Selling the Imperium: Changing Organisational Culture and History in *EVE Online*

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ABSTRACT
This paper uses two different methodologies to look at the culture and identity of different organisations in the digital game *EVE Online*. First, it uses a critical historical perspective to look at how powerful individuals and groups in Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games attempt to construct active identities. Secondly, through ethnography and ethnomethodology, it looks at how the player base responds to modifications to this identity and how conflicts between leadership and membership are formed, perceived, and resolved. Looking specifically at two different events in *EVE Online*'s history, this paper finds that line members in the game have a lot of power in determining how the group identity forms, and if pushed sufficiently by leaders against their will, they will be able to stop changes from occurring. The lack of resistance, then, can be taken as implicit legitimacy for the actions from the leaders, in particular in the case of naming The Imperium.

Keywords
Eve Online, Identity, Power, Organisations, Social Control, Legitimacy, History

INTRODUCTION
This paper analyses organisational cultural identity in *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003), through two modes of comparison. We focus on notions of construction and change, and we explore the reaction of players to this construction, and their ability to incorporate or reject cultural change in the online world.

EVE Online is a vast and complex virtual universe with very few limitations on player action. It is known for the huge scale of interactions between players, and has been the site of battles between tens of thousands of participants and in-game thefts of the equivalent of thousands of real world dollars. This has drawn the attention of both players and games journalists alike to this world, and in particular to interactions between the

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game's large political organisations, known as alliances. Here we are concerned with the actions 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 Organisation (HERO). Large player organisations in *EVE* are complex hierarchies, loosely based around 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.

In April 2015, the news site TheMittani.com (TMC), named after the player character who was the Goons' CEO, announced that the Clusterfuck Coalition was no more. The coalition, which Goonswarm had long led, was changing its name and would henceforward be known as The Imperium. The explanation given for this shift 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).

The name change prompted relatively little comment in the *EVE* community at the time, and many players continued to refer to the grouping as CFC, or as CFC/Imperium, although some mocked The Mittani's perceived egotism in his choice of name. Yet 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. This book thus represents a major initiative in terms of CFC/Imperium culture, and is the starting point for our analysis of organisational cultural identity and cultural change in *EVE Online*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

EVE Online is known both for its single-shard architecture (in which all players play together rather than on separate servers), and for being particularly difficult to master (Paul 2011). Perhaps as a result, player achievements are widely recognised among the game community, and credit accrues not only to the player, but also to any organisation of which they are a member and with which they identify. 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, organised military engagements (BBC 2013). When these organisational identities come to reflect aspects of a group's collective culture, two things occur. Firstly, the organisation comes to be understood as a social actor in its own right, into which players incorporate themselves in order to be able to communicate effectively with others (Weick 1995). Secondly, the collective culture of the organisation's members is recast as a set of social norms; the 'symbols' of the group.

In looking at player responses to cultural/organisational change, our research rests upon studies across a range of disciplines. When cultural conflicts develop, there is additional

pressure upon the individual to accept and incorporate into a greater group identity; those who cannot do so may become vulnerable, feel threatened and, in significant cases, fight to re-establish the prior position (Weinreich 1986, 301). In the online world, the most common way to incorporate players is through the use of language (Cerulo 1997). Members of TEST and the 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 the organisation.[1] Players will 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). Important here 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 (sometimes referred to as a myth-symbol complex; see Heather 1998, 5 and Armstrong 2009). At least in part, therefore, responses 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, 25).

Incorporating identity into online play is something that can take many different forms. People perform a lot of social work to maintain a particular image of the self (Attrill et al. 2011; Zhao et al. 2008). The demographics of players are also relevant, because there tends to be some level of overlap between a person's out-of-game experiences and what they do in-game (Yee 2006). In the case of *EVE Online*, a game which is built around a very extreme form of capitalism, Western concepts of work and labour 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).

METHODS

Material pertaining to the Fountain War Kickstarter campaign and the contemporary 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 2 year digitally ethnographic (Boellstorff et al. 2012) study of *EVE Online* players, focused on the social identity and social control mechanisms of large organisations 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 participants notification) using in-game chat logs and third-party VoIP programs. Throughout, publicly available speeches and posts from organisation forums and Reddit threads were used to understand 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 historical method. 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). This combination of analytical tools allows for in a broader understanding of individual actions, as well as the reasoning behind organizational and cultural changes. Analysis was performed until saturation was reached in regards to players' responses to the Imperium's changes.

In what follows, we explore cultural construction and change through two lenses, drawing upon our distinct scholarly backgrounds. Firstly, we compare the activities of the leaders of the Imperium with those of a medieval dynastic group, to reflect upon the ways in which group identities are created, and the role of history in that creation. Secondly, we compare the attempt to initiate the cultural transformation from CFC to the Imperium with a similar activity in another major coalition, HERO. In doing so, we contribute to prominent debates in the field about the nature of player organisations, cultures and identities in online games, and consider the role of history within such constructs. How do principles of organisational/group identity interact with pressures and objectives which emerge from both within and outside the game, and how do players respond to this interaction? How can we understand the distinction between 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' organisational change in *EVE Online*, and what does this mean for our understanding of online (game) worlds?

CREATING THE IMPERIUM: THE WORK OF HISTORY

Around 1015 AD, Dudo of St-Quentin completed work on his *Historia Normannorum* (History of the Normans), the first work of history about a new power in northern France. Duke Richard I had commissioned this history of his family and their deeds roughly twenty years before, and this marked a milestone in the Norman project, demonstrating not only their power but also their sophistication. The production of histories like this was an explicitly political act, and some copies of Dudo's work were highly decorated, positively shouting status in a period when such decoration was rare (Pohl 2015). Furthermore, the content of this history reflected a narrative which was an important part of the presentation of Norman dynastic power. In the previous century, the Normans had been mocked as pirates, led by 'a pirate duke' who made a fool of himself at court; but, through Dudo's work, they demonstrated their prowess in the contemporary political context. They were pirates no longer, and poor manners had simply been a stage in their journey to greatness as a chosen Christian people.

Immediately, this is reminiscent of the process of maturity referred to in our introduction; and thus, in this first section of our analysis, we seek to understand the cultural construction of The Imperium more effectively by setting it alongside the dynastic project of the Norman ducal family. We contend that the Fountain War book, originated by The Mittani to tell the story of a war in which he led his side to victory, serves a similar purpose to the *Historia Normannorum*. The Normans were 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 Fountain War book, while yet to be written – indeed, given the failure of the Kickstarter campaign, it may never *be* written – has an equally political purpose within the re-imagination of the CFC as The Imperium. This, as we will seek to demonstrate, is a broad project, of which the book forms a single, albeit significant, part.

Imperial Entanglements

Although the Normans never changed their name directly, naming was clearly important in the construction of their identity. They evidenced a particular pragmatism about names – the name 'Normans' was something inherited from others, meaning simply 'men from the north', and there is evidence suggesting that they were equally flexible in adopting other titles elsewhere, for example in Greece where they were known as 'albani' – 'foreigners' (Webber 2005, 87-8). But as with The Imperium, the names they took on were intended to communicate something; in the case of the Normans, a fearsome reputation for prowess in battle.

As Benjamin Pohl notes (2015), a major part of the establishment of the Normans' legitimacy as Christian rulers in medieval France was their association with the concept of 'imperium', in the dual sense of 'empire' and, its literal meaning, 'ultimate power'. The phrase *translatio et imitatio imperii* describes the particular combination at play: claiming the inheritance of imperial power, a practice well established in the medieval period, and looking to the Carolingian kings of France for the mechanics of empire: the imitation of power. We can see a similar process at work in the formulation of The Imperium, which is grounded in a notion of 'imperialness' in a variety of ways. The name is explicit in making this link, and the post in which the name was announced was entitled 'The Imperial March' (Vincent 2015). Readers were invited to choose a 'favored Imperial metaphor', with suggestions of a series of well-known science fiction empires, such as the Imperium of Man from Games Workshop's *Warhammer 40,000*, or Iain M. Banks' Culture. More reminiscent of the Normans' claims, the list included 'just straight up Rome', an association made as 'in each case, our victory comes from unity and discipline'; a phrase that claims not only similarity with, but also membership of, the group ('our'). And later, in a reader competition to create recruitment materials, the Persian empire of Cyrus joined the list.

Efforts at *translatio et imitatio imperii* were not solely textual, either. The images in the announcement post include a humorous roleplaying moment, in which The Mittani was photographed ostensibly pledging allegiance to Maximilian Singularity VI, a roleplayer who styles himself 'Emperor of Amarr' (a fictional empire from *EVE Online*'s backstory). And while the power relationship suggested here is problematic (an Imperium subordinate to a *different* empire), the visual discourse reflects a more comprehensible relationship. Maximilian, draped in what appears to be a stole, raises his hand in benediction over the head of The Mittani, who kneels before him – we are reminded of the subordination of the medieval ruler to the spiritual authority of the Church and, in particular, the Holy Roman Emperor receiving his crown from the Pope.

Figure 1: The Mittani before Maximilian (Left), An Emperor before the Pope (Right)

Thus while game lore indicates that the Amarr emperor is a strictly secular figure, the visual lexicon at play 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 relatively little control over The Imperium's subsequent activity). The Imperium has also adopted a new symbol as part of the rebranding process; and while, like so many other things both in and around Goonswarm's activities, this ostensibly began as a joke (TheMittaniDotCom 2015,

@28:45), it has, in The Mittani's own words, become a 'powerful' symbol. This image, referred to as the Black Eagle, clearly and directly references well-established imperial symbolism from a variety of historical contexts, the eagle a heraldic device widely associated with power; and TMC now offers t-shirts bearing this device for sale, tabards for the loyal and the interested alike.

Figure 2: The Symbol of the Imperium

These rhetorical devices have also, recently, been extended to structure. The launch of a viceroyalty programme[2] (Lemba 2015) to further exercise control over space without falling foul of current sovereignty mechanics has, again, clear overtones of imperial ideas. 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, recent rhetoric has drawn heavily on ideas of 'barbarians' at the gates (TheMittaniDotCom 2015, @11:30). 'We could visit the "savages", "enlighten" them and show them the true light of the Imperium' (Blackfist 2015).

Power and History

It is within this context that the Fountain War book was to be produced, and it is easy to see how this takes its place as one component of a broader 'imperial' project. The commissioning of the *Historia Normannorum* was evidence of dynastic power, and while the Fountain War book was (is?) to be a crowd-funded effort, the Kickstarter depended upon the profile of those involved for success. Perhaps ironically, given what has gone before, 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 (more on this later). 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, with a post by Imperium diplomat Sion Kumitomo proving particularly inflammatory (2015b). Kumitomo tried to argue that players were rejecting the project out of hand for unsound reasons (personal dislike of The Mittani, unfounded or unreasonable concerns about monetisation), but responses indicated that members of The Imperium had spent so many years making other players' lives difficult that they did not deserve the trust of the community in this venture: 'like a bully that suddenly finds salvation, they are now astonished that the rest of us are wary' (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 Edwards' declaration that he was independent as an author, 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 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).

Revising the Past

Many of these ideas are reminiscent of precisely the kind of dynastic history that Dudo was attempting to produce for the Norman dukes. Dudo's history in particular served as a manifesto, or perhaps a declaration – a 'history' for the moment. By reconstructing the past in a teleological fashion, Dudo created a 'usable past for the present' (Pohl 2015, 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. The campaign included interviews with a number of people who backed the project, including writer Pierce Brown, podcaster Kira Tsukimoto, and *EVE* player Grath Telkin, CEO of Sniggerdly and member of Pandemic Legion, an alliance which had been one of CFC's opponents during the war. Every interviewee referred consistently to The Imperium in discussion, with references to CFC nowhere in evidence.

During an Ask Me Anything (AMA) session on Reddit on 5 November 2015, the book's author-to-be, Jeff Edwards, was repeatedly asked about this issue, not only in terms of this specific shift but as part of more general discussion about the treatment of problematic names, those which included expletives, references which went beyond the *EVE* universe, 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 specific 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 one 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 (TheMittaniDotCom 2015, @22:10).

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' (The Mittani Media 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'.

Figure 3: Banner ad for the KickStarter for the book

The conceptual tension this created was evident, as people compared the Fountain War book to Andrew Groen's successful Kickstarter,[3] pointing out that Groen's book is a historical documentary and this is not (comments on The Mittani 2015b), but desiring factual accuracy nonetheless. As with naming, however, Edwards indicated that he was flexible on the issue, signalling 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).

The Kickstarter did, however, fail; a problem the Normans did not have to deal with. As Raimo notes, though, this was *EVE*'s first *commissioned* work of player history (Raimo, 2015), and that gives the exercise a veneer of power, even if that power was not ultimately exercised effectively. Indeed, there is an implication that the campaign in the Cloud Ring, launched during the Kickstarter campaign's closing days, may have been meant as a distraction from this high profile failure. So while the Normans had the power to commission a history which demonstrated their ideas, The Mittani did not have the power 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).

REJECTING THE IMPERIUM: THE STAYING POWER OF CULTURE

While the Kickstarter may have failed at the first attempt (a second funding attempt is promised in March), the organisational and power structures of the newly named Imperium seem to have helped to protect it from the shock of change, as they have historically from changes in game mechanics as well as threats from other player groups. Other organisations in the game have been far less resistant to outside influence, and also far less capable of adapting their organisational culture. Indeed, the relative success of the Imperium project can be highlighted through reflection on a failed change initiative, which arose from a failure to resist just such external pressures and the consequent changes which those pressures instigated.

Internal Resistance to Cultural Change

It was, in fact, an invasion by CFC which was responsible for the pressures in question, creating a situation where very different groups needed to work together. In the HERO

coalition, a joining of TEST and the Brave Newbies Initiative (BRAVE), there was clear conflict between the needs of both organisations and the needs and expectations of the player base. Even as the players recognized the external threats that their respective organisations faced, they demanded that HERO respected their prior organisational cultures; the resulting culture clash, and the implied threat to the continuity of identity of both organisations, 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 organisational change. 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 organisations 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 organisations 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 organisation 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 organisation 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 in order to increase the appeal of the organisation. 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 organisation, 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 (i.e. giving up) sovereignty.

As the history of HERO shows, players can be very invested in their organisational culture. Even when an established and respected leader attempts to change it in the better interests of members, they may still resist. Internal resistance by members in order to defend their desired version of the culture serves as a good counterpoint to the example of the Imperium above.

External Resistance to Cultural Change

Resistance to organisational change can also come in the form of external players, who can influence opinions through outside systems of communication. Player news sources and Reddit threads can help spread knowledge but also help organise 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 organisational 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.

The reaction to the announcement of the Kickstarter for the Imperium novel helps 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 acceptance of spending money to succeed is limited to in-game currency. Real Money Trading (RMT) 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," or 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 (the leader of the Imperium) to make money outside the game.

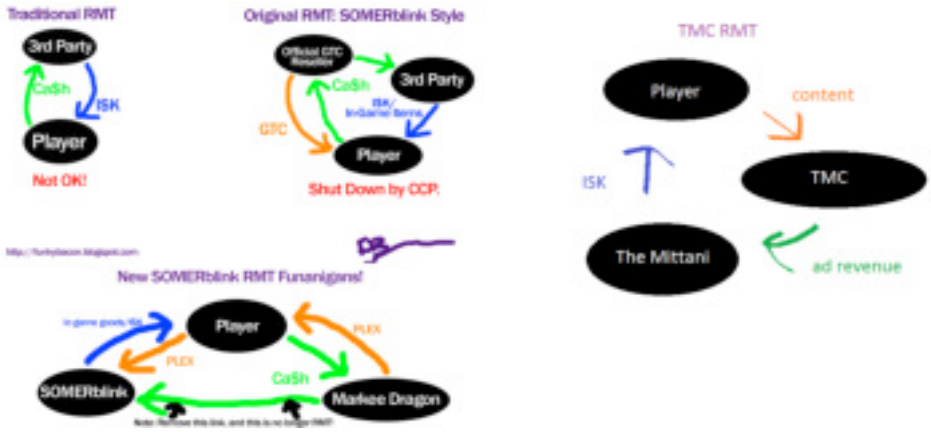

Figure 4: Different Real Money Trading (RMT) schemes, in which a player makes real-world money for in-game activity. RMT is against CCP's EULA.

As one Reddit user argued, The Mittani uses TheMittani.com (TMC) as his job, and this is a form of RMT, due to players being paid in in-game currency for news articles and opinion pieces. 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 out the spirit of the Clusterfuck Coalition. This apparent RMT is 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.

The sense that the culture had moved away from being newbie-friendly to being focused on monetary gain 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 organisation would lead to more players moving away from the game and make it even more difficult for new players to enter the game, because the Imperium would be seen as less friendly to them.

CONCLUSION

To date, it would appear that the reimagination of CFC as The Imperium has been successful. In large part, the flow of organisational cultural change has overcome the obstacles set before it. Much like the Norman dukes, then, The Mittani has succeeded in the creation of a new, legitimised power. While Imperium members may have voted with their wallets to resist one aspect of cultural change, they have not yet voted with their feet to resist the larger programme. Returning to our earlier ideas, this suggests that a sense of continuity has been maintained sufficiently to reassure the majority of CFC members, even as some comments suggest that it has not been 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 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 organisation 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. As with the Imperium, similarities with the Normans can again be drawn. In the early period following Norman settlement in France, a significant internal culture clash arose between those whose allegiance was to the Scandinavian qualities of their forebears, and those who looked towards the more settled qualities of the local (majority) Frankish population, resulting in a rebellion. For the rebels, the pace of change was too fast, the requirements placed on them too stringent, and the qualities which were valued too different from what had come before. In HERO, the evidence suggests that this 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 the primary driving forces in organisational 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 the need 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 Imperium provides us with a clear example of the times that they do.

Reflecting on the historical material that we have drawn on to understand the Imperium project, it is clear that work addressing the histories of human societies has much to offer us in thinking through the nature of social activity online. Within the space of *EVE*, the unrestricted environment offers the opportunity for a great variety of experimentation, and a framework (of conquest, of the exercise of power) in which we might expect recognisable forms of society to arise. Yet to a greater or lesser extent, such possibilities also exist in many social spaces within the online environment more broadly, although we must be wary of the assumption that all online social forms can automatically be mapped to some historic offline society, if only we can find the right one. In terms of *EVE*, at least, we might however consider the corporate context in which game organisations are described. Norman Davies has observed that 'the dynastic agglomerations of the medieval period may best be understood by analogy to the international corporations of later times', talking of states as 'political companies' subject to 'mergers', 'demergers' and 'liquidation' (2012, 176 & 735-6). Our analysis here suggests that the converse may also be true.

Extending our thinking to MMO games more broadly, we are reminded of work reporting on the common dynamics driving group formation in *World of Warcraft* guilds and US urban street gangs, irrespective of the background of their members (Johnson et al. 2009). Research elsewhere (e.g. Cărătărescu-Petrică 2015) has demonstrated that the nature and sustainability of such player organisations is heavily affected by game architecture. Different games therefore set out different requirements, and afford different kinds of social group, suggesting that we will need a variety of tools to accurately understand the diverse player activities taking place, and that we must consequently broaden the

literature to avoid treating *World of Warcraft* as a model example. This paper has aimed to make a contribution to that breadth.

ENDNOTES

1 Both Goonswarm and TEST have their origins in online forum communities which pre-date their existence as EVE Online alliances.

2 Under the scheme, viceroys or governors are appointed to oversee the regions neighbouring Imperium-controlled space. Regional leaders will receive 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).

3 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.

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