

## **EVE Online Newbie Guides: Helpful information or gatekeeping mechanisms at work?**

**Kelly Bergstrom**  
York University  
Canada  
kellybergstrom@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*EVE Online* is a space-themed Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) that has a reputation of having an exceptionally punishing learning curve. It has been argued that its difficulty stems from the in-game tutorial purposefully leaving out important information, forcing novice players to consult outside resources to be successful in this game. Through content analysis of player-created “newbie guides”, this paper argues that not only do the outside resources speak primarily to a particular demographic of player, their use of exclusionary language and imagery actively discourages participation from other demographics of potential players. *EVE* is a game whose player base is almost entirely composed of white males, and in this paper it is argued that these newbie guides are an example of a gatekeeping mechanism that works to maintain the exceptionally homogenous player community composition of this MMOG.

### **Keywords**

EVE Online, community, games, gender, Massively Multiplayer Online Games, MMOGs

### **Introduction**

As with all games, Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) are a voluntary leisure activity. However, the voluntary nature of play does not necessarily mean these gameworlds are equally open to all. For example, economic barriers exist for those who might wish to play, but do not have access to a high-end computer or cannot afford the monthly subscription fees required to play many MMOGs. Geographic factors may also limit a potential player’s access to the high-speed Internet connection required to participate in an online gameworld, or a particular game may not be accessible to certain regions due to global copyright restrictions. Here, I present research conducted as part of a larger mixed methods investigation of gender as a potential barrier to MMOG play. The case study presented in this paper is an examination of the ways in which “newbie guides”, introductory guides created by experienced players with the goal of assisting new players learning how to play a MMOG, actively hail particular demographics at the exclusion of others.

### **Context of larger study**

To address questions on the intersections between gender and MMOG access, this larger research project is focused on an online gaming community almost completely populated by males. *EVE Online* – a spaceship-themed game environment in which players use ships to navigate, trade, and generally “play” with one another – stands apart from other games of its kind as an estimated 5% of their 450,000+ players are female. This is in contrast to other popular games such as *World of Warcraft*, which estimates that at least 20% of their 12 million players are women. Community discussions about *EVE* often dismiss the scarcity of female players as simply a lack of interest in game’s subject matter (Lissanna, 2010; Sepelio Fas, 2010). In particular, the calculations and math-heavy requirements of *EVE*’s gameplay (which has resulted in the larger gaming community to refer *EVE* as “Excel Online”) are presented simultaneously as being a turnoff for female players (who are assumed to value social connections in their gameplay), and an attraction for male players (who are assumed to be drawn to the competitive and/or analytical elements of a game). This argument is reminiscent of the adage that women avoid the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, math) because they are “too masculine” or “too hard” (Park, Young, Troisi, & Pinkus, 2011). However, feminist scholars have demonstrated that it is not simply by choice that many women do not

gravitate towards these subjects. Women's access is impeded, and these barriers work to reinforce stereotypical gender roles that assume that women are "naturally" less interested in technology (Jenson & Brushwood-Rose, 2003; Jenson, de Castell, & Bryson, 2003; Wajcman, 1996). Much like research on the "leaky pipeline" that documents the processes by which women are filtered out of the STEM subjects (Blickenstaff, 2005), this larger research project is an exploration of the ways in which women are overtly and/or inadvertently discouraged from participating in *EVE*.

### **Studying *EVE* Online**

While *EVE* is understudied compared to other popular MMOGs (Bergstrom, Carter, Woodford, & Paul, 2013; Bergstrom, de Castell, & Jenson, 2011), what is known is that player demographics of this game are far more homogenous than the player populations of other MMOGs. The majority of *EVE* players are male, white, and are educated and/or working in a technology-related field (Bergstrom, 2012). It is also known that this is a game where player churn is high: many will play the game on a trial basis, but at least 30% will quit within their first month of play, and 70% of players will quit within their first year of play (Feng, Brandt, & Saha, 2007, p. 22). Additionally, players have theorized that *EVE*'s punishing learning curve is a reason for the high attrition rate. In his investigation of the *EVE* new player experience, Paul (2011, 2012) has argued that this learning curve is especially frustrating because the in-game tutorial purposefully leaves out key pieces of information, forcing new players to seek outside resources to guide their way through the introduction of this game. Paul's description of the game casts *EVE* as an exclusive universe – only a select few players who are part of a very narrow target demographic survive the trials and challenges of learning to play it. This characterization falls in line with player descriptions of this particular MMOG collected through interviews and focus groups conducted as part of my larger investigation of who plays *EVE* and who is filtered out.

### ***EVE* newbie guides**

In this paper I expand on Paul's explorations and investigate the content of these necessary player generated resources in order to learn more about what *EVE* players think about this particular MMOG's community makeup. While many "How to Play *EVE*" guides exist, these guides can be roughly divided into two groups. First are technical guides focused on mastering the specific mechanics of the game (see for example "How to play *EVE Online*" (Freeman, n.d.) or "*EVE Online* Beginner's Guide" (GEWinterswolf, 2012)). There are, however, also a number of more general guides intended to explain how to be an *EVE* player, such as the Goonswarm Federation Guide for Newbies, described below. While still offering advice about technical skills and/or game mechanics, these guides are much more focused on play style. The newbie guides analyzed as part of this study were selected by following links provided by large player corporations (permanent in-game groupings of players, the *EVE* equivalent of "guilds") and these guides largely fell into the second grouping. From here, I argue that if these are the guides recommended and/or produced by corporations, these are the guides most likely to be highly trafficked by potential recruits to the game. These guides provide clues to the behaviours, slang, and norms that must be met if one wishes to be welcomed by other players to become part of the *EVE* community.

Through a content analysis of the newbie guides, this paper argues that these player generated resources that new players consult in order to learn *EVE* mechanics are heavily reliant on jargon and memes popular on Reddit.com or 4chan.com, which are in turn websites that tend to attract a very particular demographic of user (for further discussion of the Reddit.com community see Bergstrom (2011)). Additionally, the frequent use of words such as "rape", "fag/faggot", "bro", and "bitch", are exclusionary and likely a turnoff to other demographics of users. Guides that do not rely on such language are exclusionary by other means. For example, when surveying the use of visual imagery, representations of women – when they do appear – tend to be highly sexualized (see Figure 1). From this, it is reasonable to assume that the intended audience of these newbie guides (and therefore intended recruits who are encouraged to keep playing *EVE*) is likely male. Additionally, the use of

such language and imagery can be read as being unwelcoming and/or hostile to female novices. Ultimately, the overarching goal of this research is to highlight the ways in which benign activities such as playing a MMOG work to continually reinforce claims surrounding women's "inherent" disinterest in everything but casual and/or domestic forms of technology.



**Figure 1:** In the 26 page Newbie Guide, released in February 2013 by Goonswarm Federation (a large and powerful alliance of *EVE* corporations), the above images are the only visual representations of women.

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