TREACHEROUS PLAY

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Treacherous Play by M. Carter is another addition to the *Playful Thinking* series of books published by the MIT Press that aims at shedding light on "new ways of thinking about games and new ways of using games to think about the rest of the world" (p. viii)*.* Being a Senior Lecturer in Digital Cultures at the University of Sydney and focusing his research interest on media studies, digital games and human-computer interactions, in *Treacherous Play* (about a hundred pages, excluding appendix, notes, bibliography and index) M. Carter succeeds in meeting the aforementioned aim of the series, i.e., he acquaints the reader with the concept, purpose and appeal of playing games in a way that embraces scamming, deception or betrayal. However, it needs to be borne in mind that the author draws a clear distinction between any unfair playing practices occurring in just any game and the playstyles and games at the centre of his research attention. The reason for such a distinction is clear: treachery in games is rare and playing treacherously is actively designed against in most multiplayer games. Thus, treacherous type of play is underexplored and in the author's attempt to examine the examples of games where treacherous play is successful, he choses to focus on the games employing (and supporting, at times even encouraging) "the lawful use of deception to betray another person in a multiplayer game by choice, where it provides in-game advantages" (p. 11)*.* For M. Carter, such games are *EVE Online*[1], *DayZ*[2] and *Survivor*[3]. These games are presented as examples of games in which treacherous play contributes to their appeal and commercial success and they are tackled in three individual chapters of the book. While the analyses in those chapters comprise the core of the publication, they are accompanied by three more complementing chapters providing insight into the very basis of treacherous play, introducing key design principles for games embracing this playstyle, and concluding the issue of treacherous play as dealt with in the book.

For a deeper understanding of treacherous play, in the first chapter, in *An Introduction to Playing Treacherously*, M. Carter tackles three basic assumptions that players and scholars often have about this playstyle: treacherous play is *unethical*, treacherous play is *antisocial*, treacherous players are *bad people*. Drawing on work by other relevant scholars and on M. Carter's own research findings and analyses related (not only) to the three above stated games, he interrogates the phenomenon of treacherous play in depth. Even though the author claims it is not his aim to dispel these assumptions, he manages to lead the reader to questioning them. Reasoning that even negative emotions can be a part of play, and thus enjoyed, and referring to the phenomenon

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1   CCP GAMES: *EVE Online*. [digital game]. New York, NY : Simon & Schuster Interactive, CCP Games, Atari, 2003.
2   BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE: *DayZ*. [digital game]. Prague : Bohemia Interactive, 2018.
3   PARSONS, C. (Created by): *Survivor*. [TV]. New York, NY : CBS, 2000-2022.

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of betrayal aversion, reversal theory or the excitation transfer effect, the reader is left questioning themselves whether treacherous play really is unethical if "betrayal crucially falls within the rules of the game" (p. 6). Is treacherous play really antisocial? As M. Carter argues, in the case of games where trust and social relationships have become the played commodity and whose core appeal is the social experience, the assumption about treacherous play being antisocial does not seem that sound. The same goes for the third assumption stating that treacherous players are bad people. In games like poker, lying to one's opponents is actually the core of the game and, thus, it would be too short-sighted to base our claims about who people are on how they play. However, in the cases of treacherous games analysed in the book, the players are given the responsibility to choose how to play, whether to use deception and betrayal or not, they can decide what is right or wrong and, in this way, players are forced to engage with the morality of their game and their actions.

The second chapter is dedicated to the analysis of treacherous play within a massive multiplayer online game EVE Online and is titled by the game's informal number one rule – "DON'T TRUST ANYONE" (p. 22). As the very chapter title suggests, the entire game is pervaded by the culture of distrust. As the analysed piece is a hugely complex game, a considerable amount of text within the chapter is devoted to describing the principles of the game and introducing its universe. Being very different from mainstream game culture and having a rather specific player base, EVE Online is presented as an ideal environment for treacherous play, namely *scamming.* The author uses authentic text-based communication between players and accompanies it with his commentary to provide the reader with an insight into the scams occurring in the game, both basic and more complex ones. As far as scamming in EVE Online is concerned, it is important to state that M. Carter distinguishes between scamming within the scope of treacherous play, as explained by him in the previous chapter, and mere griefing. However, scamming is not the only treacherous practice widely present in EVE Online. Via a detailed case-study, the author examines the treacherous practice of *espionage.* As surprising as it may seem, even in the seemingly hostile environment of the game, very real friendships can develop in EVE Online, as it can provide strong social experience, also because of treachery that is in the core of the game. "Risk, after all, is exciting, and the presence of treacherous play ensures that social interactions are riskier, more intense and more engaging" (p. 38).

DayZ: Treachery in the Zombie Apocalypse is the title of the third chapter of the book. According to M. Carter, the potential for treachery lies at the heart of DayZ's social gameplay and its feature of proximity-based voice chat introduces the opportunities and motivations for treachery. Within the examination of treacherous play in this game, the author conducts research on players' motivation for betrayal (once again, the distinction between griefing and treachery is crucial). It turns out that a treacherous player's motivation lies in the value of the objects stolen, not in a player's negative outburst. Drawing on other authors' works on reversal theory or the excitation transfer effect, the author explains wherein lies the appeal of the game. It is the "increased risk [that] satisfies the paratelic player's desire for high arousal" (p. 51), thus *dying in DayZ* does not have to be necessarily a negative experience. On the other hand, from the social perspective, (the possibility of) *killing in DayZ* gives players the responsibility to choose what is right or wrong, as well as an opportunity to experience negative emotions in a safe way. Treacherous play is a part of what makes DayZ attractive to players and the fear of betrayal makes players value their trust with another person.

In his examination of treacherous play, M. Carter does not limit his attention only to digital games. In the fourth chapter, titled *Survivor: Treacherous Play as a Spectator Sport,* referring to chosen particular seasons of the show*,* the author provides an intriguing insight into the well-known reality TV show "played out in its social interactions" (p. 64)*.* From among the three analysed games, it is in Survivor where the social aspects of treacherous play become most significant as betraying a player is a highly personal act of treachery and players' reactions to betrayal fully shape the way the game is viewed and understood. While in games "betraying might be okay, [...] betraying a friend might not be" (p. ?)*.* According to M. Carter, the players' choice to act deceptively or not is what really distinguished treacherous play in Survivor, as the fact that betraying is not absolutely necessary to play the game is the key. The way the game is played in Survivor "reflects the society and culture in which it is played" (p. 73).

The fifth chapter of the book, *Designing Treacherous Play,* provides a logical conclusion of the analyses presented in the previous chapters. If deception and betrayal are to contribute to a game's appeal and commercial success, five key patterns crucial for treacherous play have to be incorporated in designing such games: relationships between players must be ambiguous; players must be able to openly communicate with one another; the game must have interactions that require players to trust one another; play must be consequential; treacherous play must take place within the rules of the game. In reasoning the necessity of each pattern, the author revisits his analyses presented in the previous chapters, thus each pattern is supported by a solid knowledge base the reader has already become familiar with. In addition, M. Carter comes up with two more unnecessary patterns; however, both of them could be identified within each analysed game: "the inclusion of a dystopian imaginary" (p. 94) and "a clear ceiling on what is acceptable in gameplay" (p. 95). As far as the key design patterns for games deception and betrayal go, the bottom-line is that even treacherous play needs to be bounded.

In the final chapter, *Treacherous Assumptions,* M. Carter revisits the assumptions about treacherous play postulated in chapter one. Having explored EVE Online, DayZ and Survivor from the perspective of the three assumptions, the author formulates logical conclusions about treacherous play. The examined games remain ethical, they provide an appealing opportunity to experience various aspects of humanity (even those that are related to harsh, painful or unpleasant experiences) and create an environment in which relationships can be deep and highly valued. If part of the reason why we play games is social interaction, treacherous play, according to M. Carter, enhances the social experience of players as, by its nature, it is a very social way of playing a game. Treacherous play allows us, momentarily, "the experience of being bad. Ultimately these kinds of experiences also teach us what it means to be good" (p. 105)*.*

M. Carter's Treacherous Play provides the reader with an undoubtedly intriguing insight into an unexplored area of (not only) digital games embracing deception, scamming or betrayal. It is a thought-provoking read not only for players of digital games or scholars within the given field, but for everyone that finds engaging in a game fascinating, as "[t]reacherous play shows how complex and provocative playful experiences can really be" (p. 105).

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