallows or implicitly allows actions on the part of the enmeshed actors of an infrastructure has consequences.

Such decisions are never made within a vacuum. As I experienced firsthand during my time at CCP Games, the practices of quotidian 'game development' life are key to understanding how digital architects shape the ethics underlying the architecture of their games and thereby alter the lives of their games; players because it is in 'ordinary life' that ethics come to be (cf. Lambek 2010). As anthropologist of ethics Michael Lambek observes, "human beings cannot avoid being subject to ethics," because "considerations of the rightness and wrongness of actions," are ever-present (2010: 1). Sidnell aptly notes that, "There is a moral and ethical dimension to all interaction, because interaction is itself a moral and ethical domain," (in Lambek 2010: 124). In short, Sidnell argues that all action, even the most mundane, is rooted in questions of rightness and wrongness. It follows, then, that the actions of those involved in the enactment of CCP Games and thereby in the architecting of its virtual world are equally as 'ethical' in the sense that they are oriented in some form or fashion towards questions of what one does in an attempt to be either in the realm of rightness or wrongness.

This is not to say that every action someone undertakes is itself inherently consciously ethical or even ethical in and of itself, but rather to acknowledge that every action taken is ethically-charged and oriented toward rightness or wrongness given its potential impact on one's self or other social actors. In every action undertaken, there exists an ethical dimension that can attend to an actor's

social life, whether intended or not. By opting to set certain hardware standards required to play *EVE Online*, for example, CCP Games is, intentionally or not, excluding a subset of players from engaging with the world of New Eden, thereby excluding them from the self-lauded “Friendship Machine.”

Given the ethically charged nature of social action, it is accordingly critical to answer questions of the motivation behind certain actions, certain decisions, and ultimately certain ramifications for digital spaces of social life in order to better understand how the digital architects of our lives impact us in ethical manners. That is to say, once we understand better the corporations and institutions that shape our digital lives, we can better understand how they in turn make ethically-charged decisions that are baked into digital spaces and thereby impact our lives outside of the digital realm in ethical manners.

Situational Adjustment

While the ethical decisions digital architects make may be seemingly set in stone and rooted in rigid policies, Sally Falk Moore reminds us that “to read a constitution is not to understand how the ... system works,” (Falk Moore 1978/2000: 36). Accordingly, we must acknowledge that not only is social life inherently messy (Falk Moore 1978/2000: 37), but so too are the actual practices of digital architects as they seek to shape digital infrastructures. Although it is tempting to look at stated regulations, official announcements, and the standard practices to which a digital architect such as CCP Games professes to hold itself, it is in fact much more useful to analyze moments of what Falk Moore terms “situational adjustment” when seeking to understand how the mess of social life becomes the norms of digital infrastructure.

Recognizing that there is a notable gap between “conscious models and social actions” when it comes to handling the indeterminacy of the social world, Falk Moore’s suggestion that we analyze such seeming incongruency through a threefold lens of “*regularization ... situational adjustment ... and indeterminacy*” proves just as useful for understanding how digital architects handle the incongruencies of their infrastructures as it did for Falk Moore’s analyses of legal systems (Falk Moore 1978/2000: 39). At the core of Falk Moore’s analytical framework is the fact that social life is filled with moments of indeterminacies and seeming contradictions. That is to say that there are always ‘special cases’ that arise wherein actors are keen to admit that a particular set of rules ought not apply to a particular situation, despite said rules explicitly or implicitly applying (ibid.). Falk Moore reminds us that is best to investigate situations from angles of both what is negotiable, as well as what is not (1978/2000: 48). In this way, one comes to understand moments of so-called ‘situational adjustment,’ that is, “those [processes] by means of which people arrange their immediate situations ... by exploiting the indeterminacies in the situation ...” (1978/2000: 50).

When such a moment occurs, actors utilize the indeterminacy or lack of clarity of a social situation in order to generate a particular outcome that may on paper seem contradictory to whatever norms exist, but that they have come to justify through an instance of adjustment. In short, situational adjustments are moments in which people are faced with situations that challenge their normative understandings of their social realities and adjust for them by reinterpreting the rules or norms that exist. What this makes clear is that social realities are not fixed, but rather processual. Social relations are never fixed or static, they are always being made and remade, be that through processes of situational adjustment or processes of regularization, wherein people produce or invoke conscious models and rules to follow. Both exist in tandem with one another and are occasionally enacted simultaneously by the same actor (Falk Moore 1978/2000: 50). Indeed, situational adjustments can come to be regular processes. Similarly, institutional policies can be tinkered with and adjusted in moments of indeterminacy, only to then have the adjusted policy become the norm.

Returning to CCP Games for an empirical example, in September of 2018 the Player Experience Department, more colloquially known as the ‘Game Master Team’ or ‘GM Team’ instituted a strict ‘permanent ban policy’ in which players who were accused of “real life” verbal harassment of any sort would be permanently prevented from playing *EVE Online*, logging into their account, or interacting with the game’s players within the context of the game. After two years of upholding this policy, they received a number of complaints that drew their attention to cases where the team itself came to believe, to utilize Falk Moore’s language, that ‘this rule ought not to apply here.’ Still, they upheld the policy with no known exceptions until a number of specific complaints caused the team to question the validity of the rule itself. Without going into detail so as to protect those involved, the team was contacted by some of those accused, who convinced the GM Team that they felt true remorse and understood the gravity of their virtual crimes, but would like a second chance. Convinced by this argument and other evidence, the team then argued to

senior leadership that, while the policy was still valid, it had been applied perhaps too broadly and “Justice without mercy is cruelty” (CCP Games 2020b). Accordingly, in September of 2020, the team announced a major change to the policy wherein they would no longer ‘blanket ban’ players accused of harassing other players in real life, but would rather examine each accusation on a case-by-case basis.

Not only did the GM Team situationally adjust for a few specific cases reported in early 2020, but they regularized this situational adjustment in time by making the careful review of the evidence the new policy. Faced with situations where the rule seemed ‘overly cruel’ to players, the team changed their stance on the rule, applied it differently in a few cases, and then ultimately applied it differently to all such cases, including retroactively for those players banned between 2018 and 2020 on such grounds. In this case, we see how a situational adjustment on the part of CCP Games reveals at least one team’s own emerging ethical stance toward justice, mercy, and cruelty. Throughout my fieldwork, I would experience many such moments of situational adjustment as I grew more embedded into the institution of CCP Games. Indeed, my embedded role and my place as a Researcher for the company led me to realize that CCP’s employees were constantly regularizing, situationally adjusting, and enacting the institution of CCP Games in distinct manners in their quotidian practices of game development, game marketing, and in the case of the GM Team, player policing. These moments revealed CCP to be multiplicitous and enacted, as well as processually created, but they were not immediately obvious. In fact, they only became apparent as I came to understand the people I worked with and the company we all worked at on a more culturally intimate level.

Cultural Intimacy

It is the middle of October and I am sitting at my desk in the Panopticon-like corral with a team that I do not work with directly. Despite this, I have come to know CCP ‘The Funk’ and CCP Possum relatively well, while also having a few passing conversations with CCP Wonderboy and CCP Mischief, who are also members of ‘Team Psycho Sisters.’ As the days have grown oppressively dark, I have started pouring myself into translating academic research into actionable development research for the team I have been working with most closely: Team Five-0. Deep in an article on how the cultural background of an *EVE Online* corporation leader directly relates to how they run an in-game corporation, I look up, jump in my chair, and gasp as I notice CCP Possum standing to my right. “Oh so sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,” he apologetically mumbles to me in a thick English accent. “No worries, I just am not as focused these days,” I answer as he asks me, “Want to go to lunch later then?” I smile and nod before realizing that I am nearly late for a Team Five-0 meeting on something called ‘User Testing’ that is scheduled to start in five minutes.

Slipping into the nearby meeting room, I notice how dark the room is before flipping on the lights. I jump once more as I see someone sitting with her eyes closed at the meeting room table. “Sorry!” I blurt out, “I didn’t realize you were in here.” The woman responds with a chuckle, opening her eyes before stating in a light Danish accent, “I always come to these meetings ten minutes early so that I can take a twenty-minute nap. Five minutes late is, after all, five minutes early here in Iceland, and CCP in particular.” We both chuckle before we proceed to wait fifteen minutes, just as she predicted, for everyone to join us at “promptly” 11:10.

This humorous insight into CCP’s meeting culture, an insight that held true for the two years I was at CCP Games, was the first of many, ‘behind-the-scenes’ comments I overheard and eventually began to make during my time at the company. It was in these candid asides that I came to learn about the situational adjustments that had been made over the years, ultimately resulting in

the norms and patterns of behavior that were ‘CCP’s work culture.’ Gaining these insights was only possible because of my ability to become a CCPer and learn about what Herzfeld terms “cultural intimacy,” or “rueful self-recognition,” which reveals the diglossia of what is said as compared to what is done (Herzfeld 2016: 11).

Understanding the ethical commitments of CCP Games as a multiplicitous and enacted institution requires understanding the corporation from within. Through ethnographic methodologies, key among them participant observation, I sought to trace the ethical commitments of *EVE Online*’s creators as they architected the virtual world of New Eden. Shortly after my arrival I came to realize that labeling CCP Games as ‘merely’ *EVE Online*’s creator was to ignore other aspects of the corporation’s enactment that inform how those involved in shaping *EVE Online* understand their roles as the publicly proclaimed ‘custodians of *EVE Online*.’

Interested as I was in uncovering a more holistic picture of the corporation and its quotidian practices, I undertook participant observation at CCP Games’ Reykjavík headquarters. Intriguingly, while the anthropological and ethnographic scholarship on institutions and corporations is rife with theoretical and conceptual insights, the same cannot be said with regards to the methodological question of how to ethnographically approach corporations. Certainly Gusterson (1996) speaks to how to research an institution when no access is granted, that being by studying the space around the institution. Similarly, Ho (2009) only briefly addresses the fact that she worked for an investment banking firm before returning to the field and tapping into personal networks to gain ethnographic insights on Wall Street banking. Unfortunately, Welker’s monograph (2014), while evidencing deep ethnographic involvement with her fieldsites in Indonesia and Colorado, foregoes a detailed explanation of how precisely she gained access to said fieldsites, as well as what the practice of corporate ethnography entailed in her day-to-day work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the only scholar whose work directly addresses the means by which they engaged in participant observation within a

corporation is Malaby (2009) who describes how he showed up for work at Linden Lab, sitting at a desk in their offices while interacting with Linden Lab employees.

In each of these works, however, little is said of the access and transparency that the corporation itself allowed the researchers with regards to ethnographic data collection and publishing. Accordingly, with limited guidance from other scholars in the realm of corporate ethnography on how to engage in participant observation at an institution such as CCP Games who had given me wide-ranging access to their development teams and an extremely limited Nondisclosure Agreement which amounted to, “Don’t share the code of *EVE Online* publicly,” I made do.

As part of my fieldwork, I arrived ‘at work’ at the same time as other employees, somewhere between 8 AM and 10 AM every day, and left some time in the late afternoon. As I grew to be more familiar with the company, and its employees grew to be more familiar with me, I also began to participate in research activities for various teams, but I will speak more about this journey later. It is important to note that all of my methodological choices were aimed at understanding the entire path of virtual world architecting from the inkling of an idea, to design decision, to in-game implementation of said decision from an ethical angle. To do this, I knew I needed to understand CCP Games from within, to uncover and participate in moments of “cultural intimacy,” or, “the recognition of those aspects of an officially shared identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with an assurance of their common sociality,” (2016: 7). From somewhat hushed conversations at lunch about disorganization to bold exclamations about the constant tardiness of many CCPers, the potentially embarrassing yet acknowledged aspects of CCP Games led me to understand better how and when the company situationally adjusted as compared to its stated values. No one at CCP Games would willingly admit to an outsider that nearly everyone is five to ten minutes late to every meeting, yet many are. By

being present and involved in the lives of CCPers, both at and outside of work, I was able to experience these moments of shared, rueful self-embarrassment that ultimately unlocked my own insight into the way in which CCP Games as a corporation multiple was also a unified entity in a sense.

Where Welker's notion of the enacted and multiplicitous corporation pulls apart the threads of shared identity in a corporate environment to the point of near analytical befuddlement due to its complexity, Herzfeld's rejoinder that "all institutional structures are capable of generating their own peculiar intimacies," aids in allowing an analysis of CCP Games that is simultaneously nuanced enough to leave space for the complexities of corporate life and enacted institutions while also pointing to shared commitments to particular forms of virtual world architecting that speak to the ethics that underlie the crafting of *EVE Online* (2016: 54). By acknowledging that CCP Games is 'more than one but less than two' in its enactment and that this allows for those people who consider themselves "CCPers" to experience a shared cultural identity in the form of 'being a CCPer,' we can begin to explore how this shared identity impacts the architecting of the digital space over which CCP Games presides: *EVE Online*. Simultaneously, we must keep in mind not only the cultural context of CCPers within CCP Games as an institution, but as their reputation in Iceland highlights, we must also consider CCP's place within its non-American cultural context. That is to say, the architecting of *EVE Online* is impacted by the shared cultural identity of CCP Games, which is itself shaped by several forces, one of which is the nation-state of Iceland.

Understanding CCP Games

It is early November and with three months of fieldwork under my belt, I am feeling more confident in my place at CCP Games, even if I am sitting a corral over from the team I have now been working with for a month. I smile to myself as I type up the latest findings from a Usability

Study²⁵ reporting on user satisfaction and understanding of something that would come to be known as the “Plague of the Red Dot” externally and would be summarily ignored internally. Happy to finally contribute to the work of CCP Games, as well as engage in a form of participant observation by participating in the development of the game, I remained blissfully unaware then that my praise of the suggested feature, a notification of a new item being added to the player’s inventory, and its performance with research participants, admittedly none of whom were long-term *EVE Online* players, would play a role in one of 2020’s first *EVE Online* feature controversies. The implementation of an admittedly aggressive ‘New Item’ in-game indicator elicited an uproar from the game’s players across the official forums, Reddit, and eventually even the front door of CCP’s headquarters. In November, though, I was busy typing up my insights regarding the feature’s success with a diverse and large group of new players, happily suggesting it be implemented into the game.

As I finished polishing my report, I moved on to exploring another study that was requested of me and CCP Eagle, the man who banished me from my first desk but ultimately hired me as the company’s first User Researcher. Reading about something that was being called the “Brave New New Player Experience” and trying to grapple with how I might begin to study players’ struggles with the game’s tutorial, I suddenly realize that there are only three people left in the corral I am seated in. Being late afternoon in November, I’m not surprised to see the space relatively empty. Most CCPers seemed to leave the office around four in the afternoon and it was a bit past that time. As I take a break from my reading to collect my thoughts, I realize that the other two people in the corral are deep into a lively conversation taking place entirely in Icelandic. The two sit close to each other, nearly directly across from one another, and as I listen I glance over to see who is talking.

²⁵ More will be said on this term in a later chapter. For now, it is important to note that this is a form of “user research” or “user experience research” that is conducted on early prototypes of features meant to be implemented into a game or product.

One of the speakers, the one closest to the window is a muscular, blonde man with kind-looking eyes who I have noticed is almost always smiling, but who is also almost always playing with something on his desk. I don't know his name, but I vaguely remember hearing that it starts with the letter 'H' and that he recently got married. The other speaker is the Game Designer for Team Psycho Sisters. This is Árni, a man who will come to be a crucial support for me down the line, both professionally as a researcher, and personally as a listening ear. In November, though, all I know is that he is blonde as well and he also smiles almost incessantly.

Today the smiles continue as the two are embroiled in a discussion about *réttir* which, from what my novice Icelandic can interpret is some form of sheep sorting device. The two chat in the quick, breathy, and almost swallowed words that I have come to realize are typical of Icelandic as a language, at least in CCP Games, and terms such as *gemlingur* are discussed and defined in depth. As I listen, I believe I understand the two to be talking about a *gemlingur* and how this is a lamb living through its first winter. The conversation goes on and the discussion of sheep continues for nearly five minutes before Árni delves into discussing how to actually handle sheep, physically. He notes that you have to be nimble and that some are a bit feistier than others. At least I think that's what he means by what he says in Icelandic.

I chuckle to myself internally as I picture this man wrestling a lamb but then I realize that this moment of candid and honest discussion of lamb handling methodologies is telling because of how uniquely Icelandic the subject matter is. Though humorous, this interaction is important because it is in many ways a very Icelandic conversation to have, one that reveals how embedded and entangled even game makers are with the cultural contexts in which they operate and from which they come.

I had investigated the history of CCP Games as an institution and had come to understand that it was a multiplicitous enactment of seemingly disparate yet somehow unified parts. I had also

acknowledged that I would only get to know these enactments through observing the quotidian practices of CCP's employees as they reacted to moments of contingency through situational adjustment. I also knew that I would more holistically understand the company through accessing a level of cultural intimacy that would grant me insight into the norms of the institution that are sites of mutually agreed upon, and still somehow unavoidable, embarrassment. Together, these theoretical pieces comprised a lens with which I had already begun to observe patterns of development that held ethical implications. Yet, as I listen to these two team members speak about sheep, I realize that to understand completely the ethical implications of CCP Games as an institution, it is imperative to acknowledge that CCP Games is not just a game development studio, but is in fact a game development studio in Iceland, that primarily employs Icelandic people and is itself shaped by the cultural context of its Icelandic existence.

In short, CCP Wonderboy and Árni talking about sheep highlighted that exploring the ways in which CCP Games partakes in ethically shaping the virtual lives of its players, as well as those who are enmeshed in the network of actors tied to *EVE Online*, required more than just a methodological and theoretical lens that traced the quotidian practices of the institution as it made its game. It required a lens that took into consideration the cultural context of the company and its employees. Just as *gemlingur*, *réttir*, and *gimbur* were topics of conversation for these two, so were countless other Icelandic concepts critical to not only the conversations held in the hallways, but also to the very development practices of the company. Everyone working at CCP Games's Reykjavík office lived in Iceland. How Iceland is unique given its history and culture matters, then, to understanding how the CCPers I worked with and studied made sense of the world around them and accordingly the work they did.

It is imperative to acknowledge that CCP Games and game makers like it are ethical shapers by virtue of their existence and architectural practices, but it is equally as important to acknowledge

an institution's cultural context, as Malaby remarks in his ethnographic exploration of the technoliberal culture underlying Linden Lab (2009). Still a *gemlingur* myself in many ways, listening to Icelandic men talk about seemingly mundane farming knowledge, I had finally seen, or heard rather, just how important an institution's cultural location is to the conversations that take place within it and accordingly the practices it engages in as it architects people's digital lives and ethically shapes them accordingly.

Chapter Four: The Viking Ship

Observing Iceland Around Me

Sitting at my desk in the Team Psycho Sisters corral in early November of 2019, I have just overheard a conversation in Icelandic held between two employees of CCP Games that centered on sheep, the various definitions tied to sheep terminology, and ultimately how one handles particularly feisty lambs. I am amused at the conversation and hastily note down just how ‘Icelandic’ it is before finishing my exploration of a prototype for an upcoming research study I am conducting and heading home. On my way out, I notice three signs hanging up at the entrance to my team’s corral (See Figure 5), one of which states in large letters and a beautifully plain font: “Petta reddast is not a sustainable development strategy.”



Figure 5. The signs hanging above my team’s corral once removed for the move to *Gróska*

I realize that this sign has been hanging here since I first visited CCP Games back in October of 2018 and start to think about how the notion of “it will all work itself out” is indeed present in some of the development practices I have not only observed, but been a part of. In fact, my latest study had six players ‘ghost’ me after signing up to playtest a prototype, leading me to find an alternate solution for those six players using internal CCP employees and a handful of local contacts as playtester substitutes.

This is but one small example of one facet of CCP's development practices that are impacted by the cultural context of the company's location in Iceland. While I am not Icelandic, I certainly was encouraged to embrace *Betta reddast* as a motto for how I went about my participant observation tasks. Towards the beginning of my fieldwork, for example, when I was in Berlin with the team, despite being asked for my CCP name, then CCP Augustine, I found myself without an official name tag at the G-Fleet event. With a sort of cheer, CCP Oracle smiled at me once I mentioned it to her during the event's setup and said, "That's ok, we'll get you one." Upon realizing that there was no nametag to be had, she found an empty nametag and a spare lanyard, and together we wrote out 'CCP Augustine' in the most elegant handwriting we could muster (See Figure 6). "See? It works perfectly fine. You're new anyway," she cheerily answered once the nametag was complete. Finding people to take part in playtests was also met with a similar *Betta reddast* attitude by CCP Eagle, who handled recruitment, and he frequently told me, "Yea, this happens but we can find substitutes," any time a study participant would fail to show up.



Figure 6. The author's first 'official' CCP lanyard with CCP Oracle's handwriting

Beyond my own experiences, others clearly had also observed this renowned Icelandic philosophy in action, perhaps to their chagrin, if the poster on the wall still hung there proudly a year after I first noticed its presence. And so, walking home through a darkness I did not think could

exist in a country's capital, I began to ruminate on the importance of understanding an institution's cultural context in order to understand its various enactments.

Game Makers & Where They Are

When CCP Games initially instated the first CSM, they did so in grandiose fashion. In June of 2008, the company flew nine players from across the globe to Iceland and ferried them an hour and a half outside of Reykjavík to *Þingvellir*, a place that has been made into a symbol of Iceland's democratic history and thereby serves as the “cultural heart of Iceland” (Loftsdóttir & Lund 2016: 214). *Þingvellir* is a deep chasm in which Iceland's chieftain representatives, known as *goðar*, once met as a larger group, known as the *Alþingi*, to discuss the island's issues, arrange marriage pacts, and hear legal cases for the year before each group went its separate ways. Here, on a typically grey and cloudy summer day, the nine *EVE Online* players of the first CSM overlooked the chasm of Þingvellir and were given a charge: Serve as the *goðar* did and become the chieftain representatives of *EVE Online*. To this day, albeit with less pageantry and more electro music on the sides of a volcano, CCP Games still evokes such culturally-bound images of Iceland in both its communication to its players and the public. Notably, the mostly Icelandic senior leadership team and the entirely Icelandic Human Resources department rarely mention anything uniquely Icelandic about the company in their internal communications, opting instead to focus on CCP's ‘family values’ and emphasizing how the company supports its employees “through good and bad times.” Intriguingly, many of the foreign-born and raised employees²⁶ of CCP Games I interacted with often

²⁶ CCP's Human Resources department referred to anyone without an Icelandic passport as an ‘Away’ employee, although internal mailing lists often included the terms ‘foreigners’ or ‘expats.’ These distinct terms will be analyzed more in depth later within this dissertation, but it is worth noting that HR sought to downplay not only the Icelandic aspects of the company, but also the foreign aspects of its non-Icelandic passport-holding employees.

bemoaned how ‘utterly Icelandic’ many of the company’s processes were and are, thereby evoking yet another culturally-situated image of CCP Games.

This divide between the public-facing image of CCP Games as the ‘Icelandic Developer’ and senior leadership’s internal image of ‘established MMO developer’ reveals how CCP Games itself engages in what Loftsdóttir refers to as the “nation-branding” of Iceland, wherein a cultural identity tied to a nation-state’s purportedly quintessential characters, in this case Iceland, is used to market and shape particular products, that being *EVE Online* in this context (2015: 253). Given the gap between the public-facing enactment of CCP as a quintessentially ‘Icelandic Developer,’ and senior leadership’s aims to downplay this image internally, an analysis of the cultural and social context of CCP Games is critical to reaching a holistic understanding of its various enactments, as well as how said enactments impact its ethically charged architecting of *EVE Online* as an infrastructure. In short, CCP Games’ location in Iceland matters with regards to how the company portrays itself to the outside world, as well as how many of its foreign-born employees understand their roles within the company in the context of their lives outside of it.

While ethnographic research on video game developers is growing, much of the critique of video games and their developers remains rooted in North American games and companies, with a particular bent towards so-called ‘indie’ developers (Sotamaa & Švelch 2021: 12). This focus on North American game makers verges on an American hegemony on video game scholarship that has been observed by authors such as Pijnaker and Spronk in their then-novel exploration of Ghanaian video game maker Leti Arts and the impacts of Western game development ideologies on Ghanaian development practices (2017). In their article, the authors highlight how game maker Leti Arts and its staff actively sought out to make their game *Africa’s Legends* more ‘African’ as compared to “Africa and Africans as imagined by Westerners,” just as the authors had to reimagine what studying such an institution might entail, given its non-Western context (ibid.: 339). Similarly, there have been

some efforts by authors such as Wolf to focus on non-American video games research and while his edited volume excels at its task to focus on video games from the perspective of the consumer, it largely ignores the role of said games' makers (2015).

I would argue that to conflate North American games and digital architects with a generalizable 'global video game market' is to perpetuate implicitly the idea that video games as made in North America—as well as North American video game makers—are the ideal. As Souvik Mukherjee (cf. 2016) writes when observing that postcolonial thinking has only just begun to creep in from the margins of Game Studies as a discipline, the subtle implication that the North American cultural context upon which many Game Studies articles are based is equivalent to other cultural contexts has deeply colonial implications (ibid.). It goes without saying that the idea that North America is the only place where video games that matter are made is preposterous, not the least because it is arguably Japan that mastered the art of video game making, and selling, following the North American video game market crash in the 1980s (cf. O'Donnell 2014). In fact, it is arguable that Japan, not North America, ushered in the mass proliferation of video games and their subsequent welcome into the mainstream hobby limelight that they enjoy today (cf. O'Donnell 2014: 167-216). These complex histories of video game development highlight the significance of looking beyond North America when researching video games in order to understand holistically the significance of cultural context on a video game's creation.

Implicit colonialism aside, to ignore video game makers outside of North America is to ignore a massive number of jobs, companies, and situations in which ethical decisions about our digital lives are made. Game development is booming in Europe, where game developers and development support companies employ millions of people (Nieborg & de Kloet 2016), some of whom were responsible for the launch of major video game titles in series such as Assassin's Creed, a number of Battlefield titles, and more. It is also booming in Africa (cf. Callus & Potter 2017) and

South America (cf. Penix-Tadsen 2019), and accordingly it is important to address the seeming disconnect between these realities and Game Studies literature for, as Švelch notes, “Games are never created in a vacuum. Instead, they are shaped by networks of non-human and human actors that are dependent on historical and cultural contexts” (in Sotamaa & Švelch 2021: 14).

The world of video game development extends far beyond the North American continent, but little research exists on how the cultural location of a video game developer, be they inside or outside of North America, impacts their development processes and ultimately the games that they make. While several authors have spoken to the implicit ethical stances game developers take in the process of game development from the perspective of race (cf. Russworm in Malkowski & Russworm 2017; cf. Hutchinson in Malkowski & Russworm 2017; cf. Leonard 2003), gender (cf. Sherman 1997; cf. Cassell & Jenkins 2000; cf. Malkowski in Malkowski & Russworm 2017), and queerness (cf. Shaw 2015; cf. Ruberg 2017; cf. Rivers 2019), it is only recently that some have begun to acknowledge the North American context of their research in brief reflexive statements towards the beginning of their work (cf. Ruberg 2020). Even considering these authors’ brief acknowledgements of their work’s cultural context, remarkably few authors actively engage with the cultural dimension of the ethics at play in the norms that game developers rely on to inform their development processes, despite Malaby’s call to do precisely that following his own ethnographic research on Linden Lab (2009). This is all the more important when seeking to understand a developer such as CCP Games because, as seen in CCP’s message to its first CSM, culture can be in turn denied, or explicitly taken up, in how games are made and how game makers communicate with not only their games’ players, but the world at large.

On Iceland and the “Exotic North”

Lost in thought about the implications of cultural context on developers’ architectural practices on my walk home that early November evening, I turn onto a street that I have come to adore, Skólavörðustígur, and smile as I look up the steep hill in front of me and take in Hallsgrímskirkja, one of the major sights to see in Reykjavík. Hallsgrímskirkja is a church designed to evoke notions of the striking, hexagonal basalt columns found somewhat commonly in Iceland’s countryside. Seeing the church in front of me and still thinking about sheep, I am certain that my aim to trace ethnographically the development efforts of a company that is not located in North America, yet has been noted as largely successful and relatively well known within the world of video games, is a justified one. Having once been an *EVE Online* player myself, I had long followed CCP Games before joining the ranks of its employees and, with my newfound insights in mind, I was excited to explore further how the company might be incorporating its Icelandic origins into its architecting of *EVE Online*.

Central to understanding how CCP’s Icelandic origins and situated context impact its creation of *EVE Online* is a firm grasp of the Icelandic nation-state’s history, as well as how recent events such as the global economic recession of 2008 have irrevocably altered Iceland’s self-image. In part because of said recession, the country went through a period of significant instability at the turn of the century, leading to a shift in what Kristín Loftsdóttir terms Icelandic “nation-branding” or the process through which state institutions and corporations alike utilize allegedly quintessential characteristics of ‘Icelandicness’ when marketing and developing products from skyr²⁷ to sushi²⁸ to perhaps even *EVE Online* itself.

²⁷ Skyr is a sour cheese similar in consistency to quark or Greek yogurt. It is consumed widely across Iceland.

²⁸ Within Reykjavík, there are a number of sushi restaurants, several of which offer ‘Icelandic sushi’ and one of which offers an “Icelandic Feast” consisting of traditionally arctic meats such as puffin, whale, and salmon.

Before speaking to her work, it is worth stating that throughout the rest of this dissertation I will purposefully cite and refer to all Icelandic authors and scholars by first name. This is in accordance with Icelandic norms, wherein people are referred to by their first name and not by their patronymic or matronymic surnames. Even those in lofty positions of societal power such as the Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, are referred to by first name and introduced by first name, although often including titles and surnames as well. I applaud the recent efforts of anthropology to meet its participants where they are and speak with local practice, not for local practice. Accordingly, I will forego a forced formality that does not align with the cultural norms of my fieldsite and instead refer to people as they refer to themselves and, perhaps more strikingly, as I came to refer to them during my time at CCP Games.

Returning to the aforementioned work, however, in her monograph *Crisis and Coloniality at Europe's Margins*, Kristín delves into the contemporary history of Iceland in the years leading up to and following the 2008 crash in order to understand how Iceland as a nation-state perceived itself prior to the economic downturn and then utilized a culturally essentialist approach in marketing and tourism sectors in order to recover (2019). Through a careful examination, both ethnographic and archival, Kristín reveals that although its history, even in the 20th century, was generally filled with extreme poverty, famine, and sickness, prior to the economic collapse of 2008 Iceland experienced a time of extreme economic prosperity that was widely spoken of as originating from the “Business Vikings²⁹” of the investment banking sector (2019: 87). Subsequently, when the banking sector crashed in 2008, it was the same “Business Vikings” who were blamed for the country’s dire economic straits (ibid.: 112).

²⁹ In Icelandic, útrásarvíkingar

Following the crash was a period in which Iceland sought to reinvent its economy while rehabilitating its international image. Combined with images of Icelandic nature as pure, pristine, and wild were images of Icelanders as “pure, somewhat eccentric, but harmless” (Kristín 2019: 152). These images drew on a legacy of stereotypes about Icelanders rooted in its past as a colony of Denmark yet simultaneously placing itself “within the safety of the first world” (ibid.: 153). Having long been a colony of Denmark, Iceland has fought to be seen as its own country, and a Western one at that, throughout the island people’s history.

Originally their own independent society, and as mentioned previously home to the world’s oldest parliament, Iceland became a colony of Denmark, albeit a largely unexploited one, in 1536, following the collapse of the Kalmar Union (ibid.: 18). From their position as a dependency of Denmark, Iceland was often spoken about as somewhere between colony and European locale, but still a place and “object to be gazed upon” (ibid.: 20). With the rise of nationalism in the 19th and 20th century, the island’s inhabitants sought their independence and were granted a form of it in 1874 with expanded sovereignty awarded to the island in 1904, in large part due to the “whiteness” of the population and their claim to the then reified European racial identity (ibid. 28). It is worth noting that, in an effort to solidify their position as a European nation, Iceland turned to early physical anthropological efforts to justify their position as European, as ‘evidenced’ by the biological evidence of skeletal remains (Gísli Pálsson & Sigurður Örn Guðbjörnsson 2011: 138). Even more notably, efforts to holistically measure and analyze the purportedly “Icelandic” genome, as well as discover any of its peculiarities, were revived in the early 2000s by deCODE, a Reykjavík-based genetic research company, which has since succeeded in acquiring vast amounts of genetic data on a majority of Iceland’s citizens, while foregoing any efforts to collect similar data on the country’s non-Icelandic residents (cf. Gísli & Sigurður 2011).

With its ambiguous past and clear efforts to position itself as a European country just as any other, it is simultaneously surprising, yet expected, that the image of Iceland as the “Exotic North” made a bold return following the economic crash of 2008. Against the backdrop of a tourism campaign entitled “Inspired By Iceland,” government ministries and tourism agencies alike capitalized on images of Iceland as located near and within the Arctic, as well as depictions of its citizens as quirky yet welcoming, to draw tourists to the country and capitalize on the potential economic benefits such an industry could have for the relatively remote island nation of Iceland (Kristín 2019: 150).

While Kristín delivers a much more thorough analysis of these efforts in her work, the end result of this campaign and its related initiatives was clear: Icelandic institutions such as the Ministry of Industry succeeded in ‘selling’ Iceland as ‘exotic, but safe and European,’ while highlighting the country’s “exceptionalism” and downplaying its own history as contributing to European racist discourses (Sigurðurdóttir & Rice 2020: 166). This was particularly evident in the dozen or so storefronts in downtown Reykjavík where words such as “Arctic” were proudly displayed and plush puffins stood in storefronts as souvenirs for tourists to purchase for themselves or those back home (cf. Katrín Anna Lund, Katla Kjartansdóttir, & Kristín Loftsdóttir 2018). Notably, several of these stores shuttered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and only a few re-opened, the rest still standing as solemn reminders of the impact of the pandemic on an industry that once accounted for nearly a tenth of the country’s Gross Domestic Product in 2017 (OECD 2022). Still, the image of Iceland as the “Exotic North” remains and while widespread in tourist-focused marketing, CCP itself engaged in similar nation branding practices both with regards to its marketing and development practices.

“No Downtime” and the Volcano Powering It

It is September of 2020 and I am walking down an empty hall of CCP Games’s new headquarters, *Gróska*, which is located close to the University of Iceland’s campus and directly across from the headquarters of deCODE Genetics. I see CCP Eagle across the hall and wave before heading to my desk where one of my close friends, CCP Antiquarian, is standing waiting to talk to me. We chat briefly about the Science Fiction TV Series Stargate SG-1 and how I am preparing to get a tattoo of the main prop of the show, the Stargate, on my thigh. He chuckles as I tell him about my elaborate plan for color and font when suddenly there is a loud “BOOM” that sounds eerily similar to a truck crashing into a concrete wall. The building shakes. I look at him in shock and Antiquarian begins laughing hysterically. I have experienced my first major earthquake and he has experienced seeing my face betray my emotions in light of certain death.

Over the months that follow, I and the rest of Reykjavík would experience thousands of earthquakes, only a hundred or so of which would be noticeable. There were several theories as to what might be happening, but it was ‘well-known’ that Iceland was a seismic zone and the earthquakes soon became little more than background noise. As it happens, by February both my husband and I would sleep soundly through earthquakes of nearly five on the Richter scale. Then, on the evening March 19th, 2021, after a week of near total stillness, a volcano erupted near the Blue Lagoon just outside of the town of Grindavík, about forty-five minutes southwest of Reykjavík.

The eruption in *Geldingadalur*³⁰ drew massive attention within the country and without. Two weeks after the eruption, I hiked the four kilometers up a mountain to see the eruption myself. With hues of orange and red that are impossible to capture in a photograph, I stood utterly speechless in

³⁰ In keeping with the theme of farm-related vocabulary I would come to learn, this name means “Valley of Livestock Castration.”

front of the then tiny caldera (See Figure 7). Iceland’s natural beauty had finally won me over.

“There really is nowhere else in the world that I could see an active volcano and its beauty from this close,” I think to myself as CCP Valhalla and CCP Hawklot, my hiking companions, make sure to thoroughly document the trek.



Figure 7. The author in front of the *Geldingadalur* caldera in late March, 2021

The volcano had captured not only my attention, but also the attention of the world due to the efforts of the increasingly desperate tourist board whose future had been called into question by the utter devastation that COVID-19 wreaked upon Iceland’s once prosperous tourist industry. As tourist companies began campaigns to draw people to a relatively COVID-19 free Iceland to see its latest wonder, several minds at CCP Games also began thinking about the volcano and how it might be used as the backdrop for a project known as “No Downtime.” To understand the connection, it is first necessary to cover some of the technical aspects of *EVE Online*’s data and server architecture.

Due in part to the virtual world’s age, *EVE Online* was created on the foundation of a database that requires a ‘refresh’ once a day in order to function optimally. This refresh sees the

world of *EVE Online* cease to be accessible for a period of time, most often for a few minutes, but occasionally for up to forty-five minutes. When the game originally launched, it was not unheard of for virtual worlds to have this period of offline activity, which is known colloquially as “downtime.” Whereas many of those virtual worlds no longer utilize downtime, *EVE Online* continues to rely on this daily ‘refresh’ in order to properly tidy up the digital halls of its database and ensure that the game runs smoothly. Simultaneously, this daily reset causes frustration for players around the globe, but most notably for Australian players, for whom it occurs in the middle of “player primetime;” that is, those hours after a standard work day when many people have free time to play video games.

So it came to be that, following Hilmar’s attendance at a large Fanfest event in Australia in 2019, as well as the launch of *EVE Online* in South Korea in that same year, the company began to critically re-examine its efforts to completely eliminate downtime and create a truly persistent virtual world that only needed to be taken offline on occasion, not on a daily basis. Those efforts led to a preliminary attempt to remove ‘downtime’ in December of 2019. The company’s senior leadership heralded this initial attempt to remove downtime as brave, a bit foolhardy, and likely to lead to unforeseen problems.

The first attempt also included a YouTube announcement which opens to CCP Burger, CCP Explorer, and CCP Tuxford dressed in suits as they stroll across the harbor close to CCP’s former headquarters. Looking up, the trio and the audience see two storage silos, one of which is labeled as ‘*EVE Online* Servers’ and the other labeled ‘salt.’ Both have been clearly labeled as such digitally within the video as, despite my best efforts, no walks along the harbor ever brought me close to a location labeled as the housing unit for *EVE Online*’s server hosting location. As the trio enters the silos, the video shows some electrical wiring before CCP Tuxford connects two power cables and smiles. The video ends with the date of ‘No Downtime,’ December 4th, displayed prominently on the screen.

This initial effort to remove downtime and the YouTube video that went with it was set against the backdrop of Reykjavík's harbor with Harpa, the city's premiere architectural feature, glistening in the background. Otherwise, it was a relatively mundane minute-and-a-half-long video announcement, save for its odd reminder that December 4th, the scheduled day of 'No Downtime' was 'National Cookie Day' in America.

Almost two years later, however, a radically different video was released, this time promoting what would be called 'No Downtime Vol. 2.' Nearly double the length of the original video, this announcement starts with an image of CCP Games's new headquarters at *Gráska*, where the three men featured in the original video curtly demand 'No Downtime' before one states that "It requires power." CCP Explorer responds to this observation with the simple phrase, "Tremendous power." The irony of this introduction is that while the efforts to remove downtime require labor, removing downtime should not, in fact, add any extra strain on the electricity requirements related to running *EVE Online*. This, of course, is not the point of this statement, as becomes increasingly obvious once the team in the video begins discussing a fictional device meant to provide this power that can only do so when placed in the magma erupting from the Fagradalsfjall volcano.

The video continues with the team taking a helicopter to the volcano and includes scenic shots of the volcano's cone. This extended montage seems carefully placed to highlight this 'Icelandic wonder.' As the team succeeds in 'connecting' the device to the magma, they celebrate 'Unlimited Power' with an almost supervillain-like glee and a light beat begins to play as a helicopter flies over the three Icelandic men, each of them dancing to the electro-vocals of the fan-created song "Bring on the Wrecking Machine."

This three-minute video is a rollercoaster ride of sensory input from beginning to end, not the least because it spends a significant amount of time highlighting the volcanic eruption and its role in aiding CCP Games to achieve its goal of 'No Downtime' once again. The Icelandic men

dancing in suits on top of an assuredly frigid peak near an active volcano elicits precisely the image of “pure, quirky, yet harmless Icelanders” to which Kristín refers when highlighting how Iceland engages in nation branding.

Just as Ireland (2013) suggested there may be a connection between the dark, cold world of *EVE Online* and the dark, cold terrain of Iceland, so too do I suggest that videos such as this one reveal just how significantly Icelanders’ understanding of Icelandic culture and consequently the country’s nation branding efforts impact the architecting of *EVE Online*. CCP Games chose to highlight the volcanic eruption not only because it was beautiful, but also because it was something unique to the place in which *EVE Online* is primarily made: Iceland. Instead of focusing on the location of the “No Downtime” effort itself, namely desks that look similar to those seen in offices around the world, CCP Games opted to capitalize on the company’s geographic and national location in its “No Downtime” announcement efforts. They specifically chose to emphasize the Icelandic surroundings of the company and suggest that it was these surroundings that enabled them to undertake the “No Downtime” effort in the first place. Accordingly, to understand how ethics are architected into the infrastructure known as New Eden, one has to acknowledge that New Eden is primarily crafted within the situated context of Iceland, even if only 60% of the team making the game holds an Icelandic passport.

A few days after the announcement is released, I am sitting on some stairs looking out over the bay in Reykjavík next to a sculptural representation of a Viking Ship named “The Sun Voyager.” Smiling at the beauty of the mountain Esja in front of me, I am happy to have recently been hired as CCP Games’s first and only User Researcher. I am excited by the prospects of being fully employed by a game development company that has grown to see the need for more grounded research on its virtual world and even more excited to continue experiencing the natural beauty of the country I still call home.

Experiences such as seeing a volcano used as the backdrop of a player-facing announcement and regularly taking in vistas such as the one of Esja from ‘The Sun Voyager’ would often mesmerize me through my time at CCP Games. They still do, in fact, for even though I no longer work there, having left the company in December of 2021, I continued to live in Iceland until the end of 2022 and regularly return to visit in part because of the breathtaking beauty of Iceland’s nature. Accordingly, while Kristín is right to point out Icelandic nation-branding efforts with a sense of warning and caution, adventures such as my volcanic hike struck me as somewhat unique to Iceland, its size, and the accessibility of its natural wonders. More significantly, they served as frequent reminders that Iceland, its nature, its people, and the norms of its society were ever-present in the making of *EVE Online*.

Keeping this in mind, the words of CCP Chimichanga, one of the game’s non-Icelandic Technical Directors, still echo in my mind, “You know, that’s why I say this place is like a Viking Ship. It’s great to have Icelanders rowing, but man you don’t necessarily want them making the ship.” In every aspect of the company’s existence, Iceland and the purportedly quintessential characteristics of Icelanders were evoked. Clearly, to grasp the ethics underlying *EVE Online*, I had to acknowledge that Iceland mattered and along the way, I became a CCPer not just by virtue of finding a team to work with, but by signing an employment contract before ultimately taking my leave to further my career elsewhere in December of 2021.

Chapter Five: The Vestibule

Meeting Team Five-0

It is late September of 2019 and I am sitting on a somewhat dilapidated fabric couch in CCP Burger's square-shaped fishbowl-like glass office describing to the Creative Director of *EVE Online* how my trip to Berlin has gone. Energetically I explain how I interacted with players, spoke to the author of *Empires of EVE* about collaborating on a future conference-related project, and even helped the CCP team with running the merchandise stand for a short while. "Yea, I heard you were a help to the team. [CCP Goodfella] really appreciated that." I note to myself that CCP Burger only commented on how I was a support to the CCP team. Before I can suggest putting my research skills to use in translating the work of Bergstrom, Carter, or Milik into something the broader development team can understand, CCP Burger looks distantly at his monitor and then announces, "You'll never be a true CCPer until you join a team." I nod and murmur an affirmative response while thinking back to one of our meetings prior to my journey to 'G-Fleet' where CCP Burger had mentioned he would ask the producers of the teams assigned to working on the New Player Experience (NPE) to have a conversation with me about joining them. As he sketches something on a piece of paper, I meekly ask, "So have you talked to those NPE teams about me working with one of them?"

CCP Burger puts down his pen and turns to look me in the eyes before smiling and stating, "Yes, I have actually talked to both [CCP Mischief] and [CCP Mimic]. They're expecting you to reach out and talk to them about where you might fit in and how." Somewhat taken aback at having to navigate this on my own, I ask, "Oh! So I should just set up a meeting with them?" He nods and responds with a boisterous, "Yea!" before adding, "Let's see what comes of that and we can go from there." I thank him for reaching out and our conversation veers toward the theoretical as we lose

ourselves in a casual chat about urban planning after I comment on how peculiar it was for me to stay in former West Berlin, having only ever lived in former East Berlin.

Later that day, sitting at my desk, I open Microsoft Outlook, look for a free meeting room in the shared calendar, then send a meeting invite to CCP Mimic, the producer for Team Five-0. In the invite, I mention that I want to introduce myself, talk about my ethnographic work at the company, and explain what I think working with Team Five-0 might look like. She accepts the half-hour meeting but does not respond to the text of the meeting invite. I spend the rest of the day focused on exploring the history of the company before leaving a bit early, trying not to think about the impending meeting.

The next day arrives and I struggle to wake up. Given my slow start, I arrive at the office shortly after 10:00 AM and notice that CCP Mimic is not at her desk or in the Team Five-0 area. Noticing that I still have some time before our meeting, I put my bag and coat at my desk, say, “Good Morning!” to CCP The Funk who is staring at his ship sitting in space on his monitor, and take a walk around the entire development floor. While I have seen the entire floor a few times, this is the first time that I notice how the black, gravel-like floor is slowly crumbling away in parts of the building. “Good thing the company is moving soon,” I think to myself as I notice several of the teams physically standing up in a circle and talking to one another about what they did on the previous day, as well as what they are aiming to accomplish today. I note down how almost ritual-like these circles seem, wondering if this is standard practice here before returning to my desk to bide time before I meet with CCP Mimic.

I spend the next hour delving into CCP’s wiki in search of historical information on a question that I assumed every company had an answer to: Why do people play our game? My naivete is greeted by a wiki devoid of any empirically-grounded answers. Thinking back to an earlier conversation with CCP Burger about who to ask for research insights, I reach out on Slack to CCP

Ghost, a Senior Strategist at CCP Games who is known for his work on player sentiment analysis via surveys. As an answer to my question on whether there is any data or research on why people play *EVE Online*, CCP Ghost sends me the research he has while noting that, “Most of this data is over two years old, it’s probably good you explore this question again!” I smile faintly, assured that even if Team Five-0 does not have space for an anthropologist, I’ll have something to work on. That, as I would soon find out, would not be a problem.

I head to the meeting room I have booked for my conversation with CCP Mimic and realize that it is located directly across from her desk, from which she is still absent even five minutes before our meeting scheduled for fifteen past the hour. On the glass paneling outside of the door is the name of the meeting room: Odyssey. Just like every other meeting room, it is named after an *EVE Online* expansion. I find it fitting that this expansion was focused on in-game exploration just as I am now focused on exploring CCP Games as a company.

I take a seat and shortly before 11:15, CCP Mimic walks into the room and says, “Good morning. I’m [CCP Mimic]. I know we’ve met briefly but nice to meet you more officially now.” I echo her sentiments and ask, “So [CCP Burger] mentioned he’d talked to you?” She nods and answers, “That might be a bit of an overstatement. He briefly mentioned that you’re an anthropologist here studying CCP and that you wanted to work with one of the development teams directly. That’s about it.” My eyes must betray my surprise as she immediately adds, “But don’t worry, that’s plenty of information to start with.” I nod and respond, “Maybe it would be good for me to expound a bit on my project then, what my background is, and what I have worked on in the past?” She smiles and after explaining my past research on MMO community-making, as well as my hope to understand both CCP Games, as well as its interaction with its players, she stops me to say, “This is truly fascinating, even the way you’re phrasing it. So let me tell you about my team and what we do because I think you might could help us.”

Her explanation of her team begins with the fact that recently the entire company has reoriented to, “at least in word,” focus on, “what Hilmar is calling the New Player Experience.” She mentions that Team Five-0 is one of three teams assigned to work on projects specifically aimed at improving the broader experience of new players. Team Psycho Sisters is focused on the first thirty minutes of the game, which inevitably has led them to work primarily on the tutorial, while her team has been tasked with improving the first thirty hours of the game, another team whose name I fail to catch is focused on improving the first thirty days of new players’ experiences.

CCP Mimic recounts how the team has recently been hard at work on developing a ‘Daily Login Incentive’ feature meant to have players return to the game daily for rewards. Her faint smile suddenly vanishes, though, as she observes, “But we’re not entirely sure what questions to even ask in order to undertake this work and the team is almost entirely made of ‘Seniors’ who have all worked here for a significant amount of time, meaning they have a lot of other features they have to work on.” I write this fact down, curious as to what exactly it means before answering, “At the end of the day, one of the things I have been most trained to do is to ask the right questions, especially about people.” I do not entirely believe my own words as they leave my mouth, but CCP Mimic nods in the affirmative and smiles before saying, “Welcome to the team. Let’s see how this goes to start, but let’s go introduce you, it’s time for ‘stand-up’ anyway.”

I try not to betray the near euphoria coursing through my veins in response to this phrase, instead opting to nod before grabbing my notebook and standing. We leave the meeting room and walk over to the team area, which is called a corral. CCP Mimic stands at the entrance to the area (See Figure 8) and clears her throat. It is 11:45 and the entire team swivels in their chairs. A few opt to stand, but most smile and stare at their team leader who announces, “Hello everyone, this is Josh Rivers, he’s going to be joining the team and helping us ask the right questions about our players. He sits over by CCP Burger currently, but he’ll join us for Stand-Up and team meetings” She gestures at

me and I give a brief introduction, noting that I'm here to study CCP Games, yes, but also to contribute to the company's efforts in any way I can. The huddled team issues a welcoming chorus, "Hellos!" before each of the team members, going in clockwise order from me, introduces themselves and then recounts what they did yesterday, as well as what they are going to be working on for the rest of the work day. "Great Stand-up!" CCP Mimic cheerfully announces as the final team member to her right finishes their team announcement. She then turns to me and says, "We'll get you added to the team channel and Wiki today."



Figure 8. The same team area when later used by Team Aurora. I stood where the yellow paper is in frame

Following lunch, which I have later, I realize that I have an unexpected notification in Slack for the first time since joining the company. CCP Mimic has added me to the private #team-five-0 channel and there are more 'Welcomes!' listed there, as well as a ballerina emoji reaction, which I will come to learn is one team member's digital calling card. I am also granted access to the team's wiki pages, of which there are many considering the near decade that the team has been together. I am overjoyed and ecstatic at this belated fieldwork birthday present and immediately set myself to investigating what I can do to help the team, especially with the Daily Login Incentive feature.

For Money, The Friendship Machine, Employee Health or All Of The Above?

In October of 2018, I visited CCP Games for three days in order to undertake preliminary fieldwork, talk to the senior leadership of the company in person, and formally ask for their approval to ethnographically study the company for a year pending grant applications. During the admittedly brief period of time I was there, I never heard mention of the words “New Player Experience” and most employees seemed focused on projects aimed at improving the game experience or adding content for people already playing *EVE Online*. I did learn about the existence of a singular team dedicated to improving the game’s tutorial and even attended one of their presentations to Hilmar.

As I began my work with Team Five-0, I realized that in 2019 it was impossible to go a single day at the company and not hear the phrase “New Player Experience,” often abbreviated to NPE, in some context. Be it in a company-wide email, or in a public-facing announcement, the *EVE Online* development team was constantly surrounded by discourse on new players, both bringing them to the game and then keeping them in the game. Since I had been gone, Hilmar and the game’s senior leadership had concluded that *EVE Online* was in desperate need of a so-called “new generation” of players in order to realize their newly announced vision of “*EVE Online* Forever,” a phrase that stood for Hilmar’s goal of realizing a virtual world that would never die and would outlive him.

In this discourse surrounding the future of the game, Hilmar and leaders such as CCP Burger would state that the new generation of capsuleers was failing to materialize because of a subpar NPE. While the suggestion was that the NPE meant a new player’s first experiences in the game, the phrase itself was fully defined beyond what CCP Mimic had explained to me: the first 30 minutes, the first 30 hours, and the first 30 days. That said, the company had announced an effort, both internally and to its playerbase, to reorient its focus on acquiring and retaining New Players through a deceptively simple four part strategy. The first step, as CCP Burger would explain to me in

his office during one of our first meetings following my joining of Team Five-0, was to “Stop the bleeding.” To him, this meant fixing major bugs within the initial tutorial experience, as well as in other early experiences in *EVE*. I never formally heard what these bugs were, but CCP Burger relayed that they had concluded this step and now needed to “Fix the stupid.” It remained unclear what ‘the stupid’ was in our conversation, but from the sounds of it, this step would be significantly more difficult to realize. The final two steps were to engage and teach, as well as incentivize return.

What struck me about this discourse was the lack of candor on one of the biggest reasons to usher in a new generation of capsuleers: their money. While the company had seen general success over its lifetime, Hilmar would often show a graph labeled “Life Cycle of a Game,” similar to the figure inserted below³¹, (See Figure 9) which used revenue over time to highlight that *EVE Online* was losing players, as well as money and so was in a place where it would either begin dying or it would experience a rebirth and a boon of new players.

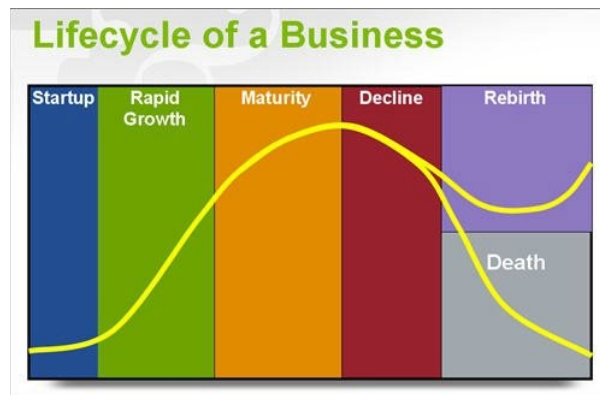


Figure 9. A graph similar to the one used internally at CCP, lacking only revenue numbers overlaid

While it was clear to everyone attending those meetings that rebirth was the ideal outcome so that the company would continue to exist and people could continue to work on the game, player spending was rarely mentioned explicitly, despite the original “Product Life Cycle” chart being based

³¹ I have chosen not to include the original figure in this work as it contains sensitive revenue and player count numbers that are not necessary to demonstrate the point of the chart.

exclusively on sales numbers, and thereby money. Instead, the company defined four of its six major “Key Performance Indicators” (KPIs) according to player engagement with the game, including time spent in space and completion rate of the tutorial experience. Only two of its KPIs were tied to revenue. Interestingly, while quarterly bonus programs were tied to these six KPIs, the company-wide annual bonus program was tied to EBITDA, or Earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization. Clearly, money mattered.

With these facets of the company’s bonus structure in mind, as well as a common sense understanding of how video game companies such as CCP are able to continue operating, namely through bringing in income with which to pay their employees, it was clear to me, however, that the desire for new players was ultimately a desire for more revenue. While Hilmar passionately argued that the company’s mission was to “Create virtual worlds more meaningful than real life,” he more frequently spoke of this mission in terms of the game’s existence, while less often mentioning the positive impact it could have on fulfilling players’ satisfaction or desires. It was clear that Hilmar wanted *EVE* to continue to exist, but that he knew that this could only happen if players spent money on the game, something they were unlikely to do if they were not playing it. This not-so-hidden motivation of increasing revenue, or at the very least stabilizing it, became particularly evident following the events of the first “No Downtime” project.

A little less than a month before the company attempted to forego downtime for a day, on November 14th, 2019, *EVE Online* launched a Korean localized version of the game—to much internal fanfare. The release of a Korean localized client was talked about as the “Korean launch” by senior leaders such as CCP Orca and had been hyped by senior leadership as a major opportunity to bring new lifeblood into New Eden. Members of the Publishing team flew out to Seoul to attend G-Star, a major Korean gaming event, and oversee the Korean launch ‘on the ground.’ What the team soon realized as they demonstrated the game to crowds of curious potential new players was that

beyond the ‘bleeding’ and the ‘stupid’ of the NPE, players in Korea were going to be more severely impacted by downtime than players in Europe and North America, where most *EVE Online* players were located. As the game spread through Korea, nearly everyone at CCP Games, from engineers to producers to senior leaders, followed the quantitative metrics concerning Korean players with a careful eye. The game saw a huge spike in new players and these new players seemed to be completing the tutorial at greater rates than their Western counterparts, but every day when downtime happened, many Korean players would simply log off for the night, never to return.

“A company can’t be ethical at all... What is ethical? It’s doing good, or at least not doing evil and a company will always optimize for the sake of money.” It is early December of 2019, a few days after the first attempt at foregoing downtime and I am sitting at a worn wooden table in a meeting room that looks at the ever-cloudier fish tank that serves as a centerpiece of CCP’s office. Across from me is CCP Explorer, one of the three men who was featured in the No Downtime announcement. I stare at him as I take in what he has just said and ask, “So then why now?” He stares at me, his face utterly neutral, and replies, “For business reasons, really. For money. This [No Downtime] started after Hilmar attended EVE Down Under³². He heard players there complain about downtime. Then we launched in Korea and it hurts retention there. So he told us to make it happen.” I nod and remain quiet before he continues, “It makes sense, we run a business, money is what motivates these decisions. If we remove downtime, then we make more money.” I ask, somewhat sheepishly, “So it isn’t about modernizing the game and pushing *EVE* to embrace new players?” CCP Explorer looks directly into my eyes and states, “Not really. It’s about optimizing and choosing between staff and customers. Downtime exists at the time it does because it is convenient for us.” We continue talking about the details of No Downtime, and CCP Explorer goes on to

³² EVE Down Under is a player-organized event that takes place in Australia.

explain that this optimization matters because, “We’re dictating people’s lives,” by choosing when downtime is. He gives the example that people wake up early to be on at downtime or stay up late to login right after downtime to obtain rare resources that respawn only once per day following the server reset. In both of these cases, he is correct that *EVE*’s downtime impacts the ways in which its players choose to structure their days and lives even outside of the game.

I thank CCP Explorer for the interview following a final observation on his part that, “efficiency is maybe the enemy of the ethical.” Immediately, I begin reflecting on these candid insights as well as on the origin of the sudden and urgent push to experiment with “No Downtime,” namely Hilmar himself and his seeming desire to improve player numbers so as to improve revenue. Two things struck me about this initiative as I began to explore working with a team focused on improving the New Player Experience. The first is that Hilmar could make things happen quickly by simply asking that they happen and it was clear from CCP Explorer’s comments that CCP’s CEO was not shy to do so. The second was that there were clear financial motivations underlying this effort to improve players’ experiences. While public announcements branded “No Downtime” as a bold experiment on CCP’s part, one aimed entirely at improving the world of *EVE Online*, CCP Explorer’s comments made it clear that, while this was true, the reason for this bold experiment was Hilmar’s desire to improve metrics surrounding player log-off rates following downtime in the new territories and ultimately to improve business performance through revenue. Simultaneously, CCP Explorer’s comments about dictating players’ lives also reveal that while money may have played a role in Hilmar’s motivations for suggesting the experiment, at least one member of the team was aware that financial rationale aside, this change was also one that would impact the lived experiences of *EVE Online*’s players. It was a significant decision accordingly as it shaped the lives of the game’s players and “dictated” how they were to engage with the game.

CCP Explorer's commentary on what was internally and externally heralded as a bold shift for improving players' lives both in-game and outside of the game highlights how development efforts such as the "No Downtime" initiative are undeniably ethically charged. Dictating how players are able to access a game has implications for how players structure their lives. Simultaneously, it has business implications for the corporate entity of CCP Games as players who chose to stay logged off following downtime were less likely to spend money on the game, particularly if they were new players who never returned. Eliminating downtime would likely lead to increased financial gain for the company, at least this is what Hilmar believed and what the Data Analytics team concluded when analyzing the metrics surrounding downtime and the newest market in Korea. "No Downtime" also impacted CCP's employees' lives, though, as several employees were suddenly tasked to expediently move forward on not only the experiment of "No Downtime" itself, but also on the marketing and advertising of the initiative across multiple platforms. Several of these employees were taken from existing projects to do this, leaving their teammates to fill in for their tasks, or to await their return. Accordingly, this experiment that attempted to eradicate what may be conceived of as a mere inconvenience of a few minutes of the game's server being offline actually impacted hundreds of thousands of people's lives in multiplicitous ways. It reached across the enactments of CCP Games as an employer, as a business, and as the makers of *EVE Online* to shape the lives of players and employees, all in an effort to increase revenue via improving the game by preventing downtime.

As I dove into my work with Team Five-0, I would come to discover that these seemingly innocuous decisions held powerful implications for the lives of players, team members, and the business of CCP Games.

Stand Up and the DLI

The days are growing shorter. I catch my first glimpse of the Aurora Borealis at the beginning of the month as I grab ice cream from Valdís, a local ice cream shop right across from CCP Games's offices. Looking up at the night sky, I am awed by the beauty of Earth's magnetic shield in action as streaks of green dance across the darkness. With thoughts of the aurora still in my mind, I arrive at my desk the next day feeling calm and relaxed as I set to work investigating 'Daily Login Incentives' for my team.

Roughly an hour after sitting down at my desk, it is time for the team's stand-up. I think through the ritual before heading to the team area: It starts with the entire team standing in a circle, then, team member by team member each person describes what they worked on yesterday, highlighting successes and failures. After talking through the past, that same team member speaks to what they have planned for the day, as well as anything keeping them from accomplishing that task that either another team member or someone outside of the team can assist with. These hurdles are described as 'blockers' in the stand-up ritual. Occasionally, other team members will chime in and ask questions about work done or projects that will occur, but this appears to be the exception and not the rule for Team Five-0. Team members who are not physically present for stand-up simply do not participate and no real record is kept of what was said.

As I arrive at the entrance of the team's "corral," I take a spot next to another team member who sits in a different area than the team area, CCP Nomad. He nods and smiles at me and I greet him with a subdued, "Hey," still somewhat unsure of myself and my place on the team. Hearing the exchange, CCP [Bannister] turns around and cheerfully greets Nomad with, "Well hello, Mr. Clock." This interchange is just one of the many playful interactions between Team Five-0 members that I have already observed occurring. This is a team with rapport built between its members, each of whom appears to not only respect, but also understand the unique skillset each other brings to the

team. Realizing this, I muse on the fact that I hope to bring such a skillset to the team through my research some day. Nomad chuckles and looks a bit confused at the greeting before CCP Mimic arrives behind the two of us, startling me a bit as she also cheerfully exclaims, “Good Morning team! Let’s get started.”

The ritual of ‘Stand-Up’ begins and since I am standing directly to the left of CCP Mimic and the stand-up order seems to always be clockwise from the team manager, with the manager themselves going last, I begin. “Good morning everyone,” I start off, “Yesterday I was out working on university-related things, but before that I was investigating player motivations for playing *EVE Online*, working with CCP Ghost to dive into the archival data there. Nothing to report yet, but I have a few leads I’m eager to follow up on once he sends more data my way. Today, I’ll be diving into Daily Login Incentives in other games, looking at what seems to work and what doesn’t. That’s all.” The team nods and then the teammate to my left, CCP Lebowski, a Quality Assurance Analyst responsible for testing and bug-hunting, begins delivering his statement, which involves updating so-called “tasks” in a system known as “JIRA.” He bemoans the fact that not enough people are documenting what he calls “defects” despite verbally complaining about them. I make a note to myself to investigate what this system is, as well as how to report a “defect” before the round quickly moves on, each team member talking about various aspects of their work, none of which seem to be related to the Daily Login Incentive (DLI) system CCP Mimic noted was the team’s current priority.

This disconnect between Hilmar’s clarion call to improve the NPE through systems such as the Daily Login Incentive and the actual quotidian practice of Team Five-0’s members strikes me as peculiar. Then I recall that CCP Mimic had told me in our first meeting about the plight of the team: Given the way ‘feature’ ownership worked for *EVE Online*, several members of the team were focused on maintaining and updating other projects or features that they had majorly contributed to

throughout their longer tenures. CCP Masterplan, for example, spent the majority of his time handling the very complicated to solve bugs that would arise with player-owned space stations and structures. Feature ownership such as this, it seems, had led to several team members working on basic maintenance of their ‘owned’ features instead of pushing forward on the new feature: the DLI.

While other team members continue to talk of their ‘blockers,’ I ruminate on this oddity of the team’s development work. Then, it dawns on me that I have come into the field with a base assumption that maintaining a virtual world is as “simple” as maintaining a static system such as an archive or library. Certainly, there is work involved, but I assumed that it involved simple processes that were already established and as easy as clicking a button once in a while. As the team speaks to the various areas they’re working on, from an in-game simulation of spaceship-modules known as the ‘Ship Fitting’ window to a system that allows people to fly to particular places in space known internally as the ‘Bookmark’ system, despite being formally called the ‘Location’ system, I realize this assumption is horribly flawed, particularly in a virtual world as complicated as *EVE Online*. Each of the team members speaks to how they have to consider the ‘balance’ of the world and its system in their work, trying to ensure fairness for veteran players while attracting newer players to play the game. This idea of ‘balance’ is incredibly vague, it seems, but it clearly adds complexity to tasks that, on their surface, are as “simple” as clicking a button once in a while.

The stand-up nears its end as the circle makes its full loop back to CCP Mimic who concludes the ritual by stating, “We have a meeting scheduled with CCP Eagle for tomorrow, so we may move Stand-Up. It’s about UX Testing the DLI. Josh,” she says as she looks at me, “I think you could really help out here.” I smile and voice an affirmative, eager to hear more about what ‘UX Testing’ even entails. I head up to the Cantina to grab lunch, as Team Five-0’s standup always ends shortly before lunch begins, before returning to my desk and continuing my investigation not into other DLI systems, but into ‘UX Testing’ and, perhaps more properly termed, ‘UX Research.’

My initial research uncovers a veritable treasure trove of knowledge, including some fascinating works by Celia Hodent (2017) who had just delivered a lunchtime seminar at CCP Games, as well as a tome on the field by Drachen, Mirza-Babaei, and Nacke (2018). The field seems, at first glance, a practical application of social scientific methodologies and theories to the world of video game development. It is precisely the kind of research I hoped to bring to the table in my fieldwork: research that did something for a development team and helped them make a better video game for their players. Fascinated by a field I never realized existed, I bookmark nearly twenty unique articles and pages while exploring the archives of Games User Research (GUR) conferences, as well as talks given at the Game Developers Conference (GDC). Before I know it, it is nearly six o'clock and the development floor is completely empty, with not a single Team Five-0 soul in sight. CCP Possum stands up and walks over to my desk, smiling. Over the past month, we've grown to be pretty close work colleagues. "Time to go home?" he asks in his thick Liverpool accent. I nod and gather my things before we exit the building together. We say goodbye in town and I head back to my apartment at Þórsgata 27 where I spend the rest of the night eager to find out what exactly CCP Eagle has in mind for UX Testing the DLL.

CCP Eagle and the Research Task

The next day arrives and, in an unusual move for me recently, I arrive at the office before 9 o'clock in the morning and dive back into the world of UX Research and 'User Testing.' The clock strikes 11 and the team assembles in a meeting room, circling around a rather worn wooden table as CCP Fozzie unlocks the meeting room's computer by remotely logging into his machine. CCP Eagle strolls inside the rectangular space, arriving right on time. With light brown hair and piercing icicle-blue eyes, he smiles at me before greeting the team with, "Hello Team Five-0, let's talk about User Testing."

As he starts his talk, he pulls up an internal wiki page, which he uses to explain a number of basic UX Research principles, including highlights such as the insight that developers are not so-called “users” and should research the perspective of “users” of a product accordingly in order to design for them and not to design for one’s self or one’s team. This idea of recentring the player immediately resonates with me, particularly considering my aim to uncover the ethical architecture of games. CCP Eagle goes on to explain what exactly the process could look like, he notes that a part of it will involve “Usability Testing,” which is something he and his former team undertook when they were working on Project Nova, a first-person shooter set in the world of *EVE Online*, before its cancellation.

2021.05 AIR NPE Learning Plan

Title: AIR NPE Usability Study

Hypothesis (your bet)

Use a simple statement to summarize your problem and solution hypothesis. The example below combines your target player/customer, your problem hypothesis, your solution hypothesis, and your belief about business benefit. It's a mouthful. Try this form, or experiment with your own.

- We bet that [these players or customers] have [this problem or need], and
- if we build [this solution/feature/capability] they will [observable and ideally measurable behavior].
- Resulting in [measurable business benefit].

Hypothesis

We bet that new first-time *EVE Online* players are overwhelmed by their initial impressions of *EVE Online* given their expectations of a modern streamlined narrative tutorial experience, and if we build a novel, narratively-driven and cinematic new player experience they will understand better *EVE Online*'s potential, enjoy their onboarding and return to the game following the tutorial because they want to stay 'plugged in' to the world of New Eden, resulting in increased tutorial completion rates and better retention overall.

List assumptions and questions:

List the assumptions you're uncertain about. List the questions that would fill in facts you need. Use the questions below to help you identify assumptions and questions.

- For the problem you're solving:
 - Who do you believe your players or customers are?
 - What problems/challenges do you believe they have?
- For your solution:
 - **Valuable:** will your players/customer understand it and choose to use it? Is it better than other solution or work-arounds they have today?
 - **Usable:** can they easily learn to use it and incorporate it into their lives or work?
 - **Feasible:** can you build it using the tools, technology, and time budget your org has?
 - **Viable:** will players/customers' use of the solution eventually have a business impact?

Usable

- Do players understand how to interact with the space scene?
 - Navigation (Moving the ship)
 - Interacting with Selected Items Window (to move the ship)
 - Do they observe the camera behavior?
- Are players able to read and understand the text instructions?
 - Are players able to hear the voiceover? Did they understand it?
- Do players understand how to use the Selected Items window?
- Do players understand how to progress through the conversation?
- Do players understand the meaning of Shields, Armor, and Hull?
- Do players understand the Overview window?
 - What it is
 - How it works
- Do players understand how to target lock?
 - Do they understand how to utilize their modules?

Figure 10. A sample Learning Plan based on the same template

CCP Eagle goes on to describe his vision for the process after the team affirms their acceptance of what CCP MasterPlan later calls in a casual team exchange, “Once again being the guinea pigs.” Eagle sketches out a three-week cycle that involves drafting a “Learning Plan” based on a template CCP Eagle provides (See Figure 10) before recruiting “Participants” that ideally match the *EVE Online* demographic, though he is simultaneously vague about what that demographic is, while also noting that finding matches for *EVE Online*'s new players may be tough in Iceland.

Following recruitment, these participants are then hosted at CCP Games for “User Testing Sessions” wherein they are guided through the experience of the Daily Login Incentive in an interview setting. This is meant to reveal any so-called “usability errors” with the new feature that the team may have overlooked or failed to consider in their design and implementation of the experience. Eagle proclaims that, following the sessions, the team will be able to “action off of the data collected.” I take note that neither CCP Eagle nor the team has clarified what that action will look like, or how the data will be collected. Still, I smile and continue to listen intently.

Following his description of the process, CCP Eagle explains that there are multiple roles involved in the process, including someone to draft the interview guide, recruit participants, moderate the sessions, and deliver the results. My interest is immediately piqued. “I could do any one of those,” I think to myself, imagining how to translate my existing skills into something more demonstrably useful for the team. Before I can chime in, CCP Mimic calmly but firmly says, “I’d like to get Josh involved in this. This is something he’d be good for.” I smile at CCP Mimic, elated that she sees my potential here, and answer in the affirmative saying, “I’d be happy to help in any way I can. This sounds very similar to the work I’m used to doing, just in a different context.” CCP Eagle smiles back and nods, “Great, we can explore his role in that.” Both Mimic and Eagle nod. For a moment, I am stunned silent. Mimic has just given me the chance to pursue a major responsibility and a chance to interact with participants as an official representative of CCP Games and its research arm. “Happy to help however I can,” I answer before asking CCP Eagle, “But will you handle recruiting?” He agrees that he will and the team then dives into completing their ‘Learning Plan’ for this testing session, revealing that their ultimate goal is to learn about how players interact with the system generally, not whether the incentives themselves are meaningful.

I leave the meeting elated and return to my desk. Shortly afterwards, CCP Eagle sends me several links through a direct message on Slack. The first sends me to an internal wiki page linked to

a now canceled game, Project Nova. On this page, there are clear instructions as to “Why User Testing matters.” I realize that this is the page CCP Eagle walked the team through earlier. The second link, however, is a new page and contains what is labeled as an “Interview Guide.” Here, there are so-called “Task Sets” and “Tasks,” each of which describes an action that a player is meant to do when interacting with a prototype. CCP Eagle then swings by my desk and cheerfully asks, “Hey I just sent you stuff, did you get it?” I nod in the affirmative before he adds, “Great and could you help us out a bit? Maybe write the interview guide?” I smile and answer, “Absolutely.”

His smile fades slightly before he makes one final remark, “And, uh, I’ll actually need you to move your desk. Can you do that by the end of today? I need to be located here now.” He points at my desk and I look up, slightly deflated before answering, “Sure, but where do I go?” We both sit in silence for a few seconds before his smile returns and he answers, “I don’t know, but let’s go find a spot together. It’ll work itself out.” Five minutes later and I am sitting next door at what was apparently an empty desk in Team Psycho Sisters’ corral. The team has waved at me as I moved my stuff to the new desk, but none introduce themselves. In moving desks so suddenly and with relatively little fanfare, I realize I have just experienced one of my very first “Petta reddast” moments. Perhaps there is something to things working themselves out when need be. I ponder this as I dive into drafting up an interview guide, curious as to how else this mindset might impact my own experience in the field.

A little less than a week later, a relatively mild Tuesday in October, and I have a polished Interview Guide that should help the team understand if the Daily Login Incentive system they’ve created is usable and engaging for new *EVE Online* players. The sessions are scheduled to take place on Wednesday and I am set to fly back to Milwaukee on Thursday to attend a major event on UW-Milwaukee’s campus. After spending Monday morning coordinating equipment with the team, getting both a playtesting room and ‘monitoring room’ for the team setup, I send CCP Eagle a

message asking, “Any word on the people who will participate?” He does not respond until later in the afternoon, stating, “I did not have time, do you think you can handle this?” I respond in the affirmative but ask him where to recruit people from.

A few minutes pass and suddenly CCP Eagle appears next to my desk. He places his laptop down and begins showing me how he creates recruitment screeners, as well as where he posts them in order to find playtesters: a number of gaming-focused Facebook groups. Here, I realize, is yet another connection between CCP’s development practices with the norms of the society from which it stems. Although surprising to me at first, Facebook serves as a primary communication and outreach platform within Iceland. From finding an apartment to finding a job, to meeting up with other people who share your hobbies and interest, Facebook is at the center of Icelandic digital lives. It follows then that an Icelandic company looking to recruit local playtesters would utilize groups dedicated to such an effort, or at least to gaming, to do so.

After this revelation dawns on me, I return to the matter at hand and we quickly craft a new screener together before CCP Eagle posts it to the Facebook groups. Within an hour, there are nearly fifty responses. A few phone calls made from my personal cell phone later and we have six playtesters for our study. Here again, *Betta reddast* rears its head. In forgetting to recruit playtesters, CCP Eagle ultimately depended on a joint effort between the two of us to find people to take part in the study. Never once did he doubt we’d find those people and ultimately we did. This notion of self-resolving problems would soon arise again, on the day of the actual study.

The First User Testing Study

I wake up relatively early for a Wednesday in October and despite it being seven thirty in the morning, it is inky dark outside. I get ready and choose to forego my usual polo shirt for a floral button-down. Looking at my closet, I see a grey flowing cardigan and put it on as a jacket before walking to CCP. Following a quick breakfast in the cantina, where I notice only one other breakfast-goer who I don't recognize. Heading down the staircase from the fourth floor to the third, I walk to my desk, grab my clipboard and printed Interview Guide, and head to the now fully running "UX Testing Lab" (See Figure 11). As I get the prototype build of the DLI up and running on the machine, I think of the struggle I experienced the night before, working until seven o'clock to get what the team referred to as "the build" to work as intended and in a manner that wouldn't crash every ten minutes.

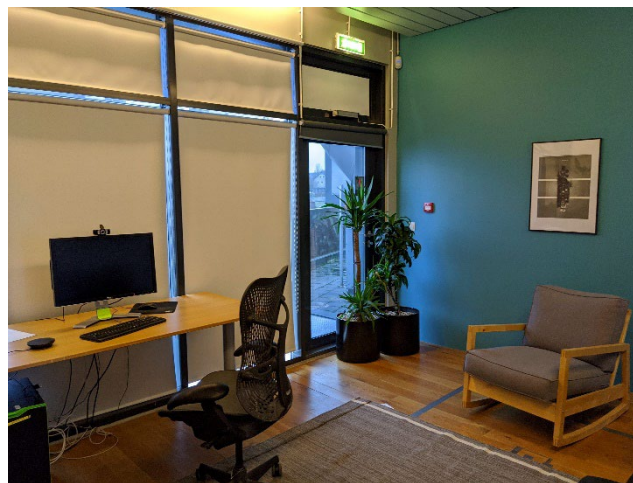


Figure 11. The *Grandagarður* UX Lab interior

Working with CCP Lebowski, the team's Quality Assurance Analyst, we ensured that this version of *EVE Online* was able to be securely launched in a stable manner on the machine in the UX Testing Lab. In a sense, this was a version of the virtual world that would never leave this lab, nor these particular User Testing sessions. It fascinated me accordingly to watch CCP Lebowski work with various commands in the game while communicating with one of the team's

programmer's, CCP Karkur, who was simultaneously making changes to the very code of the world. In front of my eyes, "the build" was refreshed, iterated on, and adjusted, and so too were both the rewards given to players, as well as how quickly they were given. These two individuals controlled how people would interact with the prototype and accordingly how players would ultimately interact with the virtual world of *EVE Online*. Together they were enacting CCP Games as *EVE Online's* Architect, albeit on a relatively small scale.

Returning to the present, I smile as I see the game client load without issue. A few hours later and I have successfully conducted three of the five interview sessions. Taking a short break, I walk over to the monitoring room. On my way there, I hear someone comment, "Wow, that's a nice cardigan, we all need to level up our wardrobe game around here." I smile and nod a 'thanks' to GM Ice Cream³³ who is playing pool with a few others before I head upstairs to welcome our next playtester. He never arrives. Ten minutes into the session, I message CCP Eagle and ask him what we should do. We need at least five playtesters according to industry standards on usability studies (cf. Nielsen 2000), and really we should be testing with six. He writes back, "We'll find someone, find someone in the building who has never really played the game, maybe someone from HR." Here again, *Petta reddast* is put to the test as I walk around various offices and eventually find a member of the Publishing Team, a team dedicated to marketing the game, who has not played *EVE* "really ever, at least not seriously." Testing with them, we're able to uncover some unique usability problems with both the DLI and the general tutorial. In a sense, the no-show is a resounding success for the team in its efforts to find player hurdles.

Another few hours pass and I conclude the final interview. After saying goodbye to the playtester, I make my way to the monitoring room. It is full of people and becoming stuffier by the

³³ Unlike other CCP employees, GM's are referred to as GM + CCP Name. If they leave the GM team for another development team, they keep their name, becoming CCP + CCP Name.

minute, but everyone is in high spirits and there are mountains of notes on the wall. I notice a familiar, yet unintroduced face, CCP Mischief, the producer and manager for Team Psycho Sisters, whose team corral I currently sit in. She looks at me and comments, “You’re really good at this.” I smile and say, “Thank you, happy to help here,” before taking a seat. We spend the next hour noting the problems we observed and charting out potential solutions, while also discussing players’ biggest problem: the rewards seemed lackluster. The team would go on to spend several weeks working out a balance between rewards that were “too unbalanced” and “not enough.” Here too a singular team held responsibility for a major decision about the virtual world, namely what items and currency players would receive for logging in every day. These discussions in mind, I head home happy, content that I have made a mark on the game in some small manner by helping with this study and sparking these discussions. The next day, I fly back to the States for a week.

Looking In From The Vestibule

I return to Iceland at the end of October and make my way back to CCP Games on the following Monday. Now, I am greeted by the people sharing my team corral, as well as by my own team. Several other people within the company also seem to know who I am, or rather that I “did the user testing for Five-0.” Alongside other projects, including several that involved me being the team’s go-to wordsmith, I conduct another User Testing study, this time for Team Psycho Sisters on the tutorial. Shortly after conducting this study, and this time producing a report for the team on an internal wiki page, I leave Iceland once again to attend the 2019 American Anthropological Association’s Annual Meeting. After a brief stop in Milwaukee to reconnect with colleagues and my partner, I return to Iceland at the end of November.

More assured of my place and my ability to contribute back to my interlocutors, I walk into CCP Games on a Monday morning and make my way up the glass staircase, across the lounge area

and past Team Five-0's corral, noticing that there's a new desk set up perpendicular to CCP Mimic's (See Figure 12), including a proper PC tower and double monitors. I wonder who has joined the team in my brief absence before waving hello to some of the teammates already at their desks for the day, all of who appear to look much more morose than last I saw them. I continue walking, turn right towards my desk and notice immediately that it's occupied. Sitting at what just two weeks earlier was my desk is a relatively short woman who looks up at me, says, "Hello," in a thick Scottish accent and then returns to looking at her monitor. I look across the desk to CCP Possum, who also looks up at me, shrugs, then stands up and says, "Let's go find your desk I suppose."

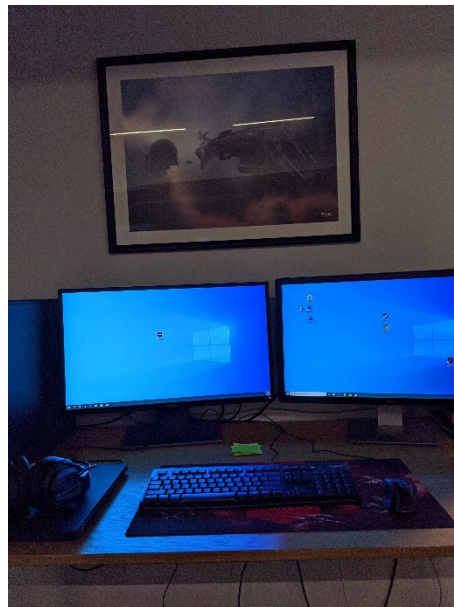


Figure 12. The author's soon-to-be-found desk

We wander the floor for only a few minutes before making our way back to Team Five-0's corral. There, CCP Mimic smiles at me as I ask her, "Whose desk is this?" pointing to the desk I noticed earlier. "Is it mine?" I ask in near certain belief it is not. "Of course. We had to get you over to the team area eventually. You are a team member after all." She sits down at her own desk and begins typing away as I stand in near disbelief that I not only have a dedicated desk, but a full workstation. Nearly three months into my time at CCP Games and finally I have a dedicated

machine. I sit down at what comes to be termed 'The Vestibule' by my team and budding friends at CCP Games and beam a wide smile. It seems after working to conduct User Testing, as well as wordsmithing a fair few posts, I have finally "done something" enough to be seen as a "true team member." Now, I think to myself somewhat naively, the real fieldwork can truly begin.

Chapter Six: The Bedroom

Discovering The Culturally Intimate

The notion that my fieldwork had only begun after being assigned a desktop computer and a desk near a team was, of course, quite naïve. I had been undertaking ‘real’ fieldwork even before stepping foot on Icelandic soil. Indeed, I had experienced CCP Games’ ethically-charged enactments throughout my entire time at the company so far and the months to come would ‘merely’ highlight them even more. That said, as a producer from another team would later tell me, “It wasn’t until you started sitting with Five-0 that we believed you were a part of them,” highlighting that my physical co-location with the team did, to some extent, convince other employees that I ‘belonged’ there. Similarly, while several ‘CCPers’ I worked with directly would talk to me openly, it was only after being assigned a desk and receiving the title of ‘Researcher’ on internal platforms that conversations seemed to flow easier, and even more people seemed more willing to trust me, particularly with their grievances.

For example, a month after being moved to Team Five-0’s area, the senior leadership of CCP announced a company-wide restructure labeled as the establishment of “EVE Guardians” at a global staff meeting, revealing window decals and distributing comfortable blue hoodies (See Figure 13). Following this announcement, several employees privately contacted me and asked if I wanted to hear their opinion on the restructuring. I accepted every invitation and listened to over a dozen employees share their frustrations with me. While I have opted to analyze the event in full in a forthcoming article, the shared thread through each conversation can be summarized in the statement of one employee, a designer, who told me, “This happens a lot. Something goes wrong with the game and the company reorganizes to try and fix it. It’s a nuisance and it can be good to change up perspective, but it rarely solves the real problem.”

In this moment of sharing a “culturally intimate” insight with me (cf. Herzfeld 1996), this designer, along with several other employees, enacted CCP Games as an organizational “nuisance.” As teams were restructured, employees grumbled. As desks were moved, people openly sighed. And as new managers were assigned, several employees, at least on Team Five-0, remarked that they were leaving the company’s best producer for one who was “fine.” Most of the producers put on a smile, but in private at least three noted that this complete reorganization of the *EVE Online* Development team, now focused on who “owns” certain features, was unexpected and difficult to navigate.



Figure 13. The author in the comfortable blue “EVE Guardians” hoodie on Icelandic National Day in 2020

The restructure was purposefully organized to “better serve *EVE Online*” by “establishing its guardians” through clearly demarcated, team-based feature oversight. What the employees who spoke to me found a ‘nuisance’ was that the company had failed to understand the core problem: Removing feature ownership from individuals was a good move, but there was no planned transition, which often led certain teams to ultimately rely on others to move forward with features. Character Creation, for instance, was owned by the newly established Team Aurora, but had previously been overseen by a team in the art department. Any time changes were made to that part of the platform, the team would have to bring in members of the art department to help them with

the code and overall effort. In aiming to produce a more streamlined development process so that parts of the game would not be forgotten and would instead have clear “caretakers,” CCP Games had, according to some, created more work. Through senior leadership’s efforts to enact a CCP Games that was “better organized to be able to oversee the universe of *EVE Online*” by establishing clear feature “caretakers” within the broader institutional “caretaker of *EVE Online*,” they in fact enacted an employer that was a “nuisance.”

Still, over time the teams settled and, at present, mention of EVE Guardians is relegated to compliments on what several employees, myself included, consider to be one of the most comfortable pieces of clothing the company has ever distributed to its employees. After the dust settled, I was the only employee who was allowed to choose their new team. In an effort to more deeply explore the company’s primary development focus, improving the ‘New Player Experience,’ I chose to join what would become Team Aurora, the team responsible for the entire new player experience and all that that entailed.

Simultaneous Enactments

Throughout my time on Team Aurora, I would see the team and company work to enact a “player-focused and caring” version of CCP Games that was not only working to serve as the custodians of the universe, but as the architects of it, working to “improve the system,” as one programmer once told me regarding their work on cleaning up outdated code. Oftentimes, these efforts to improve the game would involve me conducting User Research, studying player pain points and needs through various means. Nevertheless, through each of these studies, be they focused on a reworking of the tutorial or a more inclusive character creation tool that was suddenly canceled by senior leadership following successful playtesting, it was clear that CCP’s management layer and the company’s senior leadership were also enacting CCP Games as a revenue-making

business. Certain features that were beloved by players who participated in closed playtests of them, the novel character creation tool, for example, were shelved by senior leadership in order to focus team development efforts on other, more “business and goal relevant” projects.

Decisions such as these reveal that CCP Games as an institution was not working to build more new player-friendly experiences solely to make a better experience for new players, but to keep said players engaged with the game so that they would spend money on it. Money mattered to CCP Games as a for-profit corporation. While unsurprising, it was uncovering the coexistence of CCP Games’ enactments as ‘caring architect’ and ‘revenue-driven corporation’ that I consider novel. CCP was not driven solely by making money, but also by improving player experiences. It was simultaneously focused on making money, in part so that, as Hilmar once explained during a Global Staff Meeting, “[CCP] can build an *EVE Online* that lasts forever ... because of the good it does.” Both enactments existed simultaneously and both were enacted by the social actors that comprise the institution as a whole. These enactments were also impacted by the company’s Icelandic context through cultural norms such as *Þetta reddast*, which was embedded into the very fabric of CCP’s operating mentality. The intersection of cultural norms and institutional enactment was a site of rich ethnographic data during my time at CCP Games. For, while Welker (2014) addresses the multiplicity of institutions at length in her monograph, wherein she highlights how the Denver-headquartered Newmont is enacted as both ‘Newmonster’ and ‘Job-maker,’ she fails to thoroughly address how the cultural context of an American corporation operating in Indonesia impacted the corporation’s local enactments and the manner in which its Indonesian employees internalized their own understandings of Newmont, despite her interlocutors noting that Newmont’s practices stood in contrast to their own Sumbabwan practices (2014:219). The American nature of Newmont impacted its Indonesian employees’ enactment of the corporation, yet the significance of cultural context on institutional enactments goes largely unaddressed in Welker’s work.

It matters, then, that I have shown that *Betta reddast* was a norm at CCP because what came to be evident in my time on Team Aurora was that this norm impacted the multiplicitous and simultaneous enactments of CCP Games, as well as how the company’s senior leadership opted not to acknowledge the “culturally intimate” implications of turning to the Icelandic norm of *Betta reddast* as a primary vehicle for “situational adjustments” to unexpected developments in the production of the game instead of turning to more ‘industry standard’ approaches.



Figure 14. The red dot as seen in the game

One of the projects I was assigned to support, for example, was a study involving a seemingly innocuous red dot. Similar to how a phone app shows a red dot when a new message is waiting to be read, one of the teams at CCP Games wanted to implement a notification dot for players highlighting when they’d received new items or new ships (See Figure 14), as the company had discovered that many new players struggled to find items across the game’s many inventory windows and complex user interface. While testing the red dot, players appreciated it and remarked that it helped them find the items they were looking for. None of them mentioned the feature as overbearing, some of them never consciously noticed its existence. And so the team’s producer greenlit the red dot to be released, and so it was—to much uproar.

As it happens, the red dot was implemented without the ability to turn it off. While new players benefited from the notification bubbles and many reported being able to find items more easily, veterans of the game who had played for years and who had learned where to look for newly

acquired items were annoyed by the dots, finding them distracting. They were also overbearing, popping up repeatedly, even without new items being added to an inventory. Publicly, CCP Games largely ignored this outcry at first, in part because internal leadership knew that it was beneficial to new players. The prevailing attitude internally was that the red dot was annoying, sure, but, as one producer said, “things will work themselves out and people will get used to it, even if it isn’t behaving as intended right now.” The question of course being: How will things work themselves out? Indeed several non-management level, non-Icelandic employees noted that things could “only work themselves out if we work them out.” Other, non-Icelandic companies would likely have responded to such a situation by immediately removing the feature from their game until it functioned “as intended,” as seen in the case of Blizzard quickly reacting within 48 hours to a virtual world pandemic run rampant (Girish 2019). Instead, despite this new feature acting unexpectedly and accordingly causing frustration with players, CCP Games opted to acknowledge the problem, but set no clear plan to implement a solution. After some time and at least one question about the red dot being posed directly to Hilmar and James Dobrowski, then the VP of Product (See Figure 15) the team originally responsible for the red dot was tasked with altering its behavior and made less present a few months after its release before ultimately allowing players to turn it off entirely, over a year after its release.

In releasing the red dot, CCP Games was enacted simultaneously a “caring architect,” and “out of touch developer,” as well as a “revenue-interested” corporation looking to make more money from and improve the game experience for new players. When the release of the feature did not go as planned, CCP’s senior leadership and middle-management layer situationally adjusted to the unexpected results of their work by embracing the notion of *Betta reddast* in contrast to a more instantly reactionary response that is standard within the games industry. They thereby enacted a version of CCP Games that adheres to the Icelandic principle of “things will work themselves out.”

Other employees, notably many of who are not Icelandic, subsequently responded in the negative, noting that the issue needed to be addressed, and soon, before themselves enacting a version of CCP Games as “damage controller,” that led to the code being modified to minimize the appearance of the red dot, as well as allow for the red dot to be optional. All of these versions of CCP Games existed simultaneously, but it was the Icelandic norm that guided the company’s public response and senior leadership’s internal response. CCP Games was and is a corporation interested in making money, but it is also a caring architect of its virtual world, and a *Betta reddast* embracing Icelandic institution.

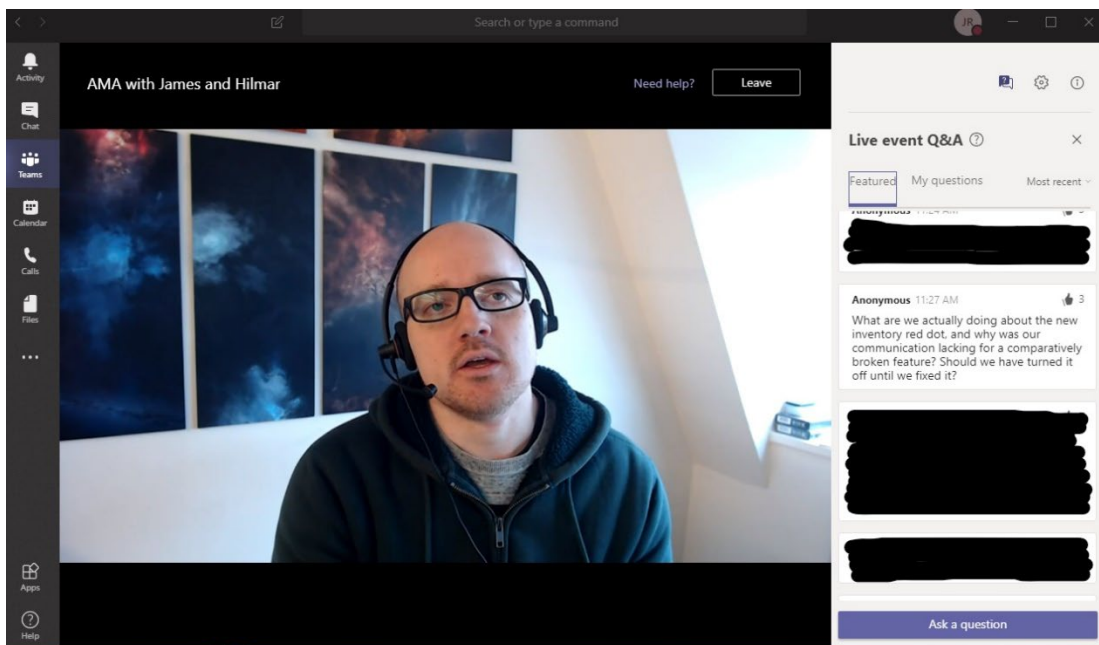


Figure 15. A question about the red dot posed to James and Hilmar in an AMA session

It is only through considering the Icelandic context of the corporation that the public messaging surrounding the red dot and the company’s reaction to said incident can be fully understood. It is not that CCP Games as an institution did not care about its players, but instead that the Icelandic norms upon which the company itself was built and is maintained, given the current senior leadership’s Icelandic situatedness, shaped the manner in which CCP Games as a

whole situationally adjusted to the unexpected behavior of the red dot and the community's reaction to it. Other solutions were proposed and strongly argued for internally, but *Betta reddast* held the day.

CCP is also an employer, both caring and concerned. Shortly after working on the red dot project, I was asked to support CCP's HR team in understanding how they could improve the lives of those that they had labeled, "The Aways," that is, employees who were not Icelandic. It's worth noting that in determining who belonged to the "Locals" and "Aways," the HR team did not distinguish between employees born and raised in Iceland and those who were new to the country; they only noted if an employee held a foreign passport or an Icelandic one. Still, as I speak to in my work discussing situated and reflexive applications of Anthropology (cf. Rivers 2020), the HR team very much did care about improving foreign employees' lives and satisfaction, but had no idea where to begin. They were interested in this, as the Head of People told me, "because CCP cares about its employees, we want them to be happy," and as one of the team members told, "and because tenure of our foreign employees is lower than CCP would like it to be." As these statements show, HR was enacting CCP Games as both a "caring employer" trying to support its foreign employees, as well as a "talent conservator employer" who was trying to keep the talented and skilled employees they had invested in at the company. The study ultimately produced insights for the HR team and would lead to changes that the team saw as "CCP simply caring for its people."

As I continued to see the multiple enactments of CCP Games during my time in the field, I began to imagine that I was close to fully understanding the various aspects of the institution in their entirety. I had captured what CCP was, or nearly had, I thought. But as my project with HR concluded at the end of February of 2020, I was about to learn that though I knew my fieldsite and my interlocutors well, dramatic change would radically alter the way we all interacted with one another, not only for me and my team at CCP Games, or even for the people living in Iceland, but rather for the entire globe as the unthinkable happened and a virus shut down the world.

Friday the 13th And My New Desk At Þórsgata 27

On March 11th of 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. On March 12th, rumors began swirling of international borders closing. Then, on March 13th at roughly 11:00 AM Iceland's prime minister and chief epidemiologist held a press conference in which the seriousness of the pandemic was emphasized and new disease control measures were announced, including occupancy caps for offices, the closing of universities and schools, as well as two-meter social distancing suggestions.

Immediately following the press conference, held solely in Icelandic with no English translation or subtitles, the foreign employees of Team Aurora, myself included, turned to our Icelandic teammates and asked, "So what's happening?" Only a few hours earlier, the world had seemed normal. Now, a sense of panic hung in the air, but none of us quite knew what the panic was for, just that a flu-like virus was rampaging through Italy and had possibly been brought back to Iceland. Seeing our concern, CCP HotPepper, a new Icelandic teammate, turned from his monitor where the press conference was concluding and calmly declared, "We're going to have to go home. This virus is serious, there are rules being put in place to limit occupancy and to maintain distance between people. I would start packing now." Resigned, but glad to have some information, most of the team returned to their desks and began organizing their things.

A few hours later, every CCP employee received an email outlining how serious this virus was, how it had majorly impacted the CCP office in Shanghai and how, effective immediately, we were to go home. CCP Reykjavík was closed, indefinitely. We were allowed to take our "work stations"³⁴ home if we needed a computer to work from, but we would be expected to bring them

³⁴ During my time at CCP Games, employee computers were referred to as work stations.

back once the IT team organized a more long-term solution, if needed. At the time, CCP Horsewhisperer, who sent the email, openly acknowledged that no one knew how long we would need to be home, but it was likely to be longer than a few weeks.

As people read the email, reactions varied. Some employees shut down their computers and immediately left, not saying goodbye to anyone. Others gathered in circles within their team corrals, trying to maintain two meters of distance between one another while talking about what was happening. Throughout the entire office, there was a sense of urgency hanging in the air, with even the calmest of employees looking a bit on edge. As the impact of the news settled in, I did two things. I started by writing my husband and asking him if he was okay and what was happening in the United States. Having just woken up, he had no news, only noting that he had heard the borders were going to close. Then, I asked my roommate to bring my car down to the office so that I could drive my computer and monitors home. My roommate asked what was happening and I told him I'd explain in person. Roughly twenty minutes later, I was loading my equipment into my Suzuki Jimny's very small trunk. After closing my loaded truck, I noticed CCP Optimal struggling to carry his two screens and computer out of the front door. I rushed over and helped carry the equipment to his car. Throughout the day, I had seen several employees helping one another load equipment into

cars. Helping other known employees of the company was normal at CCP Games, but especially today, that help and aid were weighed down by the uncertainty of the recently announced pandemic.



Figure 16. The author's desk at Þórsgata 27

I smiled weakly at CCP Optimal and said, “Well, see you online for now. Goodbye, stay safe and stay healthy,” to which he returned a goodbye before we both got into our cars and drove off to our newest desks: Those located in our homes. For me, that was at Þórsgata 27 (See Figure 16). After a weekend spent indoors, I woke up the following Monday at 8:30 AM, showered and got dressed as I normally would, then made a coffee and sat down at my new desk. I logged onto a Microsoft Teams meeting at 10:00 AM to the faces and microphone echoes of my many teammates. “Good morning Team Aurora!” the team’s producer CCP Mischief bellowed out, “Obviously a lot has changed, let’s stay safe, but there’s a new rule now for the team: Stand up is holy, guys. You must attend.” The team nodded and the day began at a CCP Games that was forever changed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shifting Realities: “Community-Caring” CCP

It is Tuesday, March 17th of 2020. The world around me has been thrown into chaos and over the weekend it has begun to feel as if I am living through a surreal post-apocalyptic movie. The day begins at 8:35 in the morning and I attend my team’s standup before a company-wide “AMA”³⁵ with Hilmar and James is scheduled to begin at 11:00 AM. Shortly before joining the call, my roommate walks out of his room and by my door with two suitcases, a backpack, and a look of pure terror on his face. “I’m flying out in a few hours to go home,” he tells me as I sit at my desk, “I don’t think I’m coming back to Iceland, but I’ll let you know.” I nod and wish him safe travels before returning my attention to my monitor as CCP Grendel, the company’s Head of Public Relations, announces that the AMA will begin shortly after they resolve an issue with Microsoft Teams. Twenty minutes later, the call begins, not as a moderated live event, but as a companywide conference call. The first five minutes are spent muting people with live microphones and asking people to turn off their cameras. It seems CCP Games is not the only company underprepared for the pandemic, as Microsoft Teams itself struggles to keep up with the volume of people on the call.

CCP Grendel opens the session with a question to Hilmar, asking, “How will CCP be handling work from home? Is there a model in place?” to which Hilmar answers that they are working on this, but there are questions of differing contracts, legal frameworks, workplace insurances, pension funds, and more that all have to be considered if the company is to move to a more remote model. Following several other bureaucratic questions and one question about the game’s imminent launch in China, CCP Masterplan asks, “Are you worried about losing our culture by being remote?” Hilmar pauses briefly to reflect before answering, “No. CCP is resilient. We will

³⁵ AMA stands for “Ask Me Anything,” and was a meeting where the entire company could ask literally anything to CCP’s CEO and VP of Product, James Dobrowski. Most questions were nonetheless about the game, the company, and company strategy.

not stop being who we are because we are remote. We still care for each other and we still work together as one team.” CCP Masterplan nods on camera and the matter seems closed. What is clear is that in this moment, CCP Masterplan voiced a fear that the company’s culture, but particularly as he later told me, “How we foreigners are supported,” might shift from what it was prior to becoming a remote workforce and Hilmar responded in turn that this would not occur because CCP as an institution is resilient. Here, too, CCP was enacted by Hilmar as being something, in this case resilient.

The call continues and CCP Grendel asks an anonymous question, namely, “Will this bump games up?” The question being: will a global shutdown increase game revenue generally, but especially for *EVE Online*? Hilmar pauses again before calmly stating, “The data from China suggests it will.” A follow-up question is asked, again anonymously, “Will we capitalize on this?” This time, Hilmar takes a longer pause before responding, “The evil capitalist in me says yes, but we should lean into the benevolence of *EVE Online*. We should help, not capitalize, there’s a lot of relevance here for what we do and what *EVE* is.” He goes on to mention historical research done internally into the powerful and meaningful friendships formed in the game. In this moment, Hilmar enacts CCP Games as a powerful force for good, highlighting that the company’s virtual world of *EVE Online* can provide a place for people to meet, make friends, and ‘be together while apart.’ The implication being that in this uncertain time where people are locked in their homes because of the virus, it is better to lean into and publicize how *EVE Online* can help alleviate loneliness, rather than tap into the “evil capitalist” drive to profit off of the unrest in the world. The meeting ends, notably without any comment or announcement from CCP Horsewhisperer about working arrangements or company support for employees, and I sign off of the call before diving into research on Character Creation tools in other games.

Hilmar's public statement of focusing on the good *EVE Online* can do for people enacted a CCP Games that cares for the community and that works to do good in the world through the video game it creates. Yet it bears mentioning, as several scholars of the virtual world itself note (cf. Bergstrom 2019; cf. Carter 2022; cf. Yee 2008), that *EVE Online*'s community is quite homogenous with regards to gender, and from my own experience at the company's World Tour, also with regards to race. In the early 2000s, Yee (2008) observed that roughly 85% of MMORPG players were men, concluding that 14% were women. Today, women comprise somewhere between 30%-45% of the MMORPG market (Kneer et al. 2019). Nonetheless, as Bergstrom writes, women are underrepresented in gaming generally, but especially in online games (2019). This is not due to the games themselves, but rather due to barriers put in place to prevent women from playing the game, be they community barriers or external ones (2019). Still, while women are underrepresented in online games generally, in *EVE Online* they are underrepresented to an even greater extent, with Bergstrom concluding that women comprise somewhere between 2-4% of the population (2012).

Who was to be helped by *EVE Online* during the pandemic, then? The implication was not that the community should expand demographically, but rather in volume for *EVE Online*-minded players. In this sense, while Hilmar's statement, and the employees' assent, enacted CCP Games as a "community builder" and "caring game-maker," it ignored the reality that CCP Games was also the "maker of a game dominated by men," and that embracing the game's 'benevolence' was also embracing the lack of women in the community.

This particular omission on Hilmar's part during the call struck me as recently the company had in fact begun researching "Women in EVE," or rather the lack thereof. During my first few months at CCP Games, I heard relatively little about the lack of women playing the game, despite a number of women working across the company in all sorts of roles, and heard nothing about the game's predominantly white playerbase. Two months before the pandemic shut CCP's office doors,

though, a “Women in EVE” project was greenlit and CCP Oracle, with support from me, was tasked with exploring why *EVE Online* was perceived as a men’s club. At that time, the company did not even know what percentage of its population was women.³⁶ The project was not mentioned in Hilmar’s statement and while CCP Oracle would research women’s stories, ultimately revealing that the community of women playing *EVE Online* is tightknit and their life stories diverse, up until I left CCP Games in December of 2021, no major action was taken to encourage more women to play the game. It follows, then, that while Hilmar’s statement enacted CCP Games as a “Concerned Community Maker” during the pandemic, it would be making a very specific and homogenous sort of community.

Still, the company-wide commitment to creating a positive impact through *EVE Online* was genuine, albeit ignorant of its game’s deficits with regards to community inclusion. Also at question during the AMA session, though, was CCP Masterplan’s enactment of the company, that is CCP Games as a “company with a unique working culture.” Neither CCP Masterplan nor Hilmar ever explicitly defined the “culture” of the company during the AMA session and no one else asked for clarification, either. After the call, following several conversations with employees across departments and teams, it became evident to me that this was because every employee had ‘filled in the gaps’ for themselves as to what CCP Masterplan was referring to according to their own perception of CCP Games as an institution.

In asking this question, CCP Masterplan unknowingly tapped into the fact that the company is multiplicitous in its enactment. No one needed clarification because each person on the call knew for themselves what CCP’s “culture” was. For CCP Masterplan, as I later found out, it was the

³⁶ CCP Games did not accurately measure the gender gap in its own game until I, in my later role as Player Researcher, organized a game-wide survey with an external consultant company to measure the population’s demographic and psychological data. At that time, in April 2021, women comprised 3% of the population. Interestingly, people who identified as non-binary comprised 1% of the population. The rest were men.

ability to quickly collaborate in order to solve complex problems. As he later told me, if a problem or bug arose with a feature, people would simply come by his desk and ask him how they might resolve the issue. For CCP Antiquarian, it was the openness to playful banter in the hallways. For CCP Possum, it was the willingness to grab drinks at the local pub after work. For CCP Horsewhisperer, it was the camaraderie of playing pool together in the game room. Amongst other things, for me, CCP Augustine, it was the warmth and friendliness of people making time to talk about life outside of work. Every employee had their own perception of what exactly it was CCP Masterplan was asking and it follows that several of these overlapped.

To each of those enactments of CCP Games that was evoked in that moment, Hilmar answered resoundingly, “That will not change,” while also enacting CCP Games as a place of mutual care between employees. In the months that followed this call, though, the employees of CCP Games would in fact shift and change their behavior, situationally adjusting to the indeterminacy of the pandemic by finding new ways of working together, interacting with one another, and of working on *EVE Online*. What remained, though, was a genuine care for each other as the broader community of CCP employees, as well as for the players who engaged with *EVE Online*, and even for the scientists working to understand this mysterious virus.

Situationally Adjusting In A Pandemic-Addled World

Two weeks have passed since the ‘Ask Me Anything’ session with Hilmar and James and many of the employees at CCP have adjusted to the new reality of an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, although some still hope it will only last until summer. Those employees with children, nearly all Icelandic, are struggling a bit more than others to work from home given their children’s antics, but meetings are happening, features are being designed and programmed, and CCP Games as a whole is still caretaking of its virtual world.

My Tuesday begins with a Global Staff Meeting (GSM). Unlike the hastily cobbled-together AMA, this session is a bit more organized, albeit Hilmar's internet connection is somewhat unstable as he opens the meeting by saying, "Hello everyone. Welcome to the first Global Staff Meeting of 2020 and the first one ever where we're all sitting at home." He then presents how Q1 of 2019 was one of the worst in the history of *EVE Online*. For what seems like the hundredth time since joining, I hear Hilmar say that *EVE Online* is in need of a rebirth and that our playerbase is shrinking because, "there is no new generation." Following Hilmar's now-standard presentation, CCP Horsewhisperer takes over and opens by thanking everyone for making the move from office-based work to working from home. She also announces that, "CCP Games is repealing the use-it-or-lose-it rule for vacation days, and will be reimbursing at-home internet costs. You can also use your workstations at home, but we will provide a secondary set-up for you all when supplies are available."

Following this announcement, she notes that the office is still closed for more than 20 people and only those needed in person, for example, the IT department, would be allowed onsite. Having visited the office following its evacuation for the sake of documentation (See Figure 17), I shudder at the thought of sitting there in the cold and quiet alone, realizing that the background noise of others has become a comfort. CCP Horsewhisperer then notes that the move to a new office in May is still expected to happen as planned. *Gróska* is still opening, although it might open to only those twenty business-critical employees to start.

The rest of the GSM continues with the company's various senior leaders speaking to their domains. CCP Orca speaks to user acquisition, CCP Mannbjorn speaks to production strategy, and CCP Burger dives into the "promising numbers" of the updated tutorial, which my team has been working on. The meeting concludes, though, with Hilmar restating that, "Our mission is to create virtual worlds more meaningful than real life, let's do that."



Figure 17. An empty corridor in Grandagarður shortly before the move to *Gróska* in May of 2020

Following the meeting, it strikes me that CCP Horsewhisperer chose to speak of the decisions made regarding vacation time and internet reimbursement as if made by an entity other than herself. As the company’s Head of People, she is the person who makes decisions regarding vacation time and general company reimbursement policies, yet she enacts CCP Games as the decision-making institution when making the announcement. In doing so, she emphasizes that CCP Games exists separate from herself and cares for the people it employs. It has made the decision to reimburse internet costs and allow employees to “roll over” vacation days into the next year accordingly.

This linguistic choice on the part of CCP Games’s Head of People was both an enactment of the company as “caring,” as well as a clear instance of situational adjustment informed by Icelandic cultural norms for, as CCP Horsewhisperer and CCP Asa would later tell me, “Icelanders care for each other in hard times and being more than flexible, as well as providing necessary equipment seems the least we can do.” Given the unusual circumstances with which she and the

company were presented, she chose to adjust a company policy on vacation days, providing work machinery to be used at home, as well as reimbursing at-home internet costs, to align with her understanding of the company culture of which she was a part. “CCP Games cares for its employees,” was a phrase I had heard since the first day of my fieldwork, and in this moment, she was enacting the institution as a caring one by accounting for how it might care given the unexpected occurrence of a pandemic that forced people to work from home. Her decision was a situational adjustment rooted in her understanding of CCP Games as a caring company according to Icelandic norms of both care and *Petta reddast*. CCP Games was “making it work” within the context of the pandemic, in stark contrast to a number of non-Icelandic employers who, at the time, either required employees to use their own equipment or to ‘stream into’ their office-located machines. Ethically, this was also a commitment to care for employees beyond the company’s existing legal or contractual obligations.

Still ruminating on this thought, I join Team Aurora’s daily stand-up. Given the way in which virtual stand-up operates, there is no longer a clockwise order to presenting one’s update. Instead, CCP Mischief calls on team members to speak, often in an alphabetical order. After stand-up, CCP Mischief, the team’s senior data analyst, and I stay on the Teams call to talk about the completion and retention rates of the team’s updated tutorial, particularly as compared to the old one. At the end of this meeting, CCP Mischief asks, “Hey Josh, there’s a meeting later about making a new Project Discovery [mini-game], one that helps with this COVID stuff, would you want to join?” I immediately respond in the positive, to which she answers, “I thought you might, it seems like it could be cool for your research. I’ll make sure [CCP Burger] invites you.” I thank her for thinking of me before the meeting ends and we all disconnect from the Teams call.³⁷

³⁷ During my fieldwork, every employee of CCP Games aided my research in some form or fashion, but after talking about my project with her one day, CCP Mischief made a particular effort to make sure I had access to the people and

The Spark of Project Discovery: COVID-19

Later that day, I join another Teams call with my mic muted and my video off. CCP Burger invited me to the call, but asked me solely to observe, not participate. As the growing body of literature on COVID-impacted ethnographic methods shows, this is not too difficult as observation is in many ways made easier by working online through Zoom and Teams calls, albeit ethically more voyeuristic (cf. Hall et al. 2021; Watson & Lupton 2022). I can echo that ease, and not the voyeurism, as no mention is made of my silent headshot appearing among the roster of participants during the call. Instead, the call begins with general introductions of several of the attending CCP employees, including CCP Burger, CCP Muppethunter, *EVE Online*'s Game Design Director, and CCP Wonderboy, who introduces himself as a software engineer and programmer who has worked on the past two iterations of Project Discovery.

Attila Szantner, the CEO of Massively Multiplayer Online Science (MMOS), then introduces himself, noting that, “We’ve really enjoyed working with [CCP] in the past and there’s a real golden opportunity here for citizen science helping us fight COVID-19.” Having briefly played *EVE Online* in 2016, I experienced the first iteration of Project Discovery, in that mini-game, players helped analyze human protein images for an international medical database (CCP Games, 2016). I had also heard about and played the second iteration of Project Discovery, where players helped identify exoplanets, contributing to Nobel Prize winner Dr. Mayor’s research on the universe beyond our planet (CCP Games, 2017).

teams I most wanted to research. Without her as my second manager, I do not believe I would have had as rich a dataset to work with, nor a future career as a UX Researcher. This highlights how our interlocutors work with us and alongside us in the field. Her efforts, and those of other employees, are as much a part of the methodological undertaking as my own work.

But for now, on the call, Attila’s introduction leaves me wondering what ‘citizen science’ is. I quickly google for an answer and find, as Haklay et al. (2021) note, that there exist myriad definitions for “citizen science,” each emphasizing aspects unique to their own individual context. Following a quick Slack message after the call, though, I learn that CCP Games defines citizen science as “allowing players to contribute to scientific breakthroughs in between [playing other parts of the game],” (CCP Games 2021). Another man, Dr. Ryan Brinkman, introduces himself as a medical geneticist and flow cytometry expert, followed by Dr. Jerome Waldispühl, who introduces himself as a computational molecular biologist. They briefly teach those of us on the call about their work in flow cytometry, a method of studying the impact of pathogens on singular cells (cf. McKinnon 2018), before CCP Burger begins sharing his screen to show those of us from CCP Games what flow telemetry charts look like (See Figure 18).

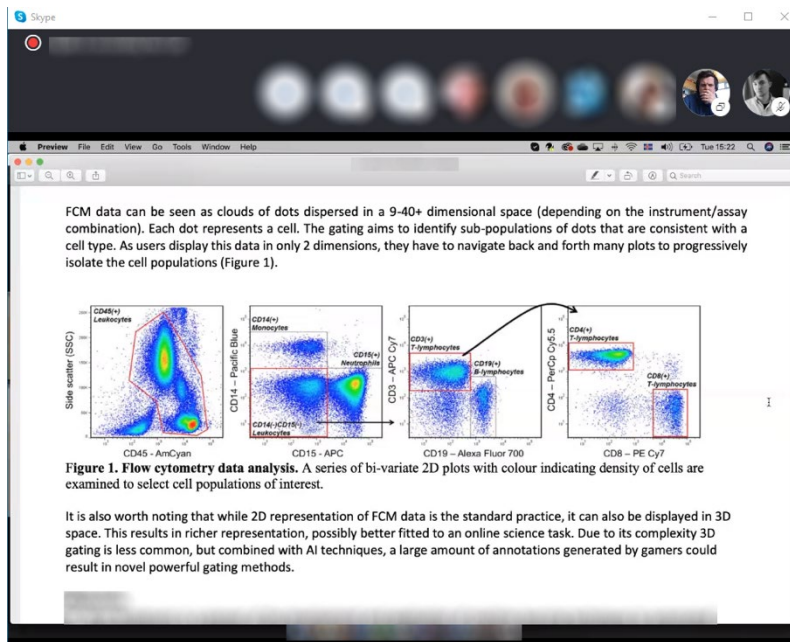


Figure 18. CCP Burger exhibiting confusion at the flow cytometry charts on the screen

None of us at CCP being flow cytometry experts, we all sit in silence until CCP Muppethunter asks, “So, we draw circles around the clusters? Is that right?” Ryan responds in the positive and CCP Muppethunter then asks, “So [CCP Wonderboy], can we do this? I don’t see how

it would be complicated.” CCP Wonderboy also notes that he does not see any major difficulty in turning this into a Project Discovery mini-game. The discussion that follows centers on how to send high enough quality images into the game for the data to be properly analyzed without overloading server infrastructure. The details of that are eventually worked out before CCP Muppethunter again interjects and asks, “So how quickly can this be done with unlimited money, [CCP Wonderboy]?” “2-3 weeks,” he answers, “but I’d need a Game Designer, a UI Designer, and a Front-End Programmer.” CCP Burger interjects, “And a QA.” CCP Wonderboy chuckles at this remark, visibly. I later find out that is because neither of the first two iterations of Project Discovery had a QA Analyst working on them. As CCP Wonderboy later tells me, the fact that CCP Burger suggested having one already told him that the decision had been made in CCP Burger’s mind. Opting to commit the relatively scant QA resources CCP Games has to this project highlighted for CCP Wonderboy that, for CCP Burger at least, this project was important to undertake and to undertake well. Unlike the other two Project Discovery iterations, the first which was experimental and the second which was designed and implemented almost entirely by interns, this one was to be assigned a QA and an entire team.

The call concludes with CCP Burger asking Ryan Brinkman, “But will this be yesterday’s news six weeks from now?” to which Ryan responds, “COVID-19 is a SARS virus. Even if it is gone soon, which I doubt, these kinds of viruses and the impact they have on the human body are not going away any time soon.” CCP Burger seems appeased by this answer and ends the call by stating that he needs to take the discussion of whether or not this can happen in-house and offline. The meeting ends and I note to myself that there was never a question of if a Project Discovery rooted in flow cytometry was beneficial to the world at large. The questions, instead, largely centered on resources and if CCP Games was willing to utilize theirs in order to create a third iteration of the mini-game that would aid scientists in understanding the impact of COVID-19 on human cells.

A week of emails between Attila, CCP Wonderboy, and CCP Burger later and CCP Burger announces on a company-wide morning call that CCP Games will, in fact, be launching a new Project Discovery, this time to be called Project Discovery: COVID-19 and to be led by one of the company's more senior producers: CCP Shreddy. I ask CCP Mischief and CCP Shreddy if I can shadow the team, to which CCP Shreddy responds, "No way buddy. You can join, but you'll need to take a shovel and dig. Help us figure out user flows and see what needs to get done." CCP Shreddy's comment, that I could join only if I 'joined in the digging,' was reminiscent of what CCP Burger had told me near the beginning of my fieldwork, namely, no one is seen as a CCPer until they join a team. This in mind, I agree to "take a shovel," and put my burgeoning UX skills to work, thereby officially joining a second, more-temporary team: Team Project Discovery.

“Taking Shovels and Digging” As Team Project Discovery

The very same day a Slack channel is made for the team and a daily stand-up is scheduled. The next day I attend the team's first stand-up immediately following my stand-up with Team Aurora. In contrast to my normal team stand-up, this one is less formally structured and takes the form of a conversation, largely led by CCP Shreddy and CCP Wonderboy, who talk through the various elements the team will need in order to make this project a reality, including an understanding of the "user journey" of the current Project Discovery, that being a step-by-step chart illustrating the various interactions a user can have with the mini-game in their effort to interact with the game (cf. Endmann & Keßner 2016). Having done this work for *EVE Online*'s tutorial, I agree to work on this with the team's UI/UX Designer³⁸ CCP HotPepper.

³⁸ At the time, I did not know better than to refer to CCP's UI Designers by this, their given title. CCP Games does not employ UX Designers, though, and its UI/UX Designers are UI Designers more than User Experience Designers, working on user interface elements more than holistic user experiences.

The team meeting ends and I take a moment to write CCP HotPepper on Slack about how we want to divide the task in front of us. He agrees to craft a prototype on a design tool called Figma if I can provide him with screenshots and a user journey. Neither of us has worked on this sort of project before, but we both take our proverbial shovels and get to digging, working on charting out the existing experience in order to inform the future one. That same day we manage to capture the entire existing Project Discovery experience and I begin to chart a user journey for it.

Then, the nationwide Easter holiday begins. While religion was rarely present in the quotidian practices of my interlocutors or those around me and was never really talked about, Iceland is officially a Christian country and The Evangelical Lutheran Church is its national church (Lacy 1998). As part of this religious tradition, Easter has always been a major holiday for the country, similar to other European countries with similar religious histories. Nevertheless, it surprised me as the entire company shut down for the Christian holiday of Easter. Slack went silent and no emails were exchanged from ‘Good Friday’ through ‘Easter Monday.’ On the following Tuesday, we returned to work and all avenues of communication once again lit up. It was time for me to start “digging” again.

Team Project Discovery’s standup begins with an update from CCP Wonderboy and CCP Shreddy, who note that they’ve made progress in getting the scientific teams to agree to let the charts be color-coded according to *EVE Online*’s style, that being a darker more neon style than originally proposed. In talking about the charts, though, CCP Wonderboy reveals that he does not really understand what flow cytometry is. The rest of the team, myself included, sheepishly acknowledge that none of us really get it, either. Seeing a chance to “take my shovel,” I offer to take this on so that we can better understand how to make the science into a game. Somewhat pretentiously I announce on the call, “I’m an academic of sorts. I’m happy to dive into the academia of it all to try and translate.” The team seems relieved and I dive into teaching myself about a

complicated method of virological study. I manage to grasp the basics thanks to a number of helpful YouTube videos and articles and end my day by teaching CCP HotPepper the basics while documenting them on the team’s internal wiki space.³⁹

I mention this example not to praise my own aptitude for learning “hard science,” but rather to highlight that this behavior of stepping up and of working outside one’s area of direct expertise when needed was the norm at CCP Games. When I joined the company in August of 2019, I was hesitant to work on anything outside of my comfort zone. Over time, I had come to realize that one had to work outside of one’s comfort zone in order to be seen as a team player at CCP Games. While there were employees who refused to work on projects that fell outside of their job descriptions, those employees were few and far between. Instead, CCP’s employees generally “row the boat together, even if we’re not so sure how to row,” as CCP Zeulix, a software engineer on Team Project Discovery, once mentioned in response to the team tackling the dense flow cytometry material together. Several of CCP’s Icelandic employees heralded this behavior as being part of the “Viking blood of Iceland” for, as they explained, the Vikings worked together to achieve their goals. Being such a small population still, everyone was expected to contribute to the community in some manner for this was a part of their heritage. As Kristín Loftsdóttir and Sanna Magdalena Mörtudóttir note, this type of claim, that is branding the country’s population as “Vikings” and tying their behavior to Viking culture, is a standard practice in the “heritage branding of Nordic countries”⁴⁰

³⁹ For the sake of space, I will not recount those basics here. Instead, I would happily suggest you create an *EVE Online* account, play through the tutorial, then dock at your nearest station and open up Project Discovery. As it turns out, CCP HotPepper and I managed to create a decent introduction to flow cytometry through our tutorial efforts.

⁴⁰ It bears mentioning that Kristín and Sanna Magdalena also rightfully critique this branding as rooted in a singularly White perspective. That is, they shows that “non-White Icelanders” are regularly asked, “But where are you from?” despite being Icelandic due in part to the image of Vikings being White, and given that Icelanders as Vikings, many Icelanders assume that all Icelanders must be white or from somewhere else originally.

such as Iceland and, indeed, this was not the first time I had heard such a statement during my time at CCP Games (2022: 224). What was interesting in this instance was seeing how this branding bled into the quotidian practice of getting work done on Project Discovery.

Needless to say, the evocation of this cultural norm of purposeful collaboration and a willingness to learn new things in order to solve a problem was very much at play during my time on Team Project Discovery. None of us knew flow cytometry, yet we worked together to learn it well enough to turn it into a mini-game. Similarly, when designing the actual game itself, the team banded together to craft a “core gameplay loop” that simultaneously appealed to people’s drive to “create shapes” while also capturing valuable data for the scientists. This alone took nearly three weeks of iterative work on the team’s part, as well as detailed conversations with the scientists themselves.

But it was not just purposeful collaboration and a willingness to learn new things that were at play during the production of Project Discovery: COVID-19. Several times throughout production, the phrase *Þetta reddast* was either directly spoken or heavily implied. About a month into the project, near the end of April, CCP Zeulix, an Icelandic-born software engineer for the team, proclaimed that he had finally managed to create a “drawing tool” that would appropriately interact with both the in-game window, as well as the data charts sent from the scientists, thereby sending them solved flow cytometry charts.

On a call with the science team, Team Project Discovery presented this solution. Unfortunately, it was buggy, the lines of the shapes were far too thick, and it occasionally simply failed to work. No one quite knew what to do to fix the problem, but the rest of the team appeared to assume, “*Þetta reddast*,” and left the team’s two engineers, CCP Zeulix and CCP Edelweiss, to resolve the issue. The next morning, CCP Edelweiss announced that CCP Zeulix had needed rest, so went to sleep, but she had spent the entire day and well into the night creating a new ‘drawing tool’ that, although not beautiful, worked. The problem had indeed resolved itself, or perhaps more

appropriately put, those who stated that the problem would solve itself had not had to contribute to the solution. While “*Betta*” had indeed resolved itself, it did so because CCP Edelweiss had picked up a new shovel and began digging the hole herself after CCP Zeulix had struggled to find a smooth and workable solution.

Other teams were also impacted by the culturally-bound expectations of Team Project Discovery and the loose strings the team’s quick pace of production introduced. There was an assumption on the part of the team and its producer, it seemed, that others would need to help us dig given the “worthy” goal of our project: to fight the pandemic. Shortly before the project was set to launch, for example, Team Inkling, CCP’s narrative design team, and specifically Narrative Designer CCP Calliope, a close friend of mine, were asked to drop all other projects at a moment’s notice in order to help craft an in-game narrative explanation for the project. CCP Calliope took on this sudden shift in priorities with aplomb and within forty-eight hours the team had a Creative Director approved in-game narrative for the project that was immediately worked into the tutorial that CCP HotPepper and I worked together to make.

Following two months of fast-paced labor, a few heated conversations with the scientists pushing them to better explain what they needed, as well as a great deal of “digging together,” both within the team and outside of it, Project Discovery: COVID-19 launched on June 15, 2020. The community rallied behind the project and it was extremely well received, both internally and externally, because it showed that “CCP Games cares.” The team had created something that could “make a real impact on this pandemic,” and indeed, it did. As of my departure from the company in late 2021, the mini-game had nearly 450,000 unique players engage with it, having solved a total of almost 2 million tasks, nearly 200,000 of which had been scientifically validated, saving the scientific community over 500 years worth of people-hour work. Project Discovery: COVID-19 was and is successful.

Ethically-Imbued Enactments At Play

Project Discovery: COVID-19 also served as a moment of deep realization on my part about how CCP Games's enactments were impacted by its Icelandic cultural context. The project had begun because CCP Burger had convinced the company's senior leadership team, as he later recounted, that this project, "Could do real good for the world," and, "isn't that what CCP Games is about?" This led to the project being greenlit and given priority, and even a QA Analyst. In this act of greenlighting the project and assigning precious resources to it, CCP Games was enacted by CCP Burger and the company's employees as a corporation that cared not only about its playerbase, but also the broader global community. Once the mini-game was released, the *EVE Online* community, and the broader news media, heralded it as a benevolent act (cf. Dhar 2021; cf. LeBlanc 2021) and the scientists themselves noted in their own publications that this project was a true "level up for citizen science," (Waldispühl et al. 2020).

CCP Games's senior leadership had made a commitment to launch an unprofitable project, despite it costing the company valuable human resources that could have been spent on revenue-generating features at a time when an increasing number of players were engaging with the game due to being stuck in their homes. Despite this, CCP's senior leadership made an ethical decision to "help science" and decided to launch a project that could "do good" through the game of *EVE Online*. In turn, the team I was a part of worked hard to ensure that the data provided would be valuable for the scientists. At each step, ethical decisions were made given the decisions made held implications for how we as a community were working to counteract the impact of the pandemic that had surprised us all.

As I learned through working on this project, underlying those ethical decisions were the cultural norms that CCP's employees brought to bear in their work. As the "grab a shovel"

metaphor and instruction highlight, regardless of whether one is an Icelandic passport holder or an ‘Away,’ team members were expected to behave as Icelanders were purported to, that is, to make things work, to “row the boat together,” as well as take on tasks outside of one’s expertise. Interestingly, this cultural norm was proudly spoken about, whereas moments of *Þetta reddast* as it impacted the work of CCP Games were rather sheepishly acknowledged and only shared in a ‘culturally intimate’ manner for those who “really knew how it works here.” At the same time, non-Icelandic industry standards such as charting out a “product roadmap” to inform the development of the mini-game’s distinct parts before beginning to work on it (cf. Shore & Warden 2007) were eschewed, with the team instead operating in a largely reactionary manner befitting the *Þetta reddast* mindset.

Both of these Icelandic norms impacted the way in which Project Discovery: COVID-19 came to be launched. They impacted the ethical decisions in the making of the mini-game and in its launch accordingly. Indeed, at one point there was a great deal of miscommunication between the scientists and the development team leading to CCP Shreddy himself questioning whether the project should just be shelved. Instead of choosing to shelve the project, though, CCP’s senior leaders implicitly, and in English, committed to the principle of *Þetta reddast*, assured that the team would find a solution with the scientists to make the mini-game playable and, through a joint effort, a solution was ultimately found.

Through “grabbing a shovel” and “starting to dig” with the team responsible for making Project Discovery: COVID-19, I finally saw how the Icelandic cultural context of the company partially influenced the quotidian development practices of its employees, thereby impacting the company’s multiplicitous enactments. CCP Games was a “Caring Company” during the pandemic by virtue of launching Project Discovery: COVID-19, among other initiatives, but this enactment came to be through a complex process of actors interacting with one another in the cultural context

of Icelandic norms such as *Þetta reddast* and “rowing the boat together.” It is in this complicated web of interactions that ethical decisions were made and then architected into the game itself. As I would firmly conclude at my final desk as an ethnographer, ethics were implicitly and explicitly interwoven into the architecting of *EVE Online*.

Chapter Seven: The Alcove

Standing Up At *Gróska*

It is 10:00 AM on Friday, July 10th, in the summer of 2020, and I am standing up at my final desk as an ethnographer, this one located in Team Aurora’s new corral in CCP’s recently opened office inside *Gróska* (See Figure 19). No longer a cement husk, but rather an almost fully-functioning office, it is now home to CCP Games’s headquarters, the former office having been emptied out by a small team in April. Standing here now in *Gróska*, I think about how the barren office floors at the Grandi office stood as an eerily material metaphor for the feeling of isolation and abandonment that many were feeling because of the pandemic.

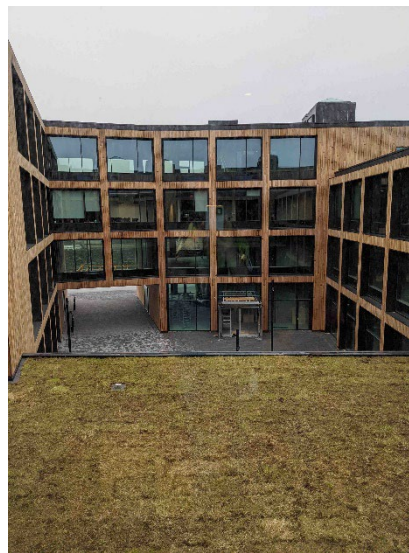


Figure 19. The view from inside the CCP offices at *Gróska*

Returning to the present, I think about how I left my desk at Þórsgata 27 about a month ago when the new building opened to employees in early June, having done so with surprisingly little fanfare. For the first time in five months, the entire team has returned to the office and each of us is actually standing up to deliver our daily update. As each team member gives their daily update, all related to the latest iteration of the New Player Experience (NPE) we have worked hard to release, I

think back on the past four months and how, despite also working as part of the Project Discovery team, I have grown deeply embedded with Team Aurora and very fond of each of my teammates. Supporting the team as their dedicated User Researcher, I have led four further studies on aspects of the New Player Experience and with each study I have seen how the team “rows the boat together” in order to craft a meaningful tutorial experience for new players. Simultaneously, I have continued to see how Icelandic norms such as “rowing the boat together” and *Þetta reddast* are applied in the development practices of CCP Games, even by non-Icelandic employees, in part because of directives from their Icelandic bosses.

As the daily stand-up ends, I see CCP Eagle standing in the nearby hallway. He waves to me and as I walk over he greets me, saying, “So Josh. It is here, let’s sit down and talk through this.” I smile and we sit down in a nearby meeting room. He closes the door and places a single sheet of paper in front of me. Glancing down, I see the bold letters I was hoping for: Offer Of Employment: User Researcher.

Over the past month, CCP Games, and CCP Eagle specifically, have worked to create and then offer me a full-time position with the company in light of my contributions as a Games User Researcher. The paper in front of me states that I will report to CCP Eagle, but work as an independent team of one before it goes on to declare relatively standard employment terms with a notable legal exception of being allowed full freedom to include any ethnographic data collected before September 25th, 2020 when writing my dissertation. I am ecstatic. I have transformed my ethnographic fieldwork into employment and stand to make an impact on *EVE Online* as a researcher and voice of the players. I sign the offer and shake CCP Eagle’s hand, eager to start work on August 24th, 2020 as the company’s first and sole User Researcher.

The path to my final desk as an ethnographer and my first desk as an employee was a surprisingly long one, with many stops along the way, but throughout the journey I observed CCP’s

Icelandic cultural context impact the ways in which its employees architect the game. By approaching and adjusting to indeterminate situations with Icelandic norms such as *Betta reddast* and “rowing the boat together,” CCP Games’s employees and *EVE Online* players both enacted a video game developer multiple that was shaped by its location in Iceland.

The Journey To Becoming A Player Researcher

In August of 2019, I set out to understand better the cultural specificity of CCP Games as an institution and corporation located in Iceland and founded by Icelanders in order to grapple with questions surrounding the cultural specificity of digital architects. To do this, I embedded myself within the institution as an ethnographer and researcher. Within this work, I have aimed to bring you, the reader, along with me as I transitioned from desk to desk and grew closer to the culturally intimate enactments of CCP Games.

My First Desk: The Island of Misfit Toys

My journey began, as detailed in Chapter 1, at my desk on the “Island of Misfit Toys,” a small corral outside of CCP Burger’s office where I sat alongside other CCP employees who had no dedicated team. From this desk, I began to see how CCP was an institution multiple. Within my first 72 hours, CCP was enacted as both a party organizer who threw a raucous Kick-Off party for its employees, as well as a mundanely corporate employer who expected its employees to be present no later than 10:00 AM in the morning the following Monday. I also observed how CCP was enacted as an employer—and an Icelandic one at that. Here I began to see how the cultural context of CCP Games as an Icelandic company impacted its quotidian practices.

Beyond the employer benefits that one might also expect to find at an American video game development studio such as free meals, learning and development budgets, and company-subsidized

trips, there were generous child-leave policies sponsored by the Icelandic government. What struck me when first learning of these policies, though, was that they were used regularly. Unlike their Silicon Valley counterparts, employees here took leave without so much as a second thought about how it might impact their work, their ongoing projects, or their teams. While I did not observe this directly at my first desk, it would come to be clear through my time at CCP Games that while the employee benefits CCP provided were somewhat above average, in part because of the requirements of Icelandic employment law, it was how they were used that was truly culturally specific to the Icelandic office.

Looking at the company from a different perspective, from that of the players of *EVE Online*, I observed them enact CCP as a “Chaosbringer” and “Destroyer” who had purposefully wrought chaos in their virtual world with, according to the players, “No clear rhyme or reason, just to mess with us.” A week later, while in Berlin at a World Tour event, I watched as players enacted a CCP Games that was nothing like this “Chaosbringer,” but rather was a “komischer Kumpel,” an odd friend. To these German players, CCP Games made some missteps at times, but always had the best interests of players at heart. The company was strange at times, sure, but they were a “buddy,” perhaps only odd because they were Icelandic, after all.

My Second Desk: Team Psycho Sisters

A month after starting at CCP Games, my desk was moved and I found myself in Team Psycho Sisters’ corral, one glass wall over from my first desk. Here, I began to learn more about the company’s history and how it came to be a household name in Iceland. Looking to the archival data the company held, as well as other sources, I discovered that CCP Games began as a small group of friends working to create their dream product, a massively-multiplayer online game, though to do so required them to first create and then profit from what is now one of the most popular boardgames

in Iceland, *Hattuspil*. This enactment of CCP Games as a ‘ragtag small group of friends’ is still present today, despite the company being quite large by Icelandic standards and very well-known within the country.

From this desk I also dove deeper into the history of what several scholars have written about when speaking to CCP Games and *EVE Online*, its Council of Stellar Management, a democratically-elected player council meant to oversee CCP’s development efforts and keep them in check. Founded because of an internal controversy that ultimately came to light after being leaked to the players by an employee, the language used by CCP’s CEO Hilmar when founding this council was rooted in Icelandic tradition. Hilmar reacted to the unexpected need for such an institution by hearkening to the company’s Icelandic cultural context, noting that the players elected to the council would serve as *EVE Online*’s *goðar*, each a *goði* of their constituency.

While certainly not ‘discovered’ at this desk, I use this vantage point of my second desk to dive into the theoretical framework that helped me understand the ethnographic material I was collecting and thereby analyze my observations. As the language of enactment throughout this work suggests, Marina Welker’s seminal monograph on corporate entities as enacted and multiple was a cornerstone of my theoretical approach to analyzing CCP Games (2014). At the same time, I found it lacking an element of cultural specificity and nuance. While Welker discussed at length how corporations are multiple and each enactment exists alongside the others, she failed to address how the cultural context of those enactments shaped them, despite her ethnographic material originating from two unique cultural contexts, those being Indonesia and the United States of America.

Where Welker highlights the importance of understanding corporations as multiple, I draw on Larkin (2013) and Malaby (2009) to highlight the fact that technology makers matter, as they architect the digital infrastructures upon which we have built our increasingly online social lives. Into these infrastructures they architect their own conceptualizations of ethics, as Gillespie (2018)

observes with Twitter and Taylor (2018) confirms with her research on Twitch. Furthermore, as Lambek (2010) reminds us, ethics are a part of ordinary life. I would extend this argument to claim that the ethical designs of digital infrastructures are often ‘obfuscated’ by their creators, in part because said creators have only recently begun to grapple with how their work shapes the social lives of other actors.

Given the implications ethically-imbued digital infrastructures hold for social life, it is no surprise that I also draw on Falk Moore’s work (1978/2000) to grapple with questions of regulation, situational adjustment, and indeterminacy as they arose within my fieldsite. While Falk Moore’s theoretical concepts of social action served me well, they did not account for moments wherein social actors would draw upon a cultural norm such as *Betta reddast* to simultaneously situationally adjust to an unexpected situation, but in doing so immediately regulate the social life they are experiencing. These norms served not only as tools with which to situationally adjust, but also simultaneously as regulatory dictums with which to declare the corporate world as another standard part of social life within Iceland.

This understanding of social life within Iceland was in part afforded to me because of my access to what Herzfeld (2016) terms the “culturally intimate.” As I grew more embedded as a researcher within CCP Games, its employees trusted me more and began to share their frustrations with the ‘status quo’ of certain corporate practices, simultaneously acknowledging that they were, “just how things are done here,” as was the case with a Danish colleague who commented on the fact that “everyone is always ten minutes late, which gives me pre-meeting nap times.” Through Herzfeld’s lens, I was able to simultaneously grasp how these culturally intimate revelations in turn impacted the way in which CCP Games employees worked from a shared understanding of the world around them in order to architect the virtual world of *EVE Online* while enacting the company multiple.

By combining a historical understanding of CCP Games as an enacted corporation and analyzing my ethnographic observations through a synthesis of these ideas, I was able to begin grappling with the question of how the cultural context of corporate institutions that architect digital infrastructures impacts the ways in which they undertake said architectural processes. Nonetheless, as I came to see in the field, corporations are also culturally embedded social actors. The Icelandic context of CCP Games matters.

The Vestibule & The Viking Ship

Written not from the vantage point of a desk but rather from the Sun Voyager statue on the shoreline of Reykjavík, my third chapter dove more deeply into the Icelandic context of CCP Games through the example of a “No Downtime” initiative, wherein the company enacted its Icelandic identity in order to explain why they were undertaking a new effort to remove a mandatory daily reset of the virtual world of *EVE Online*. Here, drawing on Kristín Loftsdóttir’s notion of nation-branding, I highlight how CCP Games engaged in a similar form of nation-branding with regards to its development efforts.

It was in observing this “No Downtime” initiative take place that I began to see how effortlessly CCP’s Icelandic employees, and the company as a whole, interwove the company’s self-proclaimed “Icelandicness” into their development and marketing efforts. This was also understood by the company’s foreign employees, referred to by the Human Resources team as ‘Always,’ who often spoke to the company’s Icelandic nature as a source of frustration.

Returning to my next desk, one located in a vestibule in front of Team Five-0’s team corral, I observed the quotidian practice of game development and participated in it firsthand by joining a development team working on improving *EVE Online*’s ‘New Player Experience’ (NPE). Through my work with Team Five-0 I grew to be seen as a ‘true CCPer’ because I contributed to the

company's efforts to develop its game. Simultaneously, I came to understand that corporations are not only enacted in multiplicitous manners, but also simultaneous ones. That is to say, CCP Games, and all corporations, are enacted as 'more than one but less than two.' CCP Games was simultaneously a "caretaker of *EVE Online*" concerned with balancing the game for veteran players while also a "welcoming host" to new players, creating an NPE geared towards incentivizing new players to play the game. At the same time, CCP Games is being enacted as a "Research Driven CCP Games," keen to conduct user experience research on its in-development projects.

At my fourth desk, I came to see how all of these enactments existed alongside one another and how the institution was accordingly more than a singular entity, but at the same time, never more than a coalescing of enacted institutions. It was in participating in these various enactments that I came to be closer to the employees of CCP and ultimately seen as one, granted my own dedicated desk and work machine accordingly.

A Changed World & The Move To Þórsgata 27

I continued my work from the vantage point of The Vestibule, observing how CCP Games was enacted multiplicitously and simultaneously through my work with Team Five-0 and Team Aurora following an internal reorganization of the development teams. I also came to discover how *Betta reddast*, or "it works itself out," was bandied about as a norm upon which to operate as a development studio, particularly when unpleasant and unexpected reactions to new features such as the red dot arose, and how this frustrated many of the company's foreign-born employees. Additionally, I undertook a project in order to support the People Experience team that showed me how CCP was enacted as a caring employer. Helping that team understand foreign employees' lives and frustrations was my final project from CCP Games's office at *Grandagarður*, for a couple of

weeks after delivering the results, everything radically changed as the world shut down due to COVID-19.

Having relocated to my bedroom desk at Þórsgata 27, the rest of the chapter details my work as part of Team Project Discovery, through which I came to see how CCP employees deployed the concepts of “rowing the boat together as a community” and *Þetta reddast* when engaging with the aleatory nature of their social lives amid the pandemic, or the development process for Project Discovery: COVID-19. Simultaneously, I came to see how these norms were utilized both to exert a form of social agency over unexpected circumstances, but also served as regulatory dictums for said circumstances. Interpreted broadly, the norms themselves were used by CCP’s social actors both to dance between control and adaptation to the contingent world they lived, but also to mandate how said actors were “meant to act” given the indeterminate circumstances in front of them. It was in their interpretation of what *Þetta reddast* meant that CCP employees varied. Nevertheless, the Icelandic norm was hearkened to when the unexpected occurred.

At the same time, I was observing ethical decision-making and subsequent architecting firsthand. CCP Games as an employer undertook a massive effort to equip its employees with working computers, desks, and chairs at home. It did this to encourage employees to continue producing and laboring for the company, but also to show genuine care by going “beyond what is required” because of its self-proclaimed mission to “care for each other, since that’s what is done in Iceland,” in the words of CCP Horsewhisperer.

Beyond how the company treated its employees, CCP’s senior leadership also greenlit the development of a mini-game dedicated to helping COVID-19 research efforts. I took part in this project and saw how its mission was at the forefront of every discussion about it, even when development grew messy. This was because CCP’s leadership had committed to the project due to its potentially benevolent impact on COVID-19 research. In undertaking this project alongside my

team, I saw both how Icelandic norms were incorporated into the company's development practices, as well as how the company made ethical commitments such as creating a non-revenue generating mini-game tailored towards combatting COVID-19. Through this time, I observed how CCP's Icelandic context mattered, as did the ethical decisions made by its leaders, as well as by the project's team as we worked to create and launch a mini-game addled with development hurdles.

Revisiting My Desks & What I Observed

Ultimately, my journey through my four desks led me to my fifth desk, the one in Team Aurora's corral at *Grófska*, where I received an offer of employment from CCP Games to help them create a UX Research discipline within the company. From this final vantage point, I looked back on my time at CCP Games and noticed that there were two major themes to be found within my ethnographic data: The first was of the nuanced manner in which social actors danced between control and adaptation in regularly shifting circumstances, often doing so by binding themselves up in culturally normative claims. The second was the impact of cultural context on corporate entities, and accordingly of the impact of said cultural context on how such corporate digital infrastructure architects embed ethics into those selfsame digital infrastructures.

On Simultaneous Regulation & Situational Adjustment

While developing a video game, the social actors bound to CCP Games as a corporation regularly navigated questions of agentic control and adjustment in the often-shifting social landscape in which they resided. Throughout my time at CCP, I regularly heard and observed social actors engage with indeterminate moments by pointing to Icelandic cultural norms. CCP Horsewhisperer, for example, told me that CCP's reaction to the pandemic was one of care because "rowing the boat together" is "how things are done here [in Iceland]." Similarly, while conducting my second user

test, CCP Eagle assured me that despite two participants simply not showing up to participate, the test would be fine because “these things always work themselves out.” In my own work as a Designer and Researcher for Project Discovery: COVID-19, I myself once uttered *Betta reddast* to a teammate when the tutorial was not coming together because we simply did not understand the request being made of us by the scientific team.

In each of these moments, all of them unexpected hurdles, the social actors involved *situationally adjusted* to an indeterminate moment by hearkening to dictums rooted in Icelandic cultural norms. These dictums, those of “rowing the boat together” and *Betta reddast* were tactically deployed. Whether or not they were a true situational adjustment or a regulatory claim depended on their context and, in at least two of these cases, the claim that “it will work itself out” was simultaneously regulatory and a situational adjustment. In regulating, the notion of *Betta reddast* allowed social actors to adjust to the unexpected situation in front of them. Itself a flexible concept, this cultural norm was deployed as a call to recognize that the indeterminate happens, but that there is always a solution to the indeterminacy and that the situation will resolve itself.

This nuanced interweaving of a cultural norm as simultaneously regulatory and a tool for adjustment aided me in understanding that social life is nuanced and complex, comprised of moments both regulatory and to be adjusted for, at times simultaneously. Intriguingly, these moments at CCP Games were also often tied to the company’s situated location within the cultural context of Iceland.

On “Being Icelandic” & How That Shapes *EVE Online*’s Development

Accordingly, the second thread with which I grappled was that of the ‘Icelandicness’ of CCP Games and how the cultural specificity of a corporation ought to be considered when analyzing it from an ethnographic lens. Culture matters. This much we know from the disciplinary history of

Anthropology. Yet that same history has taught us to treat this shared understanding of norms and means by which to interact with the world with careful nuance. Accordingly, while I was relatively quick to observe how CCP Games came to exist as an institution multiple by means of social actors projecting their myriad understandings of the corporation CCP Games onto its existence, thereby ‘enacting’ it accordingly, I struggled with how to consider the company’s Icelandic origins and situatedness.

In my very first week at CCP Games, I observed how various social actors approached and interpreted the corporation of CCP Games differently, thereby realizing it as a multiplicitous social actor unto itself. Existing simultaneously as “Chaosbringer,” “Caring Employer,” and “*komischer Kumpel*,” CCP was clearly multiple and simultaneously so. I have further demonstrated this multiplicity in my fourth chapter, through the analysis of my first foray into working on the NPE. It is clear that corporations such as CCP Games are multiplicitously enacted and exist as social actors in a state of ‘more than one but less than two.’ Welker’s conceptualization holds water accordingly and aids us in understanding how to make sense of these simultaneous depictions of the corporate entities that comprise part of our social landscape.

Where this concept founders, however, is in moments such as the “No Downtime” effort. In these moments, and in others such as the company’s response to abrupt COVID-19 changes, how social actors hearken to the cultural specificity of their institution comes into play. At CCP Games, both “No Downtime” videos featured Icelandic scenery, one including a live volcano that was heralded as the source of power for the company’s server-related technical experiment. Although clearly not the source of the energy that powers *EVE Online*’s servers, it was Icelandic imagery that the company used to explain why and how they were able to conduct their server experiment. The company could have opted to simply write a brief blog explaining that global server hardware had advanced and they wanted to allow players around the globe more playtime. Instead,

they tapped into shared imaginings as to what makes Iceland the nation-state and cultural community that it is and then projected those imaginings onto the “No Downtime” project. Icelandic cultural imagery was at play in the “No Downtime” initiative and in CCP Games being enacted as “experimental pioneer” accordingly.

Similarly, while working on the NPE with Team Five-0, I observed how the team proudly displayed a sign declaring that “*Þetta reddast* is not a sustainable development strategy,” while simultaneously encouraging one another that, “We’ll make it work,” when development hurdles cropped up because, “it always works itself out.” Sometimes stated with a slight hint of sarcasm, the team members, only two of them Icelandic, nevertheless encouraged me to embrace this mindset when we conducted our first user test on their Daily Login Incentive feature. I watched as they confirmed that this approach was “how things work here,” and ultimately, things did work out for that test, to much success. In this instance, I saw the cultural specificity of CCP Games as a corporation ‘born in’ Iceland and created by Icelanders come into play as to how work should be done at the company, even by non-Icelandic employees. CCP’s history as an Icelandic company mattered.

While I observed a number of other instances of employees, *EVE Online* players, and even residents of Iceland who I consider friends refer to CCP as “Icelandic” in nature when enacting the corporation in their own ways, it was through my work on Project Discovery that I came to realize that a robust treatment of a corporation’s cultural situatedness best empowers us to understand its ethical commitments and accordingly engage with how digital infrastructure architects such as CCP Games shape our digital lives.

Project Discovery: COVID-19 came to be because CCP Games’s senior leadership understood their role as *EVE Online*’s caretakers through the lens of the company’s Icelandic origins and nature as a corporate entity that “cared for the community around it.” CCP Burger and the

leadership team understood that the project “could do real good for the world,” and that, “that’s what CCP Games is about...” because “in Iceland, we all row the boat.”

To rely solely on Welker’s understanding of corporations as multiple would ignore the cultural nuance of these sorts of decision-making processes and depictions of CCP Games. Accordingly, I suggest we augment our understanding of corporate institutions by reminding ourselves that their cultural context not only matters, but fundamentally shapes the way in which said institutions are enacted both by those within and outside of the corporation. Analyzing the cultural specificity of corporate enactments better enables us to analyze said enactments with nuance while also addressing how the social stage upon which we all act impacts both human actors such as employees and non-human actors such as corporations. The quotidian practices of CCP Games and its employees were shaped by the company’s ‘Icelandicness,’ which in turn impacted how the company understood its role as *EVE Online*’s caretaker and architect.

This nuanced understanding of corporate cultural specificity impacts not only our ability to more thoroughly and carefully analyze the corporations responsible for crafting the digital infrastructures of our lives, but also aids said corporations in reflecting on their own ethical and cultural commitments. In understanding that CCP Games is bound up in its Icelandic cultural situatedness, I was better able to serve as the company’s Player Researcher because I understood how to operate within the cultural framework that shaped the corporation’s practices. Similarly, academics of this space would do well to consider the cultural context of game developers when analyzing the games they make. Without this facet of analysis, our understanding of the social actors that shape our digital lives lacks nuance, depth, and proper contextual understanding.

Looking Forward To Other Desks

Through my work, I have realized the significance of a nuanced interpretation of the social acts of adjustment and regulation, alongside the critical importance of acknowledging the cultural specificity of digital infrastructure architects in order to enable deeper understandings of how they engage in architecting our digital lives. Culture matters and the minute acts of social action as they point towards cultural norms matter accordingly. There remain, however, several avenues of further exploration, both within my ethnographic material and beyond it.

During my time at CCP Games, I was made well aware of the other two CCP Games offices, one in London and one in Shanghai, each operating as an independent entity, both legally and practically. While I am not at liberty to discuss the specific projects of either location, except to acknowledge that Shanghai is responsible for the mobile game *EVE Echoes* and the Chinese server required to run *EVE Online* in China, it is worth noting that neither location worked on the primary server of *EVE Online*, known as 'Tranquility'.

Still, these offices existed and their employees attended Global Staff Meetings, as well as the annual Kick-Off. Understanding how multiculturally situated corporations are enacted and how these multiple cultural contexts impact the practices of the corporation as a whole, if at all, is an area ripe for ethnographic investigation. Just as Welker failed to speak at length to how her Sumbabwan interlocutors and the American-based Newmont employees understood one another through a cultural lens, I too have not managed to address this aspect of life at CCP Games within this work. It is clear that culture matters and the cultural specificity of a corporation matters, but a question that remains is that of how multiple cultural contexts impact the quotidian practices of independent corporate entities that are nonetheless interconnected.

Similarly, during my time at CCP Games I would observe moments in which someone would attempt to enact the authority of the institution, only for that enactment to founder either

directly or upon further inspection by another social actor. For instance, later in my fieldwork at CCP Games, the Player Experience team received a complaint from a trans player looking to change the gender of their character because of the dysphoria they experienced when playing their former character.

The team asked in an open internal channel if this was possible. I began investigating in my role as Player Researcher. An employee who has opted to remain unnamed took several hours of his time outside of work to investigate the matter and quickly found a solution to the problem, crafting said solution and making it “launch ready,” requiring only testing and approval by a member of the team then responsible for Character Creation. The matter would have taken a day or two of development time. When raised with the team, a singular individual stalled the fix, citing that CCP Games would not be doing this, in part because it could be seen as a politically-motivated change to the game. A short conversation with CCP Burger later and the matter was declared an unintentional bug, which allowed the proposed solution to go forward. Despite a singular employee attempting to enact CCP Games as opposed to the change, CCP Burger instead determined this was not the case. It is worth noting, however, that despite this approval and a clear missive to implement this change, it remains to be implemented into *EVE Online*, instead, the code solving this problem is stored on the company’s internal project management platform as the answer to a bug report.

In this instance, one employee sought to ‘wield the authority’ of CCP Games to prevent a change to the game’s character modification system. Another more senior employee, CCP Burger, counteracted this claim with his own enactment. These questions of hierarchical enactment and strategic deployment of CCP Games as its own social actor and entity remain underexplored within my work, though I hope to take them up in a forthcoming article on the question of CCP Games, *EVE Online*, and gender.

Finally, the matter of COVID-19 is only lightly touched upon within this work. While I have sought to capture the impact and surprise of the pandemic in my writing, there remains much to be said about how this virus impacted the company's quotidian practices of development as the entire workforce shifted to working from home, with some shifting to working entirely remotely from abroad. This, in turn, brings my claim that culture matters back into frame. Given the cultural context of CCP Games impacts how its employees engage in digital architecting, the sudden rise of multiply-located employees, and therefore multiculturally situated enactors of CCP Games, comes into play as an issue of import. Further investigation into how entirely and partially remote digital infrastructure architects operate is well merited given the shifting face of labor in light of the pandemic.

Nevertheless, these questions come into focus in part because of what I discovered in the field at CCP Games. Cultural specificity impacts how digital experiences are crafted and how those who craft them navigate their social stages while undertaking said work.



Figure 20. The author's final desk, that of the Player Researcher, shortly before leaving CCP in 2022

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Appendix: Informed Consent At CCP Games

Holistically informed consent is a pillar of the anthropological enterprise. Anyone whose data is collected ethnographically should understand the nature of data collection, data analysis, the presentation of the data, as well as how they may be impacted by their data being made public. Every person written about within this dissertation has consented to participating in an informed manner and the chosen method of collecting informed consent for the study was approved by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Institutional Review Board under the case 19.A.307-UWM.

Instead of collecting documented informed consent, which in many cases would be the only link back to individuals who participated in the study, I collected verbal opt-in informed consent. To do so, shortly after joining CCP Games in early October of 2019, I presented an overview of my project and distributed the information sheet seen below (See Figure 21) at a companywide Global Staff Meeting. In this presentation, I covered my research questions and aims, noting that anyone who had not already been contacted about the project but would like to participate in it was welcome to speak to me. For those whose data I had already collected, I'd held a similar session of a smaller size with them individually before beginning data collection. The meeting was recorded and distributed to the entire company. For employees who joined after the meeting was held, their manager informed them of my existence, gave them a shortened version of the information sheet below, and encouraged them to consider whether or not they would like to participate in the study.

When it came time to analyze the data and produce results, participants who appeared in the data were informed that they would appear in the dissertation, as well as given access to the vignettes or conclusions that included them. They were given the ability to opt-out of appearing in the dissertation, although they were not given the ability to edit the vignettes. This dissertation was a project of interlocution between myself, the employees of CCP Games, and the players of *EVE Online* where relevant.

Informed Consent Document (ICD)
Information Sheet
Caretaking of Cyberspace: CCP Games & Symbiosis in EVE Online

I am Josh Rivers, of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I am conducting a study of how cultural beliefs and ethics are architected into digital platforms such as EVE Online. I would appreciate your participation in this study, as it will assist us in understanding the process of architecting cyberspace, game design, and digital platforms more broadly.

If you agree to be in this study, I request that you be available for one semi-structured narrative interview, lasting approximately 1 hour. I will work with you to schedule a mutually convenient time for the interviews. I also request that you allow me to observe you as you carry out your job tasks as part of your team over a total of approximately 2 months. Approximately 65 people will participate in the study. This study will take place between August 2019 and August 2020. *As an ethnographer, I am interested in the broad range of behavior in and around CCP Games in order to best understand how projects get done. Accordingly, observations and interviews will focus on your work life writ large.* There are no known risks associated with your being in the study. There are no direct benefits for participation. Indirectly, it is possible that you will develop a greater understanding of some aspects of game design.

The interviews and observation that you participate in will be treated confidentially. There will be no way to link you to your responses. Direct data from this study will not be shared. Only grouped (confidential) or anonymous data will be presented or published. Interview and observational data will be kept on an encrypted and password protected laptop before being transferred to an encrypted cloud server, both of which only I can access, until 5 years after the completion of the study, when said data will be destroyed. No other researchers will have access to this data, ever. Similarly, other members of the company, including directors and other management, will never have access to this original data. Identifiers will not be retained after interview recordings are transcribed or handwritten notes are entered into my word-processing program. I will not share direct access to your responses with anyone else, including other research participants, other persons connected to your company or in the computer game industry.

You do not have to be in the study. No one will know if you choose to participate in this study or not. You can withdraw from this study for any reason. There is no penalty for withdrawing. Data collected before withdrawal remains part of the study. Once the study is completed, I would be glad to give the results to you. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please contact me:

Josh Rivers
jwrivers@uwm.edu

If you would like to learn more about your rights as a research participant, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
414-229-3173
irbinfo@uwm.edu

If you have any complaints, you may choose to contact my PhD advisor or the Institutional Review Board:

Dr. Thomas Malaby
Department of Anthropology
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
PO Box 413
Milwaukee, WI 53201
malaby@uwm.edu

Institutional Review Board
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Figure 21. Informed Consent Document, Information Sheet