Racketeering, Cartels, Collusion and Extortion: Exploring the Language of Player-Organized 'Criminality' in MMORPGs

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

> *You are doing racketeering - same as Italian MAFIA did in in XX century and Russian Mafia perfected* (Anon 2017).

From allegations against the 'Black Lotus Mafia' of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) through to the comment above about the now-defunct CODE Alliance in *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003), players of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) employ the language of organized crime to describe some of the activities they and others undertake. This language evokes a range of associations, particularly filmic and literary references to mafias – but what (else) does players' use of this language reveal about their play, and the way that MMORPG communities work? This paper uses examples of what could be described as player-organized 'criminality', from *EVE Online* and *World of Warcraft* (particularly *World of Warcraft Classic*), to explore how players discuss activities in MMORPGs that resemble their conceptions of organized crime. Drawing on a range of blogs, official and unofficial forums for both *EVE Online* and *World of Warcraft*, and related Reddit posts, I explore how and why players draw on the language of organized crime when talking about their own and other players' activities, and what this tells us about MMORPG play and players' expectations of it. This paper will be of value to researchers interested in online gaming cultures, in emergent and/or sandbox gameplay, or in the ongoing legacy of older MMORPGs.

Both *EVE Online* and *World of Warcraft* have been the subject of extensive research in Game Studies, and have previously been the focus of edited collections (Carter et al. 2016; Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008), special issues (Bergstrom and Carter 2017) and monographs (e.g. Carter 2022; Wilde 2023), demonstrating their enduring importance. While the range of 'scams' in *EVE* is extensive, play that is labelled by others as racketeering, collusion or extortion can also be found in *World of Warcraft*, and all of these terms carry strong associations with organized criminality, as reflected in 'functionalist' understandings of mafias (Paoli, 2020: 148). Indeed, the presence of

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antagonistic or anti-social play is widely recognized in both games, and characterized in the literature through concepts of 'cheating' (Consalvo 2007), 'grief play' (e.g. Paul et al. 2015; Bakioğlu, 2019) or 'treacherous play' (Carter, 2022). These activities, amongst others, prompted a flurry of literature around MMORPG regulation during the 2000s and 2010s (e.g. de Zwart 2009; Kerr et al. 2014), and an ongoing discussion.

Importantly for this study, there is also evidence in the literature that video game players draw on other media experiences to make sense of their play, something visible in their reactions to historical information (see, e.g. Wright, 2022) and to social and economic structures in games (see, e.g. Milik and Webber, 2020). In effect, then, we might expect filmic representations of organized crime in general, and mafias in particular, to inform players' understanding of these activities – and this is indeed visible in player commentary about their experiences. Across both games, victims of these activities are explicit (in more ways than one) in their descriptions of their experiences, talking directly about rackets and cartels, collusion and extortion, and directly attaching these practices to ideas of mafias and criminality – and often expressing bemusement that these activities are permissible in video games. For player 'mafiosi', however, context is clearly important. For *World of Warcraft Classic*, where inter-faction collusion (necessary to operate cartels) is not permitted under the Terms of Service, players may simply not comment on their own play. Conversely, for *EVE*, where the activities in question are generally within the bounds of acceptable play, players are typically more forthright about their activities, although even here they tend to offer unserious rationales or euphemistic explanations for their play.

Beyond labelling, player comments also offer insight into how these MMORPG communities function and how particular forms of play occur, where the use of terminology can reflect mechanical observations about the practices of other players. In these examples, this is notable in discussions between players, as they attempt to settle on whether or not a particular group is in fact a cartel or mafia, or just a collection of people whose play they dislike. Such comments sit alongside observations about how trust and game systems are negotiated and or exploited to achieve these apparently 'criminal' effects. In aggregate, player narratives suggest that mafia terminology is employed when players feel dissatisfied or upset by other people's play, and feel they lack the power to do anything about it. Here, the evocation of a shadowy organization monopolizing money, resources or space helps to give shape to player frustrations, while also reflecting real-world expectations of a virtual space. Not only is player regulation an unsolved problem, it appears, but players continue to apply successful out-of-game models to their play, in ways which disadvantage others.

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