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Barbarians at the Imperium Gates: Organizational Culture and Change in EVE Online

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Abstract

This article looks at organizational culture and identity of different organisations in *EVE* Online, using a combination of critical historical and ethnographic approaches. We argue that it is helpful to understand major organizations in EVE as analogous to early polities, in terms of the ways in which claims to leadership and power are demonstrated (for example through the writing of history). Yet, as we show, these organizations have strong cultures which demonstrate resilience and a resistance to top-down cultural change, meaning that the successful implementation of such change is governed by rank-and-file members rather than their leadership. We propose that the cultural (rather than political or social) nature of this resilience is centrally important in understanding how organizations in EVE function. This unity of practices and understanding allows *EVE's* major organizations to suffer huge losses to their position and prestige, and yet remain viable communities and potentially resurgent powers. This seems to challenge the 'social network'-type descriptions often used to explain the persistent groups seen in many online games.

1. Introduction

EVE Online (CCP Games, 2003) is a vast and complex virtual universe with few limitations on player action, known for the huge scale of interactions between players, for battles between tens of thousands of participants and for in-game thefts of the equivalent of thousands of real-world dollars. This has drawn the attention of players and games journalists alike to this world, and in particular to interactions between the game's large political organizations, known as alliances. In this article, we are concerned with the organizational cultural identity of two of the largest alliances, TEST Alliance (TEST) and the Goonswarm Federation (Goons). These have memberships of thousands of players and yet have sought further advantage through the creation and leadership of coalitions with other alliance groups. Of interest here is the Goons' historic leadership of the Clusterfuck Coalition (CFC), and TEST's formation of the Hopefully Effective Rookie Organization (HERO). Large player organizations in EVE are complex hierarchies, loosely based on modern day corporations and led by chief executive officers (CEOs). Their enduring nature (CFC, for example, was formed in 2011) is made possible through strong internal cultures, both created by and embedded within their approach to the game, their media, their literature, and their online interactions.

Research elsewhere (e.g., Cărătărescu-Petrică, 2015) has demonstrated that the nature and sustainability of such player organizations are heavily affected by game architecture; different games, therefore, set out different requirements, and afford different kinds of social groups. While work has taken place exploring the social dynamics within so-called 'theme park' games, such as World of Warcraft (e.g. Williams et al., 2006), the distinctiveness of games like EVE suggests that we cannot treat World of Warcraft as a model example, and that other approaches are necessary. Here we explore the construction and change of group cultural identity in EVE, and the role of group leadership and group members (and some non-members) in these processes, in order to understand how different players respond to such construction, and how able they are to incorporate or reject cultural change in the online world. We focus on the activities of the Goons/CFC and TEST/HERO, in the context of a sequence of conflicts known collectively within the EVE community as the 'Fountain War' and 'World War Bee'. We consider how we can understand the distinction between 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' organizational change in EVE Online, and what this means for our understanding of online (game) worlds.

We argue that in line with established positions in the literature on leadership in organizations more generally, success or failure of cultural identity change in EVE is often misattributed to leadership when in fact the situation is more complex. While leaders have a great deal of control of the culture of a group where that is created through symbolic meaning, such as through iconography or naming conventions, the expressed culture of the group reflected in its established norms is controlled to a far greater extent by the actions of its membership. In effect, the implementation and effectiveness of what we might call 'policy changes' within an organization are ultimately governed not by its leadership, but by its rank-and-file members. Furthermore, this expressed culture can demonstrate remarkable long-term resilience in the face of significant threats and pressure, which seems to challenge the 'social network'-type descriptions often used to explain the persistent groups seen in many online games (e.g. Ducheanaut & Yee, 2009).

With this 'culturalness' in mind, we also contend that, although EVE constructs player organizations through the language of corporations (a language also used by Williams and colleagues in their description of guild mergers – 2006, p. 350), the game's conditions mean there is much to be learned from considering major game alliances as polities as well as companies. This is particularly helpful here in interrogating the process of identity (re)construction in CFC in the aftermath of the Fountain War. We take a comparative historical perspective to suggest that there are similarities in the cultural conditions which underpin temporally disparate activities (see Beccalossi, 2017, p. 48), building on historian Norman Davies' observation (2012, pp. 735-6) that "the dynastic

agglomerations of the medieval period may best be understood by analogy to the international corporations of later times". For EVE Online, then, we propose the converse; for if, as Davies indicates, states are 'political companies' subject to 'mergers', 'demergers' and 'liquidation' (2012, 176), we see it as equally constructive to consider EVE's political companies as analogies of states.

We begin our analysis with this historical work to explore a strong leadership intervention in symbolic culture, before moving on to examine more closely the role of group members in identity reconstruction through the postings and propaganda pieces of TEST/HERO. At heart are questions about individuals' collective tolerance for change: what was seen as permissible change, what was seen as negatively affecting the group's cultural identity? We complete this analysis with the discussion of some longer-term effects of these changes in organizational identity, connecting directly with player responses to issues of monetization of their gameplay activities, and reflecting on the rise of the Moneybadger Coalition (MBC) and the collapse of The Imperium. We hope by doing so to contribute to debates in the field about the nature of player organizations, cultures, and identities in online games.

2. Literature Review

When players describe the reasons for their engagement with EVE Online's universe, many will list its single-shard architecture (in which all players play together rather than on separate servers), and the difficulty of mastering the game (Paul, 2011). Perhaps as a result of these features, player achievements are widely recognised among the game community, and credit accrues not only to the player but also to any organization of which they are a member and with which they identify.[1] Importantly, these identities can come to reflect aspects of a group's collective culture, and when they do so, two things occur. Firstly, the organization comes to be understood as a social actor in its right, into which players incorporate themselves to be able to communicate effectively with others (Weick, 1995). Secondly, the collective culture of the organization's members is recast as a set of social norms; 'symbols' of the group which can be used towards different ends. They can, for instance, be used as formal and informal systems of social control (Morrill et al., 1997), or to project organizational identity to outsiders (Barnett & Coulson, 2010).

When cultural conflicts develop, individuals are placed under additional pressure to accept - and incorporate themselves into - a greater group identity. In the online world, this pressure to conform is most commonly exercised through the use and policing of language (Cerulo, 1997). Members of both TEST and Goonswarm tend to interact in-game in much the same way as they would be expected to interact in the online forums that served as the root of those organizations.[2] It should be noted, for instance, that griefing by "Goons" occurs in other virtual spaces as well, such as numerous recorded events in Second Life (Dibbell, 2008; Bakioglu, 2009). We understand that players experience the different identities that are available to them, and rank them, based on the pressures and the benefits they feel those identities present (Burke & Stets, 2009, Nakamura, 1995). Yet studies also suggest that those who cannot accept changes in the group identities of which they are a part may become vulnerable, feel threatened and, in significant cases, fight to re-establish the prior position (Weinreich, 1986, p. 301). Important in the success of such identities is a sense of shared history: changes in cultural identity are traumatic, and group identity is as much about a sense of common past as it is about social norms (a relationship sometimes referred to as a myth-symbol complex; see Heather, 1998, p. 5 and Armstrong, 2009). At least in part, therefore, responses to cultural change rest upon the degree to which such changes "disturb the basic patterning of the cultural elements that make up the sense of continuity" (Smith, 1991, p. 25). Given the observation

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[1] On occasion, such recognition stretches beyond the EVE community, for example in the case of major stories around in-game theft (Geere, 2010), pirate actions (Foster, 2013), or large, organized military engagements ("Eve players", 2013).

[2] Both Goonswarm and TEST have their origins in online forum communities which pre-date their existence as EVE Online alliances, and broader Goon culture has recently been explored by Richard Page (2016).

that heads of organizations are frequently seen as absolute leaders, regardless of the actual political structure (Weber et al., 2001), it is also, perhaps, inevitable that internal cultural conflicts are often tied to an organization's core leadership.

The incorporation of identity into online play is something that can take many different forms, and evidence demonstrates that people perform a lot of social work to maintain a particular image of the self (Attrill & Jalil, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008). The demographics of players also affect the process of incorporation, as there is generally to be some overlap between a person's out-of-game experiences and their in-game actions (Yee, 2006). In the case of EVE Online, a game built around a very extreme form of capitalism, Western concepts of work and labor present themselves in the virtual world as well (Terranova, 2013). Equally, in thinking through a capitalist frame, we are invited to reflect on other identity constructions that emerge from this context, particularly those of Western nationalism in its connection to capitalist media forms (Anderson, 2006).

3. Methods

For this study, material pertaining to the Fountain War Kickstarter campaign and its aftermath, and the representation of the Imperium was collected through a systematic exploration of news posts, blog posts and forum postings to a selection of major EVE communication locales: news sites TheMittani.com, EVENews 24 and Crossing Zebras, the EVE Online official forums, a number of EVE developer and player blogs, the Fountain War project Kickstarter page, and the sub-Reddit /r/EVE. Material on TEST was collected during a two-year digitally ethnographic (Boellstorff et al., 2012) study of EVE Online players, focused on the social identity and social control mechanisms of large organizations in-game. This took the form of a participant observation study as a member of TEST (for an introduction to TEST, see Milik, 2016), in which interactions were recorded (with participant notification) using in-game chat logs and third-party VoIP programs. Throughout, publicly-available speeches, posts from the organizations' forums, and Reddit threads were used to understand the culture and opinions of group members.

Analysis of the data was performed through a combination of a modified version of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and comparative cultural history. Player identity and impression management were analyzed through a dramaturgical (Goffman, 1959) framework while linguistic interactions were analyzed through a combination of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and categorization analysis (Hester & Eglin, 1997), with analysis performed until saturation was reached in regards to players' responses to the Imperium's changes. In parallel, processes of identity formation and discourse production were identified and brought into dialogue with specified historical examples, in order to further understand the role played by historical interventions within a broader process of identity (re)construction. This combination of analytical tools allowed for a broader understanding of individual actions, as well as insight into the reasoning behind organizational and cultural changes.

4. Creating the Imperium: The Work of History

In April 2015, the news site TheMittani.com (TMC), named after the Goons' CEO, announced that the Clusterfuck Coalition (CFC) was no more. The coalition, which Goonswarm had long led, was changing its name and would henceforward be known as The Imperium. The post talked not only in terms of change but also of maturity; gone was the 'half-ass joke', the 'ragtag clusterfuck' which had been the CFC; this player polity had now transformed itself into what the author referred to as "a modern state in internet space with highways, borders, a loose federated system of government, networked communication systems, and innumerable social programs… a true space empire – an Imperium" (Vincent, 2015).

While the name change prompted relatively little comment in the EVE community at the time, by November 2015, when a Kickstarter campaign was launched to fund the writing of a book about the so-called 'Fountain War', a historic EVE conflict in which CFC had been victorious, the new name had come to hold far greater significance. Contextualised within a broader strategy which seemed to focus on cultural as well as nominative change, the book seemed to signal a move to 'rebrand' not only the present but also the past. As we have already suggested, a sense of a common past is central to the construction of group identities; the production of history, as a "shifting, problematic discourse" about that past (Jenkins, 2003, p. 31), is thus a key element in the process of identity definition. In re-envisioning CFC's past, therefore, the Fountain War book represented a major initiative in terms of CFC/Imperium culture, and serves as the starting point for our analysis of organizational cultural identity and cultural change in EVE Online.

It seems evident that the Fountain War book, originated by The Mittani to tell the story of a war in which he led his side to victory, was intended to serve a political purpose; akin, perhaps, to that of histories written in medieval polities. It was to occupy a similar space, for example, to Dudo of St-Quentin's eleventh century *Historia Normannorum* (History of the Normans), the first work of history commissioned by the Norman dukes about themselves, demonstrating not only their power but also their sophistication. This history reflected a narrative which rejected ideas of the Normans as pirates who made fools of themselves at court, and instead demonstrated their prowess in the contemporary political context, as a chosen Christian people (see Pohl, 2015). The Normans were thus involved in a 'rebranding' process, a process of identity creation which resituated the values and qualities that they privileged in a new mould (Webber, 2005), and in this their histories played a vital role. The history of the Fountain War, then, was to underpin the equivalent re-imagination of the CFC as The Imperium. Indeed, the Kickstarter campaign became a major ground of cultural struggle within and around CFC/The Imperium; and while, as we will demonstrate, the book campaign formed only a single, albeit significant part of a broad project, we might consider it a bellwether for that project's ultimate success or failure.

4.1. Imperial Entanglements

The formulation of The Imperium was a process characterized by association with the concept of imperial power, across a variety of registers. This (apparently conscious) strategy involved drawing connections between the new Imperium and a tradition of imperial power, and the imitation of the mechanics of (another, successful) empire, a legitimating practice readily understood in the medieval period, and described by Benjamin Pohl in his analysis of the Normans as *translatio et imitatio imperii* (2015, pp. 106-7, 126-9). The Imperium name is explicit in making this link. The post in which the name was announced was entitled "The Imperial March" (Vincent, 2015), with readers invited to choose a "favored Imperial metaphor" from a series of well-known empires. These included, from science fiction, Warhammer 40,000's Imperium of Man and Iain M. Banks' Culture; and, more reminiscent of the Normans' claims, "just straight up Rome [as] in each case, our victory comes from unity and discipline". Later, in a reader competition to create recruitment materials, the Persian empire of Cyrus joined the list.

As we have noted, however, this was a broad project, and efforts at *translatio et imitatio imperii* go significantly beyond the textual, appearing in imagery and structure. The announcement post included a picture of a humorous roleplaying moment, in which The Mittani was photographed ostensibly pledging allegiance to Maximilian Singularity VI, a roleplayer known as the 'Space Pope'. Maximilian, draped in what appears to be a stole, raises his hand in benediction over the head of The Mittani, who kneels before him, evoking the subordination the Holy Roman Emperor to the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church. This visual lexicon is drawn from a Western historical literacy which portrays the relationship accurately both in terms of symbolic and also practical terms:

much like the Pope, we can expect Maximilian Singularity to have little control over The Imperium's subsequent activity.

Further visual references can be found in The Imperium's adoption of the 'Black Eagle', ostensibly a joke at the outset, according to The Mittani's 'State of the Goonion' address (19 November, 2015), but one which quickly became, in The Mittani's words, a 'powerful' symbol. A heraldic device widely associated with power, the eagle clearly and directly referenced well-established imperial symbolism from a variety of historical contexts, and TMC offered t-shirts bearing this device for sale, tabards for the loyal and the interested alike.

In structural terms, clear overtones of imperial ideas were visible in the launch of a viceroyalty programme[3] (Lemba, 2015) to further exercise control over space without falling foul of sovereignty mechanics. As one writer remarked: "We started making parallels to Ancient Rome, Medieval Spain and the British Empire. The comparisons felt natural and somewhat accurate" (Blackfist, 2015). And in dealing with these borders, rhetoric also drew heavily on ideas of "barbarians" at the gates (as The Mittani's address had it). "We could visit the 'savages', 'enlighten' them and show them the true light of the Imperium" (Blackfist, 2015).

4.2. Power and History

Thus the Fountain War book was to be produced in the context of this broader 'imperial' project, the writing of history being a critically important act within the framework of *translatio et imitatio imperii* (Pohl, 2015, p. 119). The commissioning of the *Historia Normannorum* was evidence of dynastic power, and while the Fountain War book was to be a crowd-funded effort, the Kickstarter depended upon the profile of those involved for success. Perhaps ironically, however, it was precisely this profile which served to undermine the funding request as well. The attachment of The Mittani name made many people suspicious of the purposes of the work, and comments on blog posts and in Reddit threads reflected a concern that this was, in some manner, The Mittani using player history to make money (see below). As the campaign faltered, and criticism became increasingly unrestrained, TMC writers (among others) made attempts to defend the project but this seemed only to have negative effects. A post by Imperium diplomat Sion Kumitomo proving particularly inflammatory (2015b), and responses indicated that many players felt that The Imperium did not deserve the trust of the community in this venture (e.g. Javix, 2015).

The issue of trust was particularly acutely focused on the contents of the proposed book, and the extent to which this would be a fair retelling of events. This was in part a result of the awareness that The Mittani's alliance had won the Fountain War, but also that it had been a war of conflicting narratives (Raimo, 2015). Propaganda is, after all, an important and highly developed element of EVE play (Carter, 2015), and as one of us has noted elsewhere (Webber, 2016), EVE players demonstrate a developed sense of engagement with historical concerns around bias, truth and so forth. Players were clearly worried that the story that was told would be shaped by The Mittani's political motives, be a vanity project or, worse, "goon propaganda" (comments on Kumitomo, 2015a). Indeed, even after the book's author-to-be, Jeff Edwards, insisted that he was independent, these fears did not abate (see comments on Kumitomo, 2015b).

Some commentators went further in reflecting on the narrative function of the book. One suggested that "if you cast the CFC as the hero then it literally is a text book case of the hero's journey" (comment on The Mittani, 2015a); another, "I'm picturing a full set of Appendices a'la 'The Return of the King'... 'Appendix B: On the Descent of Mittens and the Line of Goonswarm CEOs'" (comment on Matterall, 2015); while a third reflected on the ways in which patronage has

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[3] Under the scheme, viceroys or governors were appointed to oversee the regions neighbouring Imperium-controlled space. Regional leaders received an ultimatum backed by military force: either pay tribute and receive a "benefits package", or "be evicted and replaced by someone who will" (Lemba, 2015).

historically distorted accounts of the past (Raimo, 2015). All of these cases suggest that other players were just as sensitive to the possible function of such a history as The Mittani himself, evincing faux surprise that "people don't want to fund The Mittanis version of 'De Bello Gallico'" (comment on Kumitomo, 2015b).

4.3. Revising the Past

Again, these ideas recall medieval dynastic histories. The *Historia Normannorum* served as a manifesto or declaration – a 'history' for the moment - which reconstructed the past in a teleological fashion to create a "usable past for the present" (Pohl, 2015, p. 258). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the EVE community evidenced such concern around the potential for "historical revisionism" (see, for example, Raimo, 2015), something only exacerbated by events around the use of The Imperium name. Even before the Kickstarter launched, some preview material was made available to allow backers a sense of the content that they would be paying for, and players were quick to note that this material referred to The Imperium prior to its existence, even though the alliance had been CFC for the whole of the period to which the book would refer. Notably, this approach was consistent across the Kickstarter activity, and the campaign included interviews with a number of people who backed the project in which every interviewee referred consistently to The Imperium in discussion, with 'CFC' nowhere in evidence.

During an Ask Me Anything (AMA) session on Reddit on 5 November 2015, Edwards was repeatedly asked about this issue, as part of more general discussion about the treatment of problematic names which, for example, included expletives or infringed third-party copyrights. While Edwards was consistent in his suggestion that some names would have to be changed in order to deal with such issues, and that he would consult the players in question about character name changes, his view on CFC and The Imperium varied across the discussion:

> I actually think that it's going to be the Clusterfuck Coalition. EVE players feel pretty strongly about leaving the names as-is, so I'll do that except when a change is unavoidable (Edwards, 2015, /cwpmcoj).

> I'm leaning toward the Imperium at the moment, but not because I'm afraid of swearing. (Fuck no!) I just think that Imperium works better for a wider audience who's not familiar with EVE (Edwards, 2015, /cwpn1m5).

It is perhaps significant that only the second of these responses was reported on TheMittani.com (Arrendis, 2015a). This might suggest that Edwards' view perhaps diverged from the front put forward in the campaign as a whole. Certainly, in response to questions about his association with The Mittani, Edwards was forthright: "I don't know what the Mittani might have said about the book, but I can tell you that he's not writing it. Nor is it subject to his approval" (Edwards, 2015, /cwpmt1c).

Yet there is clearly common ground in the understanding that names are important here. For Edwards, this seems principally about producing a believable fiction which 'works' for its readers, with the implication that names need to be neither offensive nor silly. For The Mittani, however, there is apparently a gravity and seriousness about The Imperium which goes beyond that, as he declared in the aforementioned State of the Goonion speech: "We are the fucking Imperium, we are not a bunch of [losers] and bandwagoners like all the cool kids and their stupid cat names".

More general interest in the factual accuracy of the account was also visible in the AMA, and Edwards was asked about this a number of times as well. It is evident from the broader discussion that members of the community had markedly different attitudes towards the nature of this work, divisions perhaps enhanced by the proclamation on the Kickstarter page that this would be a work in

"a completely new genre: sci-fi non-fiction" ("Fountain War Book", 2015). Much like 'The Imperium', this phrase was used repeatedly during the campaign (for example in the interview with Pierce Brown), yet the historical nature of the work is also heavily promoted, adverts for the Kickstarter carrying the tagline "Your story. Your history. MAKE SURE IT IS TOLD".

The conceptual tension this created was evident, as people compared the Fountain War book to Andrew Groen's successful Kickstarter,[4] pointing out that Groen's book is a historical documentary and this was not (comments on The Mittani, 2015b), but desiring factual accuracy nonetheless. As with naming, however, Edwards indicated that he was flexible on the issue, signaling the need to negotiate a careful balance:

> I do care about accuracy. I also care about storytelling. The trick is to find a way to make the two work together. This won't be a documentary or a research paper. It will be a novel. If it fails as a piece of fiction, it doesn't matter how accurate it is. Conversely, if the book alienates the player base with bullshit, it doesn't matter how entertaining the story is. I've got to find a way to tell the real stories in such a way as to captivate readers (Edwards, 2015, /cwpmt1c).

The nature of the work is perhaps captured best by Tarek Raimo, who refers to it as "docu-drama", after the fashion of modern televisual interpretations of historical events; but as he points out, the material created still constitutes a source and, potentially, the main reference point for future exploration of these events (Raimo, 2015). Indeed, it *would* be history, irrespective of its bias or inaccuracies, as a discourse about the past (Jenkins, 2003). Thus, the description "sci-fi non-fiction" serves as an attempt to capture precisely what sort of history it would be; a development on a question one of us has asked elsewhere about whether we should think about such work as history, fictional history or historical fiction (Webber, 2016).

As Raimo notes, this was EVE's first *commissioned* work of player history (Raimo, 2015). Thus although the Kickstarter failed, the exercise retained a veneer of power, even if The Mittani ultimately failed to persuade people who did not seem to like him very much to fund a story about his great deeds. There is perhaps some wisdom in one response to Kumitomo's defence of the project: "History is written by victors, so you write it up yourself and you don't whine and beg for funding by others" (comment on Kumitomo, 2015b).

4.4. Monetizing the Imperium: Power and Profit

To this point, though, the transformation of CFC into The Imperium seemed to have been successful, and the flow of organizational cultural change had overcome the obstacles set before it. While the Kickstarter may have failed, the organizational and power structures of the newly named Imperium seem to protect it from the shock of change, as they had historically in respect to changes in-game mechanics and threats from other player groups. The Imperium and their allies held sovereignty effectively throughout the cultural shift.

As we suggested earlier, however, this debate also included evidence of another important element in players' reaction to the Kickstarter for the Fountain War book – the concept of ownership. For this book represented not only a discourse about the past, but the *appropriation* of that past from the community ("*Your* story. *Your* history")[5] and, as a consequence, the effective monetization of players' in-game labor. While so-called "playbor" (Kücklich, 2009) is relatively common within the online gaming world, individuals who profit from these activities are often expected to keep their rewards within the virtual sphere. Here, The Mittani was seen to be attempting to move the profits of

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[4] Groen, a writer for Wired, ran a successful Kickstarter campaign entitled 'Empires of EVE: A History of the Great Wars of EVE Online' to produce a book about a specific period of EVE's history. This differed from the Fountain War project in attempting to be factually accurate, as opposed to a novelisation of past events.

[5] Our emphasis.

in-game exploits into the out-of-game world, breaking with norms established by EVE Online gamers.

Player news sources and Reddit threads can help spread knowledge but also help organize resistance movements and give voice to players who might otherwise simply remain silent in the face of a powerful leader like The Mittani. When the Fountain War book and linked organizational change were announced, it was the powerful negative response from The Imperium's enemies on Reddit that started the conversation about cultural change. This conversation ended up being carried back to the Goons' internal forums by members, as they began to question their own participation.

These reactions to the Kickstarter announcement help to highlight certain cultural aspects that are seen as being important by players, particularly those that engage in the forums and Reddit threads. For one, even as EVE Online is celebrated as a perfect example of laissez-faire capitalism by its players, the practice of spending money to succeed is only seen as acceptable where it concerns in-game currency. Real Money Trading (RMT), where advantage is gained in-game through the expenditure of out-of-game funds, is something that is frowned upon, and players often attempt to expose what they see as infractions of this principle. Many forum threads argue about ways to deal with 'botters,' players who run automated programs that generate ISK (EVE's in-game currency) to sell for real money on online sites. They are portrayed as not participating in the game in an appropriate manner, and the gains they make are seen as illegitimate. In the case of the Fountain War Kickstarter, players expressed concern that it was an attempt by The Mittani to make money outside the game.

As one Reddit user argued, The Mittani uses TheMittani.com (TMC) as his job, and thus conducts a form of RMT, as players are paid in in-game currency for news articles and opinion pieces, which in turn attract traffic from which The Mittani receives advertising revenue (much as with traditional media, therefore, The Mittani sells audiences to advertisers). The image above compares this model with other RMT schemes which have been disallowed by CCP. The Kickstarter campaign, due to the listed expenses, was seen as an attempt by The Mittani and TMC to generate greater funding and web-traffic by selling off the spirit and the past, and in effect the labor, of the Clusterfuck Coalition. This apparent RMT was seen as counter to the concept of EVE as a game, regardless of the economic system within it.

Many players who protested against the naming of the Imperium felt that it was linked with a change to the historic (Goon) culture of the CFC. As one member put it:

> Goons used to be a communist space pirate paradise, and has slowly turned into a monetized media empire and personality cult. It used to be a big group of nerds playing the game our way and it was a blast. I've noticed it starting to change after the Fountain War.

The sense that the players were no longer fighting for their team and their values, but rather for the profit of one person was linked to a sense that this game should not be a means for people to generate real-world money. An exchange between players not in the alliance reflected this:

> CFC used to be about defending the little guy. (in my opinion) Imperium is about fleecing the little guy. (in my opinion).

> Agreed. When the name changed from CFC to Imperium is when I saw the biggest shift in attitude and culture. Almost as if CFC wasn't marketable.

There was a feeling that the culture had moved away from being newbie-friendly to being focused on monetary gain and this was seen as a problem by many players. While the book proposal was put to players as a means to help generate more content in the game (by bringing in new players through the interest generated by the book), they responded that the cultural change to the

organization would lead to more players moving away from the game and in fact make it even more difficult for new players to enter the game, because the Imperium would be seen as less friendly to them.

4.5. Fighting the Imperium: Culture as Power

EVE Online is a game that is centrally about conflict. As such, an analysis of the difference between the CFC and the later Imperium in conflict is a useful measurement of the effectiveness of the organization. By bringing in player investment in terms of time and resources, the organization is only successful when the membership is active and interested. One of the CFC's greatest fights was with the HERO coalition, a joining of TEST and the Brave Newbies Initiative (BRAVE). These groups came together in response to the threat of CFC expansion into Delve, the territory owned by TEST at the time. During this time, the CFC had a singular culture that was entirely based upon the Something Awful foundation of Goonswarm. In combining two groups, however, the HERO coalition faced a crisis of culture. Even as the members recognized the external threats that their respective organizations faced, they demanded that HERO respected their prior organizational cultures; the resulting culture clash and the implied threat to the continuity of identity of both organizations proved a crisis just as substantial as the invasion itself. This is not a unique phenomenon, and many business and management programmes teach specifically how to address issues of cultural clash and resistance to organizational change (Reeves et al., 2008). In the universe of EVE Online, however, this case is an example of how the game context grants players the knowledge of their own power and allows their interests to compete with those in power for the future of the group.

At the heart of the HERO culture clash was the definition of "newbie friendly." Many of the largest organizations in EVE Online had succeeded through the recruitment and support of new players, using low-cost ships to swarm their opponents. The difference for BRAVE was that while these previous organizations were based heavily on a cultural identity that stemmed from previously established online communication tools (Something Awful forums and Reddit for the CFC and TEST respectively), BRAVE was built in opposition to these types of online cultures. TEST Alliance, in particular, encourages complete freedom of speech on the part of its members. This means that TEST propaganda is particularly well developed, but also that members were not expected to be concerned about offending others. In fact, during the time of this research, TEST had a monthly competition for the member who was able to generate the most "tears" (complaints) from other players.

BRAVE, however, established itself as being a safe and family-friendly place. In an effort to make the organization a safe place for newbies, the leaders of this group were focused on making sure that their members, particularly younger and female players, did not feel uncomfortable in this difficult game. In order to accomplish this, the group had rules limiting player speech, particularly in terms of sexually or racially-charged language. One specific example of this is the use of "Fleet Porn" in fleets by TEST members. Commonly, while waiting for a fleet to head out from a station (a wait that can take hours if the station is being camped and organization is poor), certain members will post links to pornographic pictures in fleet chat. In order to accommodate BRAVE members in joint fleets, TEST Fleet Commanders (FCs) set a Message of the Day (MotD) stating "If you need a Classy porn channel use TestPornPleaseIgnore. Please do not link porn in coalition fleet channels." By creating a new channel and attempting to regulate player action, the leaders of these groups attempted to modify the culture to increase the appeal of the organization. They expressed that this was necessary because TEST by itself would not be able to withstand a full attack from the CFC, but with the help of BRAVE, under the banner of HERO, they would be able to protect their sovereignty (sov).

This cultural change addressed the same objective as the CFC's name change to the Imperium, although focusing on in-game, rather than out-of-game, benefit. In the case of TEST, however, the attempted cultural change did not succeed. In fact, complaints about this change flooded the TEST Alliance forums. Some users felt that this was an attempt to move away from the culture of the organization, and particularly away from the ideals of free speech that served as a defining feature of Reddit. As one member put it "I don't want to win this war if we have to lose our culture." Other players stated that they would rather lose their sov than moderate themselves. The actions of players in fleet did not change, and dissent between BRAVE and TEST leaders on how to deal with breaches became a talking point for players who were in favour of abandoning HERO. Eventually, leaders and FCs in both BRAVE and TEST decided to dissolve their coalition, with TEST changing its leadership to a player who wanted to focus on preserving "TEST culture," and dropping (giving up) sovereignty. The cultural strength of the CFC in comparison with the joint HERO cultures indicates how important organizational unity is to organizational success in EVE Online.

After the name and cultural change within the CFC to make it into The Imperium, the dynamic within the organization can be seen as changing. In perceiving that they were being exploited by The Mittani and the newly-formed Imperium, rather than being a member of a powerful in-game organization, many members of the new organization felt like they weren't getting the support needed to conduct successful military operations in the game. This became highly visible during World War Bee, where a powerful in-game banker by the name of LennyKravitz2 funded a huge military operation in response to a challenge to his gambling empire that the group's cultural conflict

> Money Badger Coalition follows the same naming convention as the Honey Badger Coalition, a coalition of TEST, Pandemic Legion, and NC (the Northern Coalition) acting against the CFC. This prior coalition collapsed when TEST lost the region of space known as Delve.

became problematic. The Money Badger Coalition (MBC), as it was named, became the single greatest military front in the game, and attacked the Imperium's space. The MBC had all of their military operations fully funded by banking groups; Imperium members, conversely, were left to meet the costs of the conflict from their own pockets, particularly grating given the concerns already expressed about RMT. As one member stated, "How do you expect the line members to keep up the ISK in their wallet? Most of us will have a buffer, but buffers run out."

As losses added up, and costs increased, The Imperium's leadership announced a policy of decreasing their territorial claims, in some cases leaving Imperium member alliances without support. In one case, the Space Monkey Alliance (SMA) was significantly left without any resources to fight a large military force, after their leader had expressed his confidence in Imperium support by stating "They [The Imperium] will come. They must come." When The Imperium did not arrive, this led to the collapse of the SMA and their departure from the coalition, along with a series of memes mocking SMA being left behind to be eliminated.

The external threat of the MBC was seen to have been crafted by negative attitudes that the EVE Online community had towards The Mittani, ostensibly due to the personal narrative that he was attempting to convey through the cultural changes of his organization. By not using his organization's resources to help his allies, the perceived strength of The Imperium was diminished, and in fact the entire organization was seen as weaker (Basarab, 2017). By changing the culture and image inwardly towards members, The Mittani ended up creating an unexpected change in the image of the organization outwardly.

5. Conclusion: The Value of Change?

The reimagination of CFC as The Imperium was a cultural experiment that worked for a time, even if it was eventually overrun through external politics. Much like the Norman dukes, then, The Mittani had succeeded in the creation of a new, legitimised power, however briefly. While Imperium

members may have voted with their wallets to resist one aspect of cultural change, they maintained the larger Imperium program until the collapse of the group. Returning to our earlier ideas, this suggests that a sense of continuity was maintained sufficiently to reassure the majority of CFC members, even as some comments suggest that it was not sufficient for all. Thus, even though the Fountain War book was not funded, the necessity of writing the Imperium into the past seems to have been lessened, perhaps due to the space that the Kickstarter project offered for discussion, if not a conclusion. In any event, the very act of commissioning such a book demonstrated power, even if the claim to control the interpretation of the past was effectively resisted by the broader community; and for all their concerns to the contrary, and the allusions to a "communist space pirate paradise," the CFC was an organization characterised by power, as a principal player in EVE's environment.

Conversely, to look at HERO, the threat to the established identity of both BRAVE and TEST was more acute, and the coalition project failed as a result. The evidence suggests that weight fell disproportionately on TEST members – it was their customary discourse which was branded inappropriate, their behaviour which was regulated and, even looking at the name, HERO – rather closer to the seriousness of BRAVE than the silliness of TEST – their identity which had been most significantly threatened by the coalition.

In both cases, these changes were driven by external pressures, and it is easy to see the instrumental needs of the different communities as primary driving forces in organizational and cultural change. However, it is important to consider these also in a broader and more reflective frame. The underlying tensions in both instances seem to arise from a leadership attempt to align a community's culture with some sense of 'appropriateness', an alignment necessary to address the imagined requirements of a different community – the imagined expectations of a reading public, or the imagined sensitivities of young or female players. Benedict Anderson explored the notion that nations are imagined communities united by media which communicate shared principles and ideas (2006); in thinking about TEST and HERO, we are reminded that projects of this kind do not always succeed, even as the early days of The Imperium provide us with a clear example of times when they do. Yet in both cases, alliance leaders were able only to provide the trappings of cultural change; the actuality of change was clearly and decisively dependent upon the responses of alliance members themselves.

Of course, cultural change in CFC/The Imperium was only superficially successful, and its repercussions did not become fully apparent until there was a sufficient external threat to endanger the political status quo of the entire game. It took a huge investment of wealth and resources to create a situation in which The Imperium's cultural conflict became problematic; yet it is notable that many commentators later stated that the leadership of The Imperium and the change to cultural unity in the organization had led to the war's loss (Drain, 2016).

If the rejection of cultural change by the membership of TEST had led to a complete loss of territory in the short term, however, in the long term it seems to have helped the organization to endure and strengthen its position in the game. When many of the game's groups joined together against The Imperium in the Money Badger Coalition, it was TEST that became a cultural cornerstone for the newly formed group. The preservation of TEST culture had reinforced the ties that bound that community, even to the extent that it helped bring back to the game some members whose subscriptions had lapsed. This, in turn, meant that the MBC had plenty of resources, in terms of manpower (playbor) as well as in-game ISK, to take, exploit, and defend new territory, even as The Imperium was losing ground through defeats and through the departure of unsupported member alliances from the coalition. The territory of The Imperium was decreased rapidly, until the entire organization was lost as a territory-owning coalition; the ability of TEST (and thus MBC) to gain and hold resources was central to the tide of WWB turning against The Imperium.

In all, this seems to suggest that, while it is always possible for a combination of factors to exist which will destabilize one of EVE Online's great player organizations, they can possess a resilience which allows them to be all-but-wiped from the map and yet recover to a position of strength. Importantly, this is a *cultural* rather than a *political* or *social* resilience, a unity of common practices and understandings that go beyond control, ordering and governance; a resilience which allows a group to prosper even in defeat. This raises two interesting points. Firstly, it is a clear argument that we should take game communities, at least within EVE, more seriously; the resilience of TEST Alliance, for example, echoes the cultural coherence of some of the most durable cultures in the world outside EVE. And secondly, given the widespread acknowledgment of the strong internal culture amongst the Goons, it seems likely they will go through a similar process and return to a powerful position within New Eden, whatever they decide to be called.

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